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Qamar, fairest of the 108 moons orbiting the gas planet of Algol. Here a strange and wonderful civilization has developed. In Suvyamara, gentle city sinking sadly into the sea, boys of the Viri Temple dance the Epodes — and the citizens venerate among other deities, Varon, the boy-love god.

Two strangers meet and defeat a band of air in a boy-bordello: a scrivening monk (and professional thief) from another Algolian moon and a long-haired, kilted warrior from the northern mountains of Far Thuren. So begins a gripping and erotic adventure of dance, spells, magicians, ghouls, dragons, rescues, abductions and seductions...

And a score of boys, all ecstatically approaching or just over the threshold of puberty: raven-haired Jethael, greatest Temple dancer in memory; blond Xiri of Thurenian blood; tattoo'd Dragon from the Chromatic Wastes; red-haired Kael, already at 14 a roistering lover and fighting rooster; voyeuristic Ravinan; pig-tailed Varonael who glows green at his sorcery.

The interweaving of the fates and loves of these men and boys, the drama of their epic quest to find and steal the power-bestowing Crowstone, makes this probably the grandest boy-love sword and sorcery novel ever published.



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Crowstone

The Chronicles of Qamar

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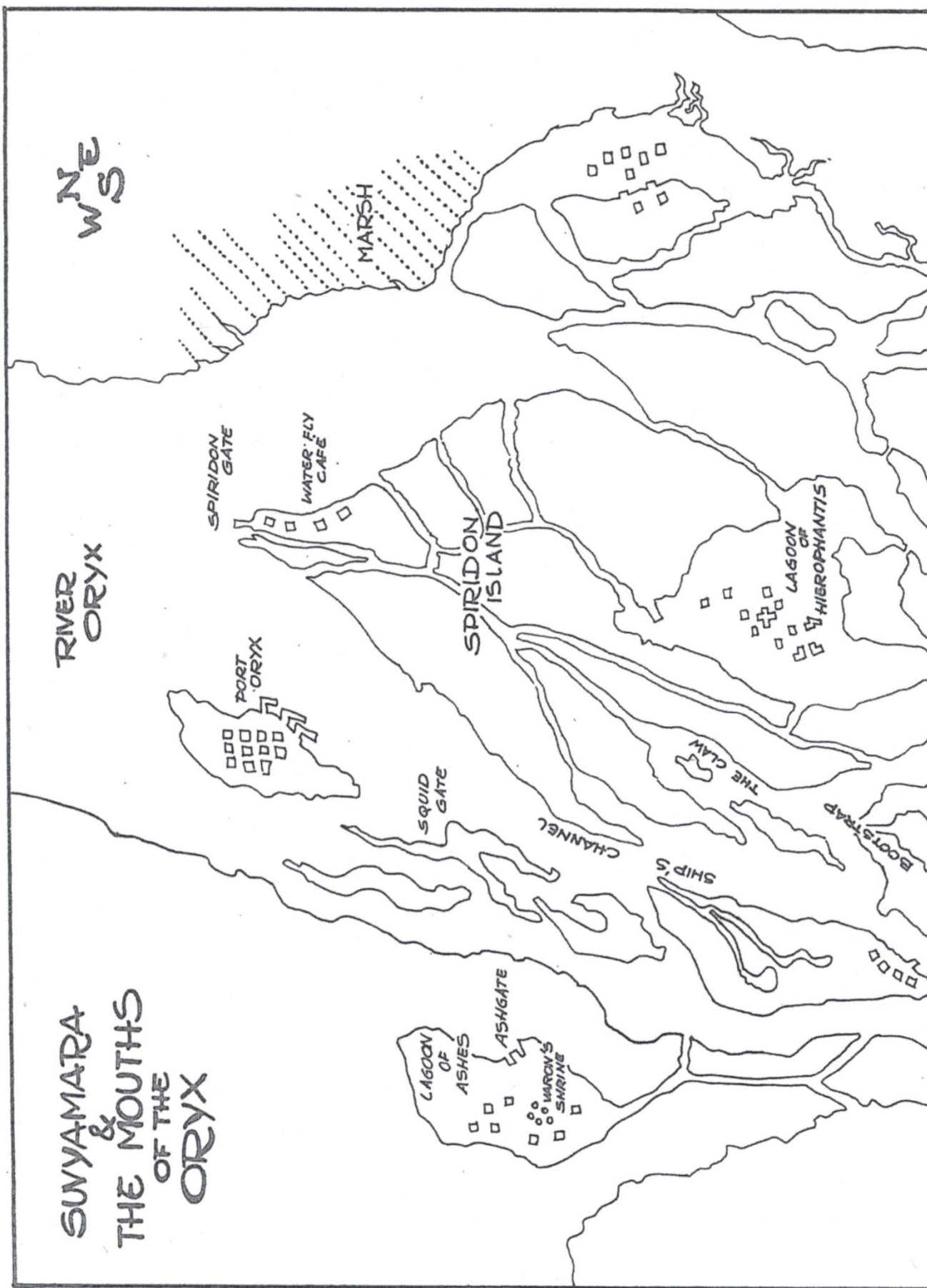
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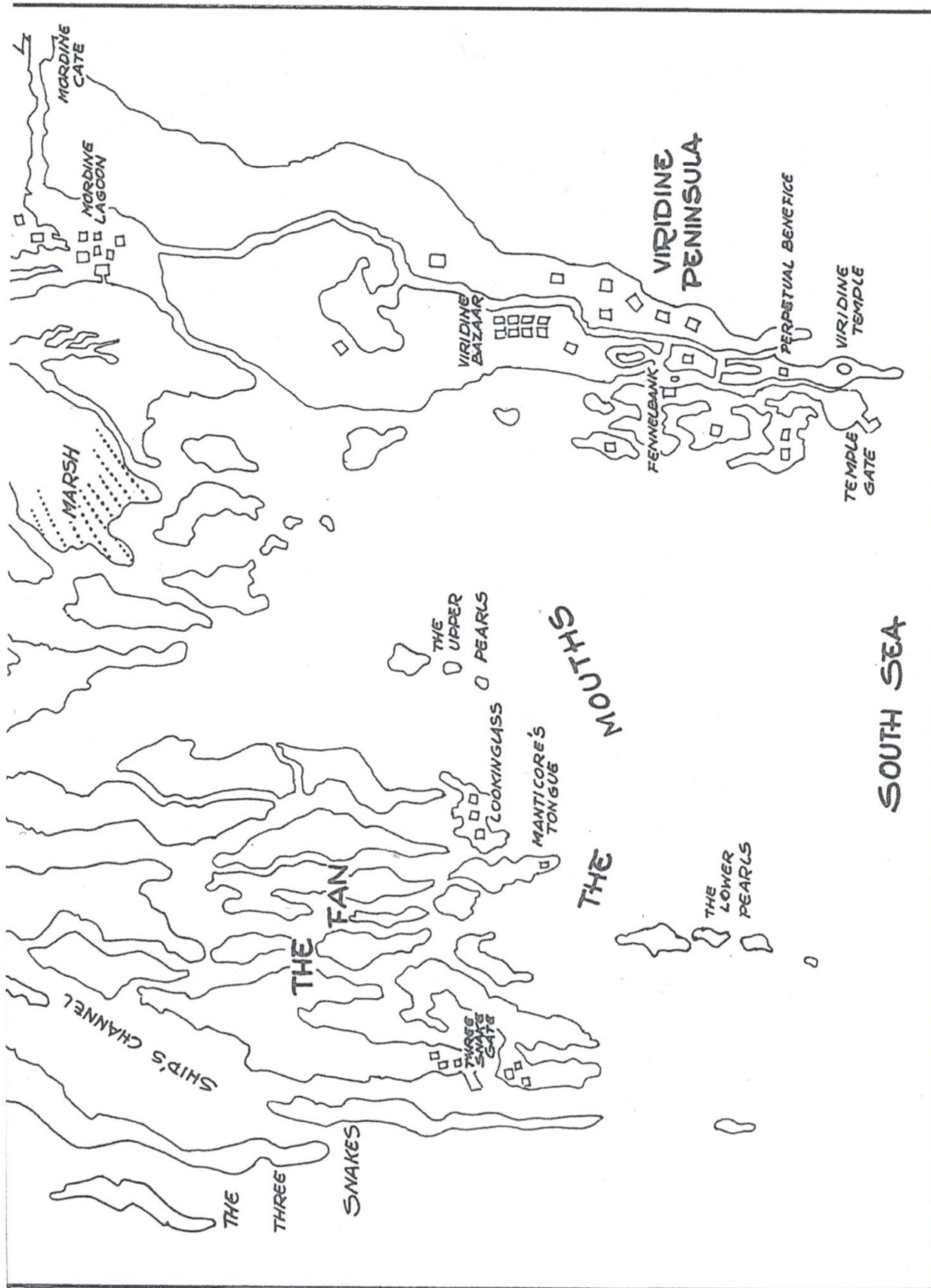
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Part One

1. Water Fly

FROM THE DOORWAY AS HE ENTERED he could see the small stage in one corner of the low-ceilinged tavern, and he could see the boy dancing on the stage. The boy appeared perhaps thirteen or fourteen: naked except for an iridescent scarf which fluttered from a gold chain around his waist. His skin was heavily powdered, and decorated with a pattern of tiny jewels pasted to his body: vines, leaves, parasitic tendrils of glint and gleam in the lurid tavern light.

No one noticed the man descend the wooden steps (thirteen of them, like a reprieve from the gallows) into the crowded pit of the inn. No one took notice because — like the man himself — all customers watched the pretty dancer.

If perhaps a few of the rapt audience happened to glance at the man, they would have tagged him at once as a scholar, a professional scribe. Even in Suvyamara, and even in such a bordel, almost anyone would recognize the small curled beard, the grey robe and black skullcap of the Minorite Order of Maervæn the Scrivener. Such professional literates roamed the Ring of Moons, a familiar sight, with their inkpots and scrolls, in any bazaar.

A more acute observer might have picked out further detail, however, and deduced something of the man's personal history from

his appearance, which was not precisely orthodox. The robe was frayed and patched, the boots down-at-heel. And why should a scribe sling such a serious-looking sword from his sash, rather than the usual modest dirk? A truly keen witness might have noted that the scholar's robe was slit at either side, the hem resewn — like a duelist's cloak.

Among the audience, however, no such sharp-eyed observer existed. As for the proprietor, the waiters, why should they take note of one shiftless monk more or less? The roads and riverways to and from Suvyamara were crowded with much more colorful wanderers. This one (judged at a glance) was neither prosperous enough to attract an innkeeper's solicitude nor abjectly poor enough to arouse his disgust. In fact, the man was rather nondescript. People often imagined they'd met him somewhere once, when in fact they had not, so ordinary was the man's appearance, so inoffensively homely his face. (Or was it? Hard to tell in that smoky lamplight.)

So no one took his eyes off the boy — least of all the scholar himself. From the aisle where he stood he watched as the child swayed in the caress of music (he could not see the musicians); the boy's eyes were half-way closed, cascades of light rippled over his belly and thighs as he moved. He'd braided his hair tightly in a dozen queues which hung to his shoulders and were weighted with green snakestones; as he shook his head the pigtails spiraled in time to the drum.

The dance itself, hypnotic and sensual, was no more complex than its function demanded. The boy possessed a simple formula, and its success could be judged by the state of some of the viciously flamboyant air-sailors who crowded around the foot of the stage, not bothering to hide their open appreciation of the entertainment. Other customers, more staid and more furtive, seemed equally and gaspingly entranced.

At last the boy lifted the scarf in his fingers, then snatched it away entirely, then rubbed it lightly against his body. His genitals seemed encrusted in the same tiny scintillant gems that made up the pattern of his mothpowdered limbs. Rhythmic ministrations of the scarf made the little organ grow, till everyone could see that it was entwined with a double helix of glitter, winding up the shaft and ending at a pearl which seemed to have been glued in place at the tip of the foreskin.

The music ended. The boy slipped behind curtains and was gone. A few people applauded by snapping their fingers. A few people groaned. The scholar looked for a place to sit down.

NOW THAT HE SCANNED the tables of this establishment — which was called the Water Fly Cafe — an expression of distaste etched the man's unremarkable features, lending him for a moment a somewhat ascetic air. He saw that the chamber was packed to the walls with men, few of whom could be said to represent the respectable and established classes of Suvyamara. The natives in the crowd wore silks and laces, aping the aristocratic fashions of the city — but the colors were gaudy, the lace crude and none too clean. Guzzling the famous dreamwine of Qamar and puffing long pipes of vhang, a contingent of air-sailors added a raucous, fetishistic note to the crowd's clangorous symphony. Lowest of their sort, little better than pirates or slavers, these men shaved their skulls except for single queues (which they lengthened with the tresses of their victims); tatoo'd their faces and bodies with gaudy myth-beasts from the Void between the Moons; pierced their ears and noses and nipples with gold hoops; crisscrossed their naked chests with chains; cinched their waists in thick leather weapon-belts and sashes of torn firesilk; carried scimitars, daggers, hooks and claws; drank and grew loudly abusive, hissing like spiderbats and fondling their loincloths.

Every table appeared to be taken. Here and there a clot of pilgrims from some distant valley in Qamar; a pair of sleazily prosperous off-Moon merchants; a rogue priest, a wizard or two; a scattering of better-dressed types who might have hailed from anywhere in the Ring, sent here to live out their lives as remittance men, here in Suvyamara where the concept of "sin" roused only a millennial shrug of ennui; where wealth bought exemption from every law (on a sliding scale, with murder the costliest and perversion practically free).

There existed, of course, several far more salubrious establishments in Suvyamara, with far more refined (but still salacious) entertainment for lovers of boys; for boy-love was a specialty of Suvyamara. In some ancient revelation, the people of this city had learned that women were sacred vessels of divine illumination, which should be stored away, secluded from the merely profane light of sun, Moons and stars. By now, however, the

revelation had been diluted to mere custom: a man of Suvyamara gained prestige according to the degree of splendid seclusion in which he kept his women — who languished in harems of silvery solitude, bored avatars of their own unimpeachable cult. Life in a Suvyamaran seraglio might prove a fascinating tale to some, but the Chronicle knows nothing of these mysteries. What, for example, do the sacred virgins and matrons think of the boys of Suvyamara, the slaveboys, fisherboys, schoolboys, choirboys, dancers and catamites who have taken over, to a certain extent, the role played elsewhere by girls and women? It is said that no form of love goes unappreciated on Qamar — but in Suvyamara, men relish one form beyond all moderation. Thus the Water Fly Cafe was only one of several such, which our scholar might have chosen to visit, as a tourist with a yen for the sight of boyflesh.

“Ah well,” he thought, “despite its noisome air, this place does possess one deciding virtue: it’s the only one I can afford. Besides, to judge by the evidence so far, the performers are appealing enough. If only I could find a seat...”

Once again he scanned the room, seeking among the pullulating colors and sweating flesh for an inconspicuous place. At last, near the stage, he spotted a table for two; one and a half places on its bench were occupied by a single large barbarian. Surreptitiously, the scholar studied this man.

The scholar, a well-travelled and erudite person, recognized at once that the barbarian must hail from the far north of Qamar, from the ragged-peaked mountains and blue valleys of Far Thuren. This he deduced from one bit of evidence: the barbarian’s single earring, a pendant made of a tiny reptilian skull dipped in silver. Obviously however the nomad had wandered a long way and a long time from his stormy homeland. His long yellow hair was tied back, and a mercenary’s mustache curled over his hungry cheeks (whereas Thurenians usually wore their hair loose and shaved their faces). As for the rest of his costume, it appeared to consist of odd bits of plunder, trinkets and fetishes from a dozen forgotten campaigns, rag-tails of fur and clumps of feathers, iron-studded bands around forehead, wrists and ankles, a vest sewn with bones and amulets and clanking bits of iron and cheap jewelry. He carried a typical northern sword, short but double-edged and broad, clipped lightly to the outside

of his belt. His clothes were well-worn, travel-stained, frayed and many times repaired — but not dirty-greasy with campfire smoke or sweaty filth. This barbarian bathed, at least. But the scholar could understand why no one intruded on the man's solitary comfort, even with a ring-side seat empty beside him. Who would sit willingly with such a savage totem, a bristling raging berserker of Thuren, a worshiper of Chaos?

The scholar picked and elbowed his way through the crowd till he stood between this barbarian and the stage. The big northerner's eyes fell lazily upon him, and the scholar bowed.

The scholar bowed in perfect imitation of the short curt nod which a proud barbarian concedes to his own Septarch, to elder blood and stronger arm. In a clear voice, the grey-robed scribe said, "Good evening, Primal Lord; I wish you the joy of the storm."

The barbarian gave no evidence that this traditional greeting pleased him, nor that he felt any surprise at being addressed in such an authentically esoteric manner. Nor did he bellow with insulted rage and go for his sword. He merely raised one eyebrow — a curiously civilized gesture, the scholar thought. He decided to speak further.

"I ask a double boon, Lord: the honor of sharing your bench, and the honor of buying some refreshment which we might share as well."

The barbarian's eyebrow lowered, but otherwise no expression crossed his face. "I appreciate your suggestion," he said. And gesturing as if the mean table were the interior of a black tent, hung with firesable and the skulls of honored enemies, he added, "Welcome."

So far the exchange of polite formulae might have taken place on a lightning-blasted heath in Far Thuren, rather than a bordel in half-sunken Suvyamara: not so much their words, but their gestures seemed out of place. So cool and lordly they moved, like two Tryptarchs planning a cattle-raid together. But the mood faded when the scholar summoned a waiter, who minced to their table. "Another glass, please, and a bottle of dream wine."

"That'll be five sequins," said the waiter.

"Ah. Perhaps a more modest vintage..."

"Wait," said the barbarian; and reaching into the bottom of a pouch of frayed chamois, he extracted a few coins. "I have three. Let us pool our funds and avoid corrosion of the stomach."

“I have four. Bring us something to eat as well.”

The waiter sneered and glided away.

CURTAINS BEHIND THE STAGE parted, and between them slithered the proprietor of the Water Fly Cafe. His head was shaved bald, and his earlobes were distended with polished lumps of onyx. His skin had the look of paper in which suet has been wrapped, yet the man was thin, as if the suet had long since been sold at some cannibal black-market for an unheard-of sum of ghost money. A robe of shimmering gold hung limply from his bony shoulders, and with one grasshopper-thin hand he clutched the wrist of the bejewelled dancing boy with the charming pigtails.

“You know me: I’m Quelleron,” the proprietor shrilled at the crowd. “I water the wine, I own the boys. Here, now, I’ll auction off a night with this one, a whole night. Who’ll start the bidding at fifty?”

The scholar nearly spilled his drink at the mention of so much money. Clearly, if he planned to enjoy his stay in Suvyamara, he’d either have to win the love of a poor honest fisherboy, or else steal something, or else... work.

A few air-sailors pushed the bidding up gradually to seventy, then dropped out, obviously unwilling to invest so much booty in such a brief condensation of pleasure. Meanwhile the boy stared blankly into space; with his free hand he fondled himself idly, and tiny specks of gem-light fell from his fingers, as if he were peeling flecks of paint off a rainbow.

One of the obese off-Moon merchants raised the bid to ninety, where it finally stuck. Two or three sailors jeered at the man as he hustled the boy off-stage and through the curtains, presumably to bedroom or bath. The scholar felt like cat-calling himself, so little did the image please him; and the barbarian sat in icy disdain, sipping his wine.

“You’ve been here before, I take it,” said the scholar.

“Several times, yes.”

“And by your expression, don’t care for it much.”

“That is so,” answered the barbarian.

“I’m not certain I like it myself. If I were wealthier, perhaps... by the by, I’m Valamiel, the Maervanite Scrivener.”

“And I am Zaek of Hraelle, Chaote of Thuren.”

They linked thumbs politely.

"You will see," the barbarian said, "during this next dance, why I come back here repeatedly, despite the... the inadequacy of the place. Now the music starts."

Valamiel the scholar could now make out the musicians from where he sat: a few older slaveboys strumming harps and one grizzly professional zervalist, who provided a bit of pleasant if somewhat rote ornamentation. "It's a tune of Far Thuren they're playing," said Zaek.

Surely the man's not homesick, thought Valamiel.

The boy who now stepped between the curtains onto the stage appeared at first less voluptuous than the last one, the bejewelled child with powdered skin. About fourteen, this one was slender with a true dancer's thinness, and wore few gems, no make-up. His straight corn-yellow hair hung below his shoulders, and would have fallen in his eyes were it not bound back with a fillet of snakeskin. Except for crude gold chains on wrists and ankles, and a trailing loincloth (also of snakeskin), he was naked. From a tore around his neck hung a tiny silver skull, like a twin to Zaek's earring.

Having noted the skull, Valamiel now studied the boy's face: the wide-set, slightly slanted eyes with violet irises, the straight nose and generous lips. Clearly the boy was of northern barbarian stock.

"He could be your very nephew!" Valamiel exclaimed.

Zaek shot him a sharp glance, not annoyed but not pleased either. He raised a thick index finger to his lips, then relented and said, "A neighboring tribe, I suppose. Now watch," and turned his gaze again upon the stage.

The slender boy had not yet begun to dance; instead he was staring around the sea of faces and eyes which devoured him, as if searching for someone. His survey seemed to end when he found their table: he smiled shyly and happily and half-raised his hand to wave a greeting. The scholar's heart lurched, and a spurt of something hot from some gland reached his brain and fogged his nerves, even as he realized that the boy was smiling not at him (sigh) but at the barbarian.

"Ah," said Valamiel, "Varon has blessed you."

"Not at all," Zaek muttered. "I've never met that child, never exchanged a word with him, don't even know his name. Last night he was sold for a hundred and twenty sequins. The night before for a hundred and fifty."

Valamiel judged it wise to answer nothing to this, and so looked back at the boy, who had begun to dance.

The scrivener considered himself a tasteful amateur of ancient dance; but he never expected to come across an authentic Transformationist in a cheap boy brothel. And yet the child was suddenly shivering in rhythmic spasms, as if a current were running through him: the sign of genuine self-possession, an aesthetic state impossible for one so young to counterfeit. As if responding to this surprising intrusion of Art into their workaday presence, the musicians picked up the beat and put some wit into their changes. Valamiel was stunned.

He was even more deeply impressed as the boy began to develop the piece, weaving together bits of traditional material with an improvisatory intelligence that was almost too great for such a child to control. In short, here was an example of the “First Flower”, which Valamiel had only rarely witnessed: the beginner’s spirit which perceives everything as New, and thus in all innocence recreates it in an eternal form.

The “subject” of the dance involved an abstract investigation of various transformational states — impossible to be more precise, short of a lengthy essay on Qamarian culture. The boy’s facial expressions first showed sweet and wistful, then something else, recognizable but undefinable — dreams on the cusp between innocence and sorrow. His finger-sijils were perfect, his legs less sure but somehow pleasing even in their occasional coltishness. Every movement was graceful, even when it lacked precision. The boy’s imagination seemed powerful, as if he could never be cut off from the hidden sea of his inspiration.

The matter of the dance was not meant to invoke the specifically erotic, and the boy never removed the snakeskin which cupped his nudity, but the atmosphere he generated crackled with desire. Valamiel suddenly realized that the boy danced solely for the pleasure and pain of one man: the barbarian who sat tensely beside him, drinking in all this astonishing art as if it might save him from a very dry death. The boy’s now-sweating body began to torment the scrivener as well, and absentmindedly he drained a full cup of wine instead of nursing it slowly as he’d meant to do.

Still swaying, the boy sank to his knees, and diamonds of sweat sprang from the darkened tips of his hair. His slender fingers moved rapidly in siffling motions of mesmeric intensity, like mating dragonflies. Then, as the music ended, he curled gracefully to his feet again and vanished between the curtains. Even the riffraff of the Water Fly Café were too tranced to applaud, or shout the usual lewd remarks. Gradually a hum of conversation swelled again, and Valamiel dared to look at his table companion.

Zaek's face, as before, held no definite expression — but the scholar needed no wizardry to detect the mixed waves of sweetness and baffled anger that radiated from the barbarian. "Well," Valamiel said mildly, "I see what you mean."

For a long moment Zaek answered nothing. Then, suppressing a sigh, he said, "I cannot stay to watch him auctioned again. I'll go now. You're welcome to the table."

"I also can see no profit in further futile torment. Let us quickly finish the bottle, then perhaps take a breath of fresh air along some canal..."

Glumly the barbarian agreed. Filling glasses to the brim, they drank once, twice, slammed the cups on the table, stood up and prepared to leave.

JUST THEN, HOWEVER, Valamiel noticed the slim dancing boy, squirreling a way toward them across the cafe floor. He nudged Zaek, and the barbarian saw, and stood still.

The boy must have gone through some hall in the warrens behind the cafe, and come back in through an unseen entryway. He wore a short mantle of scarlet, but his legs were still bare. He pushed through the crowd toward them, and as he passed, some of the customers reached out to touch him — almost as if for luck.

One of the air-sailors did more than touch, however. This man, bigger even than Zaek, festooned, skewered and tattoo'd with more than the customary collection of savage bric-a-brac and squalid imagery, reached out and grabbed the boy's arm, yanked him to a halt.

"Stop a moment there," boomed the ruffian in a theatrical tone meant to reach his shipmates' ears. "I've two hundred sequins in my belt that say I and no one else will impale you tonight. What do you think of that, eh?"

“Let go of me,” said the boy in a tired voice.

“Let go!?” bellowed the pirate, and half-jerked the child off his feet. “I said I’m buying you, lad. I’ll share you with my crew if I like.” And with that he slapped the boy’s face and knocked him down.

Before anyone nearby could react, and while Zaek was barely in motion, there appeared with commendable swiftness a tough-looking fellow in the half-armor-uniform of one of the city’s private Enforcer Guilds. With the usual brisk efficiency of his calling, he tapped the repulsive sailor on the shoulder and announced, “That’s all for you, friend. Out you go now.”

But...

The pirate performed two actions simultaneously: he grabbed the boy’s hair with his right hand; with his left he swiftly unsheathed his sword, slashed up with the curved blade braced against his forearm, and opened a great gash on the Enforcer’s face, from chin to forehead. The Enforcer screamed, fell back in a spray of red, dead or unconscious.

Now Suvyamara may have been a dangerous place, but it was no backwood feudal rockheap or nomad camp. It was a great city, civilized and peaceful compared to many. Rude foreigners might consider the natives cowardly, they preferred to think of themselves as lovers of life. Native Suvyamarans, then, were among the first wave of customers to consider an abrupt departure from the Water Fly Cafe.

Many others soon followed, for they reasoned that where an Enforcer had fallen, many more Enforcers would soon arrive, seeking upon whom they might wreak revenge; and the guilds-men showed little patience with niceties of legal evidence.

Very few customers wished to remain, in fact. And while the majority began to think about leaving, Zaek stepped forward and asked the pirate to let go of the boy.

“Earth-crawling slug,” replied the air-sailor, “have you not seen me slay the Enforcer?”

“Indeed. You surprised him. But there is no way in which you can surprise me.”

The pirate guffawed. “You have neglected to draw your sword, spawn of Chaos. Perhaps I might still startle you.” The man’s shipmates echoed his good humor.

Valamiel, who had resumed his seat the better to watch the unfolding drama, considered that the pirate had raised an interesting point. The air-sailor gave the dancing boy a shove and sent him sprawling. In the same motion he lunged forward, swinging his scimitar up and then down toward Zaek's unarmored head.

The Chronicle needs a page to detail what transpires in an instant; thus does history slice down through the layers of time, uncovering strata which no single witness might have known in every detail — (like the sword that cleft the hundred mattresses in the ancient tale).

Zaek stepped to the right; at the same time he plucked his sword, scabbard and all, from the light clasp which held it to his belt. Raising the sword in his left hand, he caught the scimitar's downward sweep upon the scabbard, causing the pirate to miss his mark.

The pirate was now off-balance, unable to stop his forward motion. Zaek gripped the pommel of his own weapon in his right hand, took a half-step forward, and half-unsheathed the sword with a vicious snap.

The pommel was set with a large irregular semi-cut stone of the sort called "Rainbow-in-the-Mist", a type of smoky crystal. This stone now smashed into the pirate's face, between the upper lip and the nose. The pirate reeled back, a great deal of blood gushed from his mangled face, and without making a sound he fell over backwards with a crash of satisfying finality. Zaek re-sheathed his sword, which in fact had never been totally exposed, and dropped it neatly into place on his belt. Valamiel found himself admiring the man's economy of gesture.

Zaek helped the dancing boy to his feet; hand in hand they began to walk toward the table where the scholar sat. Valamiel glanced quickly around the tavern. In a corner one of the wizards still remained calmly seated, perhaps spellbound by the excitement; most of the other customers, however, were already vanished. Quelleron, the proprietor, not daring to approach, hovered to one side and twittered with rage and disgust. From somewhere a dozen or so slaveboys, pretty and scantily clad, had appeared to watch the fight. Boys are like that.

Unfortunately, another contingent of spectators also remained: the fallen pirate's six or seven shipmates, who for the moment were engaged in staring down at their disfigured leader, as if expecting him

to leap to his feet and rally them with his customary joviality. Valamiel wagered they would be disappointed in this hope, so he was not unprepared when one of the sailors suddenly and surreptitiously fumbled for a throwing claw hooked to the top of his boot.

“Zaek,” the monk suggested, “watch your back.”

Even as he spoke he reached into the breast of his grey robe and with one smooth motion withdrew a pointed dirk from its hiding place.

Such knives were carried by all scrivening monks, and were usually sharp enough to make points on pens, or slice cheese.

The hilts were usually hollow, and held bars of sealing wax; the monk’s seal would be set in the pommel.

Valamiel’s dirk had been slightly modified, however. It now flew from his hand and whizzed between the heads of the barbarian and the boy, so close they could hear an insectoid *zzzip* pass their ears. By the time Zaek turned around, naked sword already in hand, the hasty sailor had dropped his claw and was attempting to pull the monk’s dagger out of the muscle of his upper left arm; somehow however, it had become stuck, and the extraction process appeared quite painful.

The dancing boy, now quite pallid with terror, slipped out of the arena, leaving six well-armed and deeply saddened sailors facing two strangers: the scribe and the stony-faced barbarian. All eight actors had by now unsheathed their swords, but as yet no one seemed to have decided on the next step to be taken.

Zaek spared a side glance at Valamiel’s weapon. His eyebrow shot up. “Is that not a Hevvaenian sabretache?” he asked.

“Yes, a Third Firing, but genuine.”

“I thought I recognized that splendid forge-pattern, though I’ve seen only two before in my life. You are well-armed, scholar.”

“My sainted father’s only heritage, an heirloom, something of a burden to carry amongst thieves, I fear.”

“I’d appreciate a chance to inspect it more closely.”

“With pleasure... once I’ve cleaned the blood off it.”

“The blood?” asked Zaek. “Oh, you mean *their* blood?”

As battle-threat or pre-combat boast, this was perhaps more subtle fare than the pirates expected; nevertheless, they managed to grasp that an insult had been hurled. This helped them to make up their minds. “Vengeance! Slaughter! Kill!” one of them screamed, and the

others seemed to find the idea an appealing one. “Kill!” they agreed. But still they hesitated.

“You couldn’t kill your grandmother with a shovel if her back were turned,” said Zaek — thinking perhaps that six armed men tend to get in each others’ way when they’re goaded to attack.

As the first thug began his rush, however, a large metal pitcher suddenly bounced off his forehead; it failed to knock him out, but it confused him. The dancing boy had recovered his wits but lost his temper, and hurled at his tormentors the first object that came to hand. An athletic boy, and fond of games, his aim proved accurate.

Zaek did not hesitate to take advantage of this development, and in a moment the sailor was down, blood gushing from the wrist of his sword-arm, and foul curses spewing from his gullet. Another raised his curved blade to attack, and this one died with his ribcage sliced open, almost instantaneously. He was, in fact, the only fatality of the incident, and perhaps he had his mourners. Perhaps not. If the remaining four sailors had tears to shed, they decided to shed them elsewhere and at leisure. Without great ceremony, they departed.

Life offers few unequivocal victories, and even these often prove chimerical, since violence causes many ripples in the sea or net of events, ripples which sooner or later wash back again to their epicenter. At this juncture, the wizard who sat in the corner got up, unnoticed by anyone, brushed his robe and silently and calmly left the cafe. A ripple among ripples, flowing away toward the horizon of the tale.

Zaek had no interest in gloating over the fallen. He dropped his ensanguined blade point-down to the floor, where it buried itself a good two inches in the board, and vibrated evilly. He then approached the dancing boy, and the boy hurled his arms around the barbarian’s neck and embraced him.

Valamiel, less sentimental, his blade unstained, slouched toward the dead and wounded, first to retrieve his dagger. The pirate had fainted with the pain of trying to remove it from his arm. The scholar put his foot on the unconscious man’s shoulder and ripped out the blade. Repulsively, a gobbet of meat still adhered to the steel, which had been treated with an herbal caustic that bonded instantly to flesh. With fastidious distaste, Valamiel cleaned and then resheathed the

dirk beneath his robe. At last, almost solicitously, he hovered over the other casualties, as if to see whether or not they still breathed.

Just then, the representatives of the fly-by-night Enforcers' Guild under contract to the cafe arrived in some numbers, thirsting vigorously for Order.

INDEED, THE ENFORCERS concerned themselves much more with Order than with Law. They discovered that their own companion, though terribly wounded, still lived. They discovered that four perpetrators had already been apprehended. They found many witnesses to exonerate Zaek and Valamiel, and to praise their character. As Quelleron the proprietor argued, Order had been restored already; what need to disturb the slumberous potency of the Law?

The Guild members seemed disappointed to have missed the fight. They seemed mildly hurt when Quelleron refused to lodge any complaints against anyone; but they were pleased that he did not intend to sue them for inefficiency or demand the severance of their contract. Taking charge of the dead and wounded, and suggesting strongly to Zaek and Valamiel that they consider the advantages of immediate emigration, the Enforcers finally — after nearly two hours of milling about and shouting — cleared out of the Water Fly Cafe and went home to bed.

“MY NAME,” SAID THE dancing boy with violet eyes, “is Xiri” (he pronounced it *Zhee-ree*, with accent on the first syllable and trilled ‘r’) — “and I want you to stay with me tonight — both of you — for free!”

Perhaps the boy's two saviors still felt their minds numb with the afterwash of adrenalin; perhaps their tongues simply failed them. Quelleron, however, spoke at once, and his grease-translucent flesh quivered with outraged propriety.

“You go too far, brat. My cafe is wrecked because of you, all customers fled except these two ruffians. And now you wish to rob me even of *their* meager custom. Sleep with them both if you like — sleep with the whole city! — so long as I am paid.”

“The boy did not cause your troubles,” said Valamiel sweetly. “The pirates did that. As for us ruffians, you might say we solved the

problem and saved you the expense of buying a new slave. If we had not...”

“Bah. Just such spurious reasoning as one might expect from such a source. I owe you nothing. Get out.”

“Don’t speak to them like...” began Xiri in a childish rage, but Valamiel shushed him with a gesture.

“A man of reason...” he purred.

“I know only one form of reason,” interrupted the bald one, his black eargems shaking in pure negation. “Two hundred sequins — or I recall the Guild and have you removed.”

“He’s courageous *now*, isn’t he?” asked Zaek politely. Valamiel shot the barbarian a glance that pleaded for peace. “One moment, friend; don’t do anything inexorable. Innkeep, allow me to finish my sentence, at least. I was about to say that a man of reason might see all points of view. Even your motives, Quelleron, however base, are worthy of attention...”

“I disagree,” said Zaek.

“...and therefore, while we applaud young Xiri’s quintessential generosity as heartily as we deplore your narrow and constricted view of life...”

“Get to the point, scribbler,” grated the innkeep.

“Scrivener, if you please. I was going to say that since you insist, you will be paid.”

“What?” said Zaek in a dangerously flat tone.

“You see, my friend,” Valamiel turned to the barbarian, “I tricked you into the expense of sharing that bottle of wine. I’m actually quite rich. In fact,” he reached into the folds of his robe, “I have here a purse of two hundred sequins which says that Zaek, at least, shall enjoy the boy’s favors.”

With a rich *thunk* the bulging purse hit the tabletop and squatted there, as if contemplating the circle of faces looming over it in the sudden silence.

Everyone studied the purse, but no one could think of any pressing reason to question its provenance. Quelleron, seeming annoyed to have his bluff called, at last reached out and touched the bag. “A poor return for all the damage and loss of trade,” he grumbled.

“Good,” said Xiri. “Let’s go and take a bath.”

The two men turned to follow the boy toward the curtains behind the stage.

“In the morning,” Quelleron hissed, “leave and do not return. Your type is trouble, and I do not wish to see you again.”

Zaek’s back stiffened — but Valamiel touched his shoulder and guided him quickly out of the room.

BEHIND THE CURTAINS, the Water Fly Cafe assumed a gaudier, more secretive and expensive air. Every surface of the hallway was patterned: rugs, stenciled walls, hangings, a worn tapestry or two, a low divan upholstered in magenta stormclouds, mirrors, scent: unmistakably the corridor of a brothel. On either side, heavy flowered curtains closed off narrow sleeping chambers. The other slaves had gone to bed, and from behind one veil crept slits of pale light and sounds of soft boy-laughing.

Xiri’s room, too small for a real bed, was piled instead with cushions, bolsters, carpets and tangled sheets. Someone had stenciled the walls with an incongruous and fanciful plethora of animals, real and mythic, including many giant saurians: more appropriate to a nursery. But the smell of the room, thought the scholar, would cause a Prior of his Order to blanch with horror; it filled his veins like smoking sacrificial wine, and began to stiffen his loins and soften his cerebellum.

Xiri flung off his red mantle, torn in the fight. He dripped with sweat — even his loincloth was soaked. He ran off to the bath, leaving the two men awkwardly alone, feeling gawkily out of proportion in the little dream-chamber. “Let’s step into the hall a moment,” Valamiel suggested.

“So,” whispered Zaek once they were out of the room, “you discovered your sainted father left you a bit of money, as well as the sword?” He grinned.

“Ah, the pirate’s purse. It was like stealing gold teeth from a battlefield corpse — nevertheless, I felt we deserved it — or rather, that *you* deserved it.”

“You are not so generous as to suggest spending the night on that purple couch — alone — are you?”

The scrivener shrugged. “I see the affair thus: you came here one night; you and Xiri noticed each other because you’re both

Thurenians. I know how your people feel about slavery. Even if you could have afforded him, you might have found it morally impossible to buy and use him. As it happened, however, you lacked the wealth (and Xiri's probably the costliest item in the house). Then, tonight, you won him in battle — symbolically if not, alas, in fact. By accident I sat at your table; by the nomadic law of hospitality, I was then bound to aid you in your need. Thus I am merely a second in this affair, and by rights..."

"Wait. I'll overlook the fact that you, not I, am squandering your inheritance to pay the filthy slavemaster. You are not a nomad — but even if you choose to feel bound by our laws, a yet higher law commands us here: the boy himself said he wanted both of us."

"Your ethical reasoning strikes me as scrupulous. Happily, I can see no further objections... at least, concerning this one night. Nevertheless, I insist on taking the first watch outside here in the hall; we have met many people this evening who might wish to pursue a deeper acquaintance. I will make sure that no such enthusiasts disturb your delectations."

"You are too ceremonious," said Zaek.

"This is a delicate matter." Valamiel smiled.

Zaek raised an eyebrow, turned and drew back the curtain of the boy's room. Xiri had emerged naked from the bath and was drying himself, smooth and slender, damp blond tresses hanging over his face. His groin appeared innocent of any pubescence; his genitals, not large but perfectly formed, were already swollen, the testicles plump in their sac, the penis jutting up at a forty-five degree angle, tip of the prepuce sticking out like the pinkbrown teat of a ripe pomegranate. He looked at the men framed in the doorway and smiled.

After some moments, the scholar said, "Well... don't delay too long..."

"Aren't you both coming in?" asked Xiri.

Valamiel began to stutter. He stepped back. "I'll explain," said Zaek, and took a step forward. The curtain fell, separating them.

THE BARBARIAN EXPECTED to find Xiri adept at kissing, but somehow he felt certain that the boy had rarely practiced with such ardor before. The child almost pushed the man over; Xiri's tongue, long and pointed, curiously flexible, tasted of spring water.

“You aren’t angry with me because I invited your comrade as well? You are the one I... I wanted, but he, he saved your life. Or maybe my life. Was I right? He *is* your comrade?”

Zaek touched the boy’s back, ran his fingers lightly down the vertebrae, disturbing infinitesimal golden hairs that grew there; and the nerves at the base of each bit of fleece sparked and sent out waves of charge and blossomy current under the boy’s skin, till he shuddered. The hand reached the curve of his buttocks, and he began to tremble as if afraid.

Zaek thought about the meaning of the word “comrade” among his people. He thought about the ceremony which created comradeship for the nomads of Chaos, the clans he had not seen for so many years. He banished the memories and said, “Yes, you did well. Your impulse was clear, I think. Moreover, our customs forbid the sense of ownership in love.”

“Unless two people choose to belong to each other?”

“Little Xiri, such things are rarely a matter of choice.”

“You mean the gods cause people to fall in love?”

“...the gods... yes... who knows?”

“What about us, Zaek? Can we belong to each other?”

Zaek thought about the Water Fly Cafe, the boy’s life, Quelleron, the institution of slavery. These bitter things melted away, however, as he gazed into Xiri’s violet eyes and felt the almost feverish warmth of his slight body. Thought drowned in an implosion of desire. “Yes. I think we do belong to each other...” he answered. “Your fingers are cold... you tremble... are you afraid?” He brushed the knuckles of one hand against the underside of Xiri’s penis, hard as a stick of candy. The boy clutched him tight; he could feel small fingernails digging into his back.

“No,” the child whispered, “not afraid. Yes, a bit afraid... but I’m so *tight*, here, it feels like it’s about to snap.”

The barbarian held Xiri, one hand at nape of neck and the other at small of back. “Lie down,” he whispered; and Xiri sank backwards with a dancer’s perfect grace, held in the man’s arms, till he came to rest, odalisque-like, on his back among the pillows and sheets.

Leaning his considerable weight on one elbow, Zaek hovered over the luminous boy, tasting first Xiri’s tongue and saliva, then the contour of his smooth armpits, then the nacreous convexity of his

throat, then the unripe nipples, then the flat dancer's chest and stomach, then the slightly protuberant navel (like a tiny pink fig in a fleshy socket), then the microscopic cornsilk at the corners of Xiri's pubes.

The boy made involuntary dove noises. Delicately and precisely, Zaek kissed the genitals, merely brushing them with his lips. He licked the testicles, rolled them on his tongue. He raised his head, took the throat of the organ between thumb and forefinger, and slowly peeled back the membranous foreskin from the glistening little snout of the corona. Again he bent forward, licked his lips, and closed them wetly over the wand of flesh.

He meant to suck the child slowly. But Xiri was passionate, engorged, cocked like a trap. Thin hips thrust upwards; Xiri stabbed himself into the man's throat; Zaek reached with both hands under the thin body, cupped the tense buttocks and half lifted the boy into the air, helping him push the organ up, up... pistoning again and again into the man's mouth...

...screamed a highpitched boy's scream... and his whole frail body suddenly twitched into the orgasmic spiral, spasmed, spasmed... and squirted a soft little bullet of musk into Zaek's mouth... spasmed again, syrupy quick ooze... down Zaek's gullet like melted sugar... fell back gasping on the pillows, beached mer-boy panting for oxygen, martyr's crown of sweat on his forehead.

Whispering love-words such as no Chronicle could pin to its pages, Zaek now reclined upon the cushions and pulled Xiri on top of him; so they lay face to face, bodies touching at every point, and clinging. Zaek's senses absorbed the bird-thump of the boy's heart, the attar of his quickened breath. The barbarian had so far neglected to undress, and his original nakedness was screaming to be set free — yet he felt pleasure in the discomfort, and was patient; he smoothed and stroked the living weight that rode him.

He felt the boy's cock still more than half-erect against his stomach. His hands roamed over Xiri's exposed buttocks... fingers reached into the cleft between them... one finger touched the central focus, the tiny inverted bud of the anus... gently the finger stroked, then probed the soft round slit, till it reached the depth of a single knuckle. Xiri gasped, spread his legs and lifted his buttocks, then

pressed down again, thrusting his sex against Zaek's weapon-belt. The finger slid in another knuckle deep.

Now Zaek rolled over and quickly rose to his feet, began rapidly to undress. The fur mantle, the clanking vest, the belt and sash and kilt of worn leather — all fell to the floor. Xiri stared up at the warrior's jutting loincloth; dove hypnotized by hooded cobra. The barbarian stripped the cloth away and exposed himself, held himself in his hand and stroked himself...

Like most northern barbarians, Zaek had terminally depilated his body sometime during adolescence — a peculiar custom in such a damp and sometimes frigid country as Far Thuren. The hairless skin was burnt brown with weather, and disfigured in a few places by badly-healed scars.

Xiri half-rose and crawled the two steps toward Zaek's feet. He embraced the man's hairless legs as he studied the erection which now pointed at his face. The tip had already lubricated itself in organic anticipation. The smooth testicles appeared illogically enormous in the boy's thin hand, which closed upon the distended sac and squeezed. With his other hand, Xiri palpated the underside of the barbarian spout, till a drop of clear seminal fluid appeared at the tip of the glans. Xiri's long tongue snaked out and collected the drop before it could fall: dragonfly and lotus-dew.

Never had Zaek experienced so much freely-given love, combined with such courtesan's sophistication. Xiri's mouth could not hold more than the head and about a third of the shaft of the man's organ, but the child used his lips, tongue and teeth on it, nibbled the heavy foreskin, darted here and there like a wet bee upon some monolithic glistening flesh-flower.

Suddenly Xiri broke away; still kneeling before the man, he gently masturbated himself with one hand, while with the other hand he grasped Zaek's wrist, and pulled him down till he sank to his knees and they faced each other kneeling amid the disarray of bedding. They kissed till the boy's saliva filled Zaek's mouth.

Xiri then twisted sinuously out of this embrace and turned, still kneeling, to face away from the warrior. He thrust his buttocks in the air and arched his back in archetypal imitation of a cat... glanced over his shoulder and smiled... his teeth were chattering slightly.

"Do you want this?" whispered Zaek.

“Yes, please,” he answered.

“Give me some ointment or salve, then, lest I damage you.”

“Come closer,” said Xiri, “cover me — and I’ll give you some salve.”

So Zaek embraced him closely from behind, his arms around the rib-cage, resting his weapon in the sheath-cleft of slender buttocks. Xiri took one of the man’s hands in both of his, forced it open palm upwards, moved his jaws as if he were chewing with his mouth closed... then pursed his lips... and a thin trail of saliva, mountain-honey-white froth, dribbled into Zaek’s hand.

At this, the barbarian at last lost control. One might say that his brain abdicated in favor of his outlaw nerves, like a merchant clubbed senseless by a highwayman, who then pilfers the horse and rides off whooping into the night.

Zaek smeared the salvific fluid onto his own yard, and into the cleft of the boy’s nates, and into the elastic sphincter between them.

He could not slide in easily, but must shove to push the bulbous crown through the tiny ring — and the boy whimpered in pain till it thrust home, and gasped as the full length of penis slowly followed, till the man had buried himself to the hilt in the boy, and felt himself impossibly deep. He clutched Xiri to himself and savored the fluttering heart; with his other hand he found the boy’s diamond stem and grasped it with spit-slick fingers.

Xiri knew a trick: as the man pulled back to thrust again, the child contracted the muscles of his rectum and anal sphincter; then loosened them again to receive the next jab as profoundly as possible; then whiplashed his hips forward and back in a quickening tempo. Zaek struggled against ejaculation. The little silver skull of his single earring banged rhythmically against his cheek. The boyprick in his hand dribbled and spurted, and Xiri began keening like a star-void goblin.

To slice through the moment which is orgasm would take the reader of the Chronicle down to those archaeologically timeless depths wherein the principle that defies all entropy pulses in an unending and victorious explosion of plasmic bliss. Farther than the word can go.

SOME TIME LATER...

Zaek said, "Tell me about yourself, how you came to be in this place."

Xiri replied, "My clan are transhumants of Zalmox; our drycamp is in the eastern valley — do you know it?"

"I've not seen it for decades, but yes, I know it. My clan are Chaotes of Thuren, and one of my grandmothers came from Zalmox. Possibly we are related."

"Well, you know about my life, then."

"No, tell me. Perhaps I have forgotten."

Xiri laughed. "The herds go to the mountains. Storms drive them again to the valley. Meanwhile festivals take place, ceremonies, the shamans heal, someone is slain in a duel; cattle raids occur, men and women grow angry and dance; a child is born, the people smoke vhang and dance. You can't have forgotten."

"When did you leave your mother's pavilion?"

"I was nine. I went with my siblings and cousins with the herds. Afterwards I stayed in a children's hut always; I was happier there."

"...and you began to dance?"

"I always danced. But when I was ten or eleven, the people began to notice me and reward me for my dancing."

"When I was young, I remember that the children of the north ran free, and learned of love as they pleased, some sooner, some later. What of you, Xiri?"

The boy grinned "What do you think? I was very forward. When I was little, I'd pester the older boys and men and climb into their laps and caress them till they blushed and laughed and chased me away. I played with my siblings and cousins; I loved to be naked."

"When I turned twelve, I fell aching in love with an older cousin named Seref. I think he preferred girls, but I crept into his bed one night and seduced him. He was the first to take me completely, as you did. His companions mocked him a bit because of me, but no one shunned us. In fact, some of his friends shared me."

"No one said I was wicked, but I wondered if I were not halfgirl, like one of the worshippers of Smarigdon the Androgyne. Anyway, I was happy."

"Then one day Seref and I wandered in the hills. We stripped, climbed a tree, and made love in the branches. We bathed in a stream

and dressed again. On our way home, we were ambushed by air-pirates.”

Zaek guessed that Xiri had never told this part of his story before. The boy did not sob, but tears glittered in his eyelashes and dripped onto his cheeks. “Seref had a sword, and tried to defend us. The pirates killed him. They dragged me back to their stinking ship and sailed away. I never saw Thuren again. They sold me here in Suvyamara, and Quelleron bought me. I’ve been here a year now; I’m just fourteen.”

“And Quelleron... mistreats you?”

“Oh, from time to time. We hate him, but he’s not the worst pimp in the city. Some of the boys hate the work, too. I don’t mind it so much, if the men are gentle. What I despise is not being free. Until you came, I thought I’d forgotten how to dance.”

“I’ll take you away from here,” said Zaek.

The boy answered nothing, but began sobbing in earnest. Zaek feared that the child mistrusted his promise, had seen too much betrayal and would not allow himself to cherish hope. But he misjudged the innocence of youth.

Xiri looked up, wiped his nose and said, “Will you teach me how to use a sword like you do?” Clearly, he took the barbarian quite literally, and was crying for joy at the thought of his impending freedom. By Chaos, thought the man. Now what?

VALAMIEL THE MAEVRAENITE had not rested in comfort upon the horrible purple divan. At first he’d listened to the sounds which reached him in the dim hallway, of boys abusing themselves before sleep, and of the barbarian making Xiri moan loudly enough to wake them all up again.

He tried a Contemplation upon the Seven Worthy Founders of his Order, an exercise that generally succeeded in dampening lust and inducing slumber (not the orthodox purpose of the meditation, to be sure!); but he felt suspended between the unpleasant excitement of the tavern brawl and the feverish anticipation of his share of the spoils... so to speak. Hoist between two petards... or some similar metaphorical impossibility.

As the enticing sounds gradually drained away into postmidnight depths and shadows, Valamiel grew increasingly disturbed, till he could discover no remedy but the soothing touch of his own hand; as a

former monk, he knew how to prolong this practice almost indefinitely without ever falling over into climax.

He was thus engaged when, finally, the barbarian parted the curtains, literally staggered into the hallway, dressed only in kilt and swordbelt, collapsed onto the divan, leaned back against the wallpaper and yawned.

After a moment the scholar said, "Perhaps the boy is too tired..."

"Not at all," answered Zaek, scratching himself.

"Well, then... but... listen, friend: will you swear to bear me no ill-will for this? I ask for the truth."

Zaek was silent. Then he spoke. "I cannot promise it... except upon one condition."

"Namely?"

"That you swear comradeship with me."

Now it was Valamiel's turn to fall silent. Mentally, he reviewed what lore he knew of the ways of the Clans of Chaos. Marriages did not exist among them (lineage being traced matrilineally) but anyone might swear comradeship with anyone else, man, woman or child. One might have many comrades, but since the bond demanded total sharing, no one entered into it lightly. The attendant ceremony, he seemed to recall, possessed certain decidedly savage, almost childishly savage, elements.

The scrivener felt many inner defenses spring up against this offer of intimacy that seemed almost sexual (indeed, it was sexual, since Zaek required it before Valamiel could share the dancing boy, on a bed that would still hold the warmth of the barbarian's body).

Nevertheless, as he contemplated what he knew or guessed of Zaek's character, he realized that the offer must have been seriously made. Here and now, a new branch in the labyrinth was being opened up and displayed for Valamiel, so that he could either refuse and continue on his way, or accept and leap into the dark. Timidity neither wins nor loses; only boldness stands to gain or forfeit anything at all. He looked as deep into himself as he could, and found there the clear image of the barbarian and the slave-boy, already graphed into his soul-stuff. Risk is always the most logical choice.

"I swear it," said the scholar at last. "By Chaos, I swear it."

"A good oath," said the barbarian, kissing him on both cheeks and on the mouth.

AROUND DAWN XIRI FINALLY slept, sated and smiling. Valamiel parted the curtains and wordlessly summoned Zaek to join him. Together in silence they sat propped against the walls admiring the sleeping boy, for a sleeping child is a true emblem of paradise. As if curled upon a bank of moss in the blue forests of Thuren, Xiri slept for all of them, a sweet daemon's sleep.

The tableau was shattered some hours later by the foul antispell of Quelleron the proprietor, who burst in upon them, ordered them to depart immediately, woke Xiri with his hissing and drove him to tears of rage.

Zaek whispered in the boy's ear that rescue would soon be organized, and Xiri pulled himself together enough to kiss the two men goodbye. But his face made an utter non-mask of desolation, which remained with them as a final sad souvenir of their transformational night at the Water Fly Cafe.

2. Why Is A Boy Like The Weather?

EVEN ON QAMAR, which is but one of the hundred and eight Moons of the Gas Giant (seventy-two of them inhabited), several different calendars are in use. The Chaotes of Thuren for example recognise the “planetary” five-hundred-and-one day year, but give each Day its own name. They think of each as an individual living being, manifesting itself once in a celestial rotation.

Sometimes, however, Days fail to appear on schedule. During the recorded history of the clans, six Days have actually died or absconded, never to be seen again, and been replaced by daemons from elsewhere (or when). These New Days often turn out to be extraordinarily eventful — so say the barbarians, at any rate, who believe that the usurping daemons possess the madcap and risky enthusiasms of cosmic children. Infants born on New Days are expected to be marked by some vivid and poetic fate.

Jethael was born on a New Day, but didn’t know it. He was Suvyamaran, and Suvyamara’s calendar looks not to the stars but the sea for its inspiration. The five-day cycle of tides (the bloodflow of the Green Goddess) defines a sacred Week, the two-hundred-day cycle defines the Year*. On Fifthdays, a ritual is performed in the

Viridine Temple. The full Choir acts out one of the forty chapters of Suvyamara's High Transformations.

So Jethael was bell-wakened early that morning, more or less at the same time Valamiel and Zaek slunk out of the Water Fly thinking of breakfast. (In Thuren, this dawning day was known to be ruled by a daemon named Xa, a young male raven with a body like a translucent opal, considered by some an avatar of the Trickster, and called — appropriately enough — the Thief of Hearts. But Jethael was ignorant of this fact as well. To tell the truth, even in Far Thuren only shamans and old women bother to think of such matters.)

Jethael's emerging wakefulness met the weather: a vital surge of sunlight through the oval window, a shaft so gold it seemed to have grown a crust of glowing violet; and from the sea, a fresh breeze freighted with ozone and electricity, an aquamarine smell that crisped the bed-linen and roused gooseflesh on Jethael's velvet-cool back.

He hated to get up: the sun and breeze on his shoulder-blades felt like the departing caress of a dream rather than the welcoming embrace of day. His limbs were tangled in sheets that squeezed and chafed, one bare leg lay free and glowing in the sun. Every morning he re-entered a body already aching with pleasure, and a mind full to seething with fancies: the continuation of a dream. He muttered:

"Ravinan? Wake up!"

No response.

He rolled over and looked at the other bed. Ravinan's hair, an alchemist's delight, covered the pillow with long straight sun-tinted rivers. His sheet cocooned him from neck to waist, but had ridden up over his hips and exposed his fair plump buttocks (for the Choristers — weather permitting — slept naked). Jethael touched himself under his own sheet... but knew there was no time for such play... the second bell would ring in less than a minute. Blue light mocked him through the window: the sky is free, but boys must work. Unfair, unfair.

MEANWHILE, VALAMIEL AND Zaek trudged along beside a

'Measurements of time and biological ages of the characters of this book are translated into Terrestrial chronology. (Publisher's Note)

stagnant back-canal through a dense park. Most of the city seemed to consist of parkland. For those without cash for a carriage, the distance between one address and the next was often marked by miles of leafy paths, primitive ferry-crossings and long rickety bridges across half-wild marsh. A Suvyamaran's notion of wealth and success demanded a house hidden from all other buildings. The poor as well sought as much privacy as they could afford, even if it required building on stilts in a bog, or moving into the upper storeys of a rotting palazzo in one of the Drowning Quarters.

The two companions were headed for one of those peculiar watery enclaves, for they feared they might be too well known now in Spiridon Gates, the transient wharf district around the Water Fly Cafe. Having neither slept nor dined, they walked in silence for the most part — but not downcast. The strangeness of their last night's adventure buoyed them up and lightened their heads with the helium of emotion. Moreover, it felt as if the sun itself were nourishing them (though their skin was neither green nor blue); as if the sky drew them upward, like airships which cast off their groundstays and lurch toward the constellations.

Valamiel remembered some lines from a poem in a dead Qamarian language; stumbling slightly on the pronunciation, he recited:

*"I claim that a Boy is like the Weather,
Not weaving a future but wandering
Day by day, now weeping a storm of tears,
Now laughing into the azure faceless Sky. "*

Then Zaek surprised him by capping the verse — with a much more classical pronunciation, too:

*"And I will take the World's Weather into myself,
Englobing the Globe, mapping into my veins
The pathways of the Nine Thousand Winds,
Like the games of a shining Boy."*

The canal meandered, in the picturesque fashion of Suvyamara, through a landscape of ruined overgrown garden. Here man's plans

and artifacts sank entropically toward the past, while victorious Nature celebrated on the dagger-tip of the present. Here a broken-down pavilion (shaped like a cracked and yellowing eggshell) overgrown with flowering trumpet-vine, insects arcbuzzing through the microcosm of morning sunlight; there, an ancient avenue of blue willows, half bramble-choked, half flooded, frog-haunted and patrolled by stooping crimson birds.

The path became a boardwalk which passed beside the canal through a grove of bog-palms and tangled purple-sedge. One last elbow in the canal, and it debouched into an open field of marshgrass and flowed at last into a great lagoon. Where canal met lake, a hamlet-cluster of wooden buildings squatted, with lattice-windowed balconies projecting over the water, cupolas and false domes rotted with sea-breeze, once-bright paint peeling and faded to a strange soft marbled dreaminess. From where they stood the two men could see several long docks projecting from this hamlet into the lagoon, and a number of narrow pointed flat skiffs were coming and going busily, carrying goods and passengers to and fro.

Out in the vast lagoon itself spread the astonishing land/waterscape which earned Suvyamara the epithet “Half-Drowned”. The millennial shifts and vagaries of the great delta of the Oryx River played strange tricks on the civilization which clung to the ever-changing silt, marsh, islands, beaches, swamps and still lagoons, all held in the River’s huge Mouths like green pearls and threads of liquid sapphire. Some neighborhoods were swallowed slowly, inundated so gradually that people put off moving from generation to generation, finally leaving their upper storeys to poor relatives, then at last to vagrants and thieves. Other quarters suffered catastrophe, freak floods, erosion of natural land-dams, flash storms which filled the streets and never sank again. The wealthy kept themselves as dry as possible, and built towers on strong piles, or clustered together on the few low hills available. The Half-Drowned Quarters were left to the poor, the self-styled true Suvyamarans, the water-people.

Two centuries ago, the lagoon they now contemplated had been the very fashionable enclave of Hierophantis. Now, the placid mirror of the lagoon extruded the baroque shapes of ruined castles, spires, pleasure-towers and domes, each amphibian building rising in the midst of its own wide acreage of lakelawn — each tower an islet unto

itself, overgrown with orchids, the larger ones surrounded by wooden shanties built on floating docks, the smaller ones isolate, pocked with age, sliding into the shallow water like old men into false but exquisite memories. The bright skiffs of water gypsies sped past flower barges and floating restaurants: the ruins were inhabited: fishermen set their V-shaped sails, each with its heraldic device, and loomed away toward the far mouth of the lagoon and the unseen open sea beyond the horizon.

Zaek and Valamiel ambled along the boardwalk, across the marsh and toward the hamlet and ferry-docks, admiring the panorama of elegant but exuberant decay. Their noses located an eatery with benches on a sagging dock, offering a splendid view of the Lagoon of Hierophantis. With the last (“really the last!”) of his “patrimony”, Valamiel purchased two bowls of bright yellow mush with steaming ladles of sauce made of fruits and sea-creatures and spices (for even the poor of Suvyamara eat complicated food). They turned their backs on the view and plunged into breakfast.

BLUE RAIN TOWER HAD been built — nearly seven centuries ago — to house some forty boys. But since only twelve now lived there it seemed cavernous, almost uninhabited. The baths, for example, offered plenty of privacy and hide-corners behind dank walls with missing tiles, in narrow stalls with green stains on their ceilings, dimly lit by tiny clerestory windows high in the damp stone arches: a vast and water-echoing chamber, smelling of centuries of steam and boy-dirt, soap and algae.

In one of the stalls, Jethael and his roommate Ravinan stood facing one another, close and naked and wet. In their hands they held their soapy weapons; they were dueling with them like swords, and stifling their giggles... when suddenly a bell donged somewhere, its vibrations louder than the splash of the shower.

“Oh, no! Ten minutes to court-assembly!” Ravinan moved quickly under the water to unsoap himself.

They ran naked out of the baths (with towels held before their weapons, which obstinately refused to resheath themselves). They listened up the vast spiral of the tower, and heard from above the voices of their fellow Choristers, already no doubt nearly dressed and ready for work. Up the helical stairway they ran, leaving a spatter of

bathwater and toeprints on the ancient stone steps, long since worn to a smooth slope by countless ups and downs of children's feet, slippered and bare. Into their room they caromed, flung towels on floor, rummaged in trunk for white linen loincloths. As they bound and wound the long ribbands between their long legs and around their waists, Ravinan studied his now-concealed-weapon and moaned, "I'll be stiff and aching all day!"

Jethael, already stepping into his pantaloons, only giggled. His hyacinthine locks tossed wetly over his forehead, each long curl like a sharpened corkscrew. When damp, his hair seemed black; but when it dried, the strange under-color of amber or muskscarlet would emerge. The sign, people say, of ancient and pure Suvyamaran ancestry.

Most of the males of Qamar wear kilts under their robes (if they're rich enough to own a robe); most of the women too — although their kilts fall from the breasts rather than from the waist. In Suvyamara, however, once a long time ago women wore pantaloons and vests. When the Goddess ordered all females into strict and sacred seclusion, certain roles and duties performed by them were inherited by boys. In that distant time, certain boys were dressed as women, and performed the Transformations. Now fashions had changed, and the costumes of Perpetual Benefice appeared archaic and eccentric rather than only effeminate.

The pantaloons were very loose and very short, but their "waists" came up nearly to the nipples, and tied with a pyjama-style drawstring. The sleeveless vest hung to the waist and buttoned to the throat with twenty-one buttons. Liturgically the boys needed a different color costume for each of the Forty Transformations (and for several other "floating holidays" as well). This Fifthday the color was pale violet, trimmed with silk ribbon the color of half-dried blood. The costumes left arms and legs quite bare, but the boys' feet were slipped into ceremonial black velvet, and their arms were decorated with silver bangles. At last they took long capes, of a green so pale it seemed more the color of sea-spray than the sea itself. Carrying these folded over their arms, they dashed out of their room and down the stairs, just as the great bell rang once again.

"I BELIEVE THAT SAUCE CONTAINED a mild intoxicant," said Valamiel, stretched out on a bench in a beam of sun.

“One would expect as much,” agreed Zaek.

“I’d counted on drowsiness at last, but still my attention refuses to waver. Moreover, perversely, it refuses to worry. It even lunges forward with keen enthusiasm, despite the indisputable fact of our destitute condition.”

Zaek grunted empathically.

Their fellow customers, fishermen for the most part, had cleared off and left them alone on the dock. The cook also seemed to have vanished, perhaps to market, to replenish his licked-clean pots.

“Practical measures — rescue plans, means of livelihood — these matters seem beyond my grasp at the moment. If you agree, let us simply wait here in this pleasant place until something new transpires, or hunger moves us to some desperate measure.”

Zaek shrugged.

“Sleep if you like,” Valamiel offered. “I’ll just sit here and simmer and bang my lid, ‘abiding in the vastness of the Wordless Word’, to quote the Blessed Maervaen.”

“Impossible to sleep. I feel as you — though more wordless than wordy, I think. Well then, weave us the Pattern of Now.”

“Eh?”

“We Qamarains tell tales with cats-cradles. I thought you’d know the phrase. It’s like ‘once upon a time’ or ‘tell me a story’.”

“Ah yes,” said Valamiel. He paused a long moment in thought, then spoke.

“FRIEND AND COMRADE,” he began at last, “I was born on Saendeb, six moons away from Qamar, out and around the Ring. A very different world than this, tamed everywhere to agriculture, industry and trade, ruled by ancient Guilds and Orders, stable, peaceful...”

“...and dull,” Zaek interrupted. “I spent a fortnight there once, between employment.”

“So then, imagine my childhood: dreams bottled up in that comfortable greygreen world, looking-for some book or some person who knew how to release them into the waking daylight...”

“Not that I was unhappy. My parents were of the Scholars’ Guild, quiet, pleasant people, conservative but not intolerant. If anything, they were pleased by my bookish dreaminess. The first I knew of

misery came with adolescence. I fell in love with an eleven-year-old boy, and loved him till I was seventeen and left the lower academy. He was innocent at first, and I was afraid. Then, when he reached puberty himself and began to intuit my real feelings, he turned quite cruel...”

Zaek snorted with disgust.

Valamiel shrugged. “Saendebians frown on boy-love, call it dirty and infantile. At least they don’t punish us with public beatings, as on Ffandir the Grim. In any case, I decided to cork up the notion of love, along with all my other childish fancies, and devote myself instead to knowledge and the Path. I entered a monastery of the Scriveners where authentic meditative techniques were still practised, and where there was no one present of less than seventeen years: safely past the dangerous stage of blossoming...

“At first I did well, making use of energy diverted from lust to contemplation. The Priors were pleased, even impressed. But after a year or so, my concentration began to dim. My praeceptors thought to detect tinges of heresy in the images of my mystic reveries. They became less pleased.

“Realizing that I needed to spend more and yet more vitality to escape my inner torment, I petitioned the Order for permission to study the martial arts in my spare time. They agreed. I took up sword and knife, and again did well, passed several ranks in another year or so, despite my unathletic heritage.

“But again, my ‘baser self’ began to intrude on me at weak moments, mocking my esoteric knowledge and warrior’s skills with bad dreams. As a last desperate measure I tried to allegorize my desires into spiritual and fleshless ecstasies, transmuting my distant glimpses of young boys into themes for meditation on the Essential Beauty of the Undivided.

“Needless to say, this tightrope of pure piety soon began to tremble and vibrate and threaten to pitch me headlong into the Mordant Tangle of Multiple Masks... something like the Ice Hell spoken of in the myths of Ffandir, in fact. Despair. Total unbalance.

“Deep one stifling night I woke in bed choking and sweating: I’d dreamt of fire, raging fire, consuming me like corpse-meat on the pyre. Disturbed and unable to sleep then, I pulled on my robe and belted on my father’s sword (yes, it really was his), and snuck out into

the slow oven of the night, to walk off my madness. For hours I strode on and on, sweating and fuming and cursing my mystical eunuchism. For at last I was beginning to realize the deadendedness of the celibate Path I'd chosen.

"Around dawn I came across a camp of rhyming mendicants who'd been smoking vhang all night, and now sat staring peacefully into the embers under their teapot. I greeted them and passed on.

"By full light I'd reached the sea. You may recall that the beaches around the capitol are the one real tourist attraction of Saendeb, because of the grey crystal boulders and sand... You failed to visit them? Ah... The smoky quartz there is almost free of any rocky admixture, and where the veins of crystal are washed by the sea's slow waves they are broken up into menhirs and stalagmites and pebbles and sand. The water rubs them against each other till they attain nearly the polish of finished gemstones. The entire beach is now — in the present geologic age at least — an uninterrupted expanse of sparkling grey jewels. When the morning sun slants on it, a million prisms awake in the crystalline fragments: as if one looked into a luminous grey cloud at a frozen rainbow or shattered kaleidoscope of smoky light.

"Where I stood there was a sea-wall, and a rough staircase leading some twenty or twenty-five steps down to the beach. Part of the steps had been built of quartz. Halfway down the stairs a boy was sprawled out, dozing in the sun, a long fishing pole held in place beside him by a rock, the line stretching tautly out to sea.

"The boy wore only a ragged white kilt, so I could see that his skin was sun-gilded and his body thin. His tawny hair looked as if it had never been combed. As I watched him, one sleepy hand crept between his legs and pulled and yanked and rubbed, at last slipped under the fold of cloth and began stroking. I had the curious notion that he was about to make love to the sun.

"Suddenly he turned his head and looked up at me and smiled, not surprised but as if he'd known I was there all along. I managed to smile back. His face struck me as attractive but strange, rather animal-like, with flared nostrils and an over-large mouth, eyes slightly mad under that mane of hair. Without a word he jumped up and skipped down the rest of the steps, reached the beach and disappeared behind a

large glistening boulder. Then peered back briefly, as if to see whether I followed him. And vanished again.

“Instantly of course I became a wolf. On shaking legs I followed down the steps, concentrating on not slipping, burning with fever and monkish desiccation. I rounded the boulder — and stopped, amazed.

“The boy had thrown off his kilt and now stood naked, legs apart, one hand on his hip and the other holding his cock, in profile, pissing into the sea toward the sun, like a broached cask of topaz wine. As if encouraged by my arrival he upped the angle of his half-stiff spout and sent one last arc spraying into the gentle waves; then just stood there, fondling himself and grinning at me as if he’d performed some praiseworthy and difficult feat. In fact — you may smile — but at the time it seemed to me one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.

“I asked him his name, but somehow as soon as I’d spoken I felt the words were wrong and clumsy. The boy pointed a finger at his own lips and signed that he either could not or would not speak. Was he deaf and dumb? Would that account for the strange, almost feral warmth of his smile? Well then, down with words! and instead, I stepped forward and touched his shoulders, then caressed his neck and tangled my fingers in his disorderly hair. And with each move I made, his smile grew better and better, as if to say: Now you’re getting it right!

“At last he twined his arms around my neck and made me kiss him. He had a tongue; at least it was not the lack of a tongue made him dumb! Here I am, I marveled, present at the birth of a whole new Cosmos. How fortunate!

“The boy laughed a strange almost bestial laugh, but his eyes made sweet and intelligent signals: down on your knees, they requested. And I knelt, failed to notice how I bruised my knees on the beach of gemstones or soaked half my monk’s robe in the surreptitious waves.

“His body was a child’s, but his cock was already adolescent: thick and rubbery, with a heavily fleshed foreskin which I peeled back from a bulbous crown that glistened, maybe with piss and smegma, what did I care? His fat testicles stretched the scrotum like plums in a purse and the edges of his groin were barely fleeced with tawny curls.

“At once he thrust his hips forward and battered at my lips and teeth with his delicate truncheon, while I licked its snout and mixed

my saliva with whatever fluids it had already secreted, and swallowed them. Trying not to lose all composure, I licked the underside of the shaft and ran my tongue over the tip. I thought I tasted ambergris, I grew faint, took half the length in my mouth and tongued it. The boy let out a high keening, almost like the wail of a midnight cat, a half-animal sound that frightened and excited me like sorcery. There on the prismatic beach, between sea and sky, enclosed in an infinity of summer and crazy light, alone with the faun-like mute, I sucked till his hands clutched my hair and he nearly pushed me over with the violence of his ejaculation: sweet spoonfuls of biologic soup creamed over my tongue and throat from that spit-slippery piston that swelled and pistoled pure clear jac over my tastebuds and teeth.

“I stood up and held him to me. His breath rasped and he shook like a wounded bird. I caressed his brown back and the paler skin of his taut and rather muscular buttocks, till he looked up at me smiling and pulled my head down to kiss his lips; then again, thrusting his tongue into my mouth, then again and once more, as if to taste himself inside my head.

“At last he broke away, and signed to me that he must go. He quickly wrapped his rag around his waist, ran up the steps and collected his fishing-pole (the line had snapped), turned to wave a cheerful goodbye, skipped up the last steps, waved again and vanished.

“As for me, I leaned back against the translucent boulder and realized that all my problems had evaporated. I was free. Tomorrow perhaps I would return to this beach to look for the mute. Or perhaps I would simply leave Saendeb and go wandering around the Ring. I owed nothing, and no one owed me. I owned nothing, and no one owned me. In my visionary and superstitious and victorious mood, I thought the gods had sent me one of their angels. I realized I hadn’t even remembered to think of reaching orgasm myself; but energy surged through me as if the mute’s sperm were charged with spiritual light. At last, fully reborn, I sauntered back to the monastery to collect my few belongings and sign out forever.

“There I discovered that the entire building, sometime during the night after I’d left it, had burned to the ground, leaving only smoldering black ashes and tumbled heaps of hissing stone. Several of the brothers — in *my* wing of the monastery — had perished in the

blaze. The angry survivors, milling and moaning around the sizzling wreck, seemed to notice something alien in my aura. Where had I vanished to? they demanded hysterically. And before I could gather my wits I found myself accused of arson and murder by the Priors of my own Order!

“For several months I languished in gaol while the investigation continued. There I met several interesting people, including a jovial thief who acted as my mentor, protected me from thugs and taught me his trade. At last I was released for lack of evidence, and exiled.

“Since then I’ve worked on a dozen Moons, sometimes in this scholar’s dress and sometimes not, as the occasion seems to warrant. I never returned to the beach, and have no idea to this day whether what happened to me there was magic, as it seemed — or merely an astounding jape of the gods of random luck.”

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE Theocratic and Perpetual Benefice for the Evocation of the Forty Epodes, Jethael reposed his bottom coldly on a smooth black vitrium floor. Above his head under the rafters of the Pavilion’s low-peaked roof, birds piped random flutes against the slow sonorous drone of a gigantic horizontal zither (called onomatopoeically a *barom*) and the reedy chanting of old Poron the Transformationist (who was already robed in jade samite, the skeletal dandy!). On the open floor of the pavilion some boys performed a mesmerically slow War Dance. Above their heads the roof was supported by slender columns in the shapes of lion-headed seasnakes. In the courtyard the sun was shining, but seabreeze and shade chilled the forty-odd boys sitting bare-and-crossed-legged on the polished glassy floor, waiting to rehearse their parts in the coming afternoon’s ritual.

Having practiced four days already, Jethael felt no need to concentrate now, as other boys still did, on sequences of hand-sijils or the words to various chants. What little he needed to know he had mastered.

“What would it be like,” he wondered, “... if an airship suddenly landed *right now* in the courtyard and rescued me?” (He supplied a mental image based on certain crude colored prints in *The Boy’s Own Bi-Annual Book of Pirates*: tattered crimson sails, spidery black hull bristling with iron claws, hooks, chains and anchors.)

“As I grasp the last rung of a dangling ladder, the ship is already taking off... The priests and proctors scurry about beneath me, already reduced to the size of dogs, shrieking at the ship... Below me now I can see the tiled roof of the pavilion, and across the courtyard the bathing pool surrounded by willows... Rising up out of the House is like escaping from a vast enchanted castle, with twelve squat towers, all melting with age and eaten away by parasitic vines...” (Jethael had never actually been in an airship; all this was but dream.)

“Now all the boys come running out like ants to wave goodbye... Now I can see how the House is surrounded by its own park... and to the south on its promontory overlooking the sea, the great Viridine Temple of Suvyamara (one of the Hundred Wonders of the Ring of Moons) thrusts its seven domes and seven spires of polished emerald into the stormy clouds. To the north I can make out the towers of Port Oryx, and the huge River itself on the horizon... The hundred peninsulas and islands, spits and bars, lagoons and slow back-streams, marshes cut by serpentine canals... Leprous with age, semi-tropical, amphibian, half asleep Suvyamara...

“At last I clamber up the ladder and hoist myself over the rail... Headed for cold air, plunging through icy clouds toward deepspace, the Ring...”

Jethael and his airship crew had just discovered a secret Moon, a sphere of ice the size of a mountain, obviously hollow inside. They were choosing lots to make up a dangerous exploration party, when some annoyance began tugging Jethael’s astral self back into his body. Ravinan, next to him, was nudging him with a bare elbow. Suppressing a grin, the blond boy gestured with his noon-blue eyes.

Naturally the twelve Choristers from the Blue Rain Tower were sitting together in their usual little sodality — and Kael had managed to hide himself almost completely behind two other boys and the shadow of a pillar — out of any master’s line of sight. Kael’s hair hurt the eyes to look at it, so red-scarlet-crimson-leaping-flame. “And with the matching temperament of a mad berserker,” as Poron the old Transformationist once drily observed. Certainly, Kael was foolhardy enough to risk getting caught in assembly with his penis sticking out of his pants.

Jethael and Ravinan alone could see it, and Kael shot them a conspirator’s grin from his shadow: green eyes, turned-up nose,

freckles. His cock boasted the most peculiar shape of any in Perpetual Benefice, and he was proud to flaunt it. Somehow thicker at the crown than at the base, with a huge red foreskin blossoming around the swollen tip, the long shaft curved in toward the belly like a strung bow: the whole organ in erection resembled a mace with a bent handle. With one long forefinger Kael tugged his balls tumbling out of the tangle of pale violet silk, and the other two boys could see a few sparse red curls at the base of the now fully-exposed genitalia. Slowly and surreptitiously, moving only his wrist, Kael began sliding the meaty prepuce up and down in his fist.

Rising from the X of Ravinan's crossed fair legs sprang up a little tent of pantaloons-cloth. Blushing, he spread his copy of the *Sacred Tides and Epodes* over the evidence. No adult Suvyamaran would blame a boy for an erection, provided the boy weren't so rude as to allow it to be noticed. In ancient Suvyamaran the same word (*vaehh*) means "manners", "spiritual Path" and "aesthetic judgment". Morality is a private affair — but a choirboy who exhibits his privates (or in any other way misbehaves publicly) has "lost *vaehh*", and will surely be spanked, or worse.

On this long lazy ceremonial morning Jethael drifted from dreams of piracy to the view of Kael's long red rooster. Jethi too was stiff, snug inside his loincloth flat against his belly where he couldn't reach it, radiating warmth against the morning chill.

Kael took his time about it, knowing he had at least half an hour before anyone would call on him. Slowly, slowly, now using his thumb and forefinger alone, pinching the loose flesh under the snout, rubbing the shaft against his bare leg.

Suddenly Kael squeezed it in his fist; it went rigid and turned the color of overripe fruit; he gritted his teeth and grimaced in an effort not to scream or spasm. One, then two, then three jets of semi-opaque jac spewed out: the first and smallest pellet splattered onto the back of the boy (a ten-year-old named Daevaen) sitting in front of Kael; the second made a string of white syrup on the obsidian floor; the third sprinkled over Kael's own bare legs and dribbled through his fingers.

Ravinan (the goose) couldn't keep from giggling. Tharactus, Master of Boys, that cruel tyrant, rushed over and slashed Ravinan's dutifully outstretched hand with a quoit. But, for a wonder, the man

failed to notice the mess Kael had made. Droningly and endlessly the rehearsal went on... and Jethael returned to the stars.

ZAEK THE BARBARIAN SAT on the edge of the dock, splashing his feet in the lagoon of Hierophantis. He thought about the story Valamiel had just told. Finding the “pattern of Now” calls for research into the past, he told himself: two sudden comrades filling in blanks, taking down barriers that stand in the way of new friendship. Zaek considered his reply.

“No such unhappy youth as you describe could be suffered here on Qamar. Even in the cities, which have been infected by such dire traits of civilization as taxes and slavery, no one cares who loves how or whom. On the other hand, I almost envy you the adventure... No single act of love ever meant that much to me... until last night... But as for the barbarian clans, most of us are omnisexual. We start early, tutored by older siblings or play mates... Well, after all, we are partisans of Chaos! We’re obliged to act like savages, no?”

“Needless to say, I envy you. But I gather that you are above all else a lover of boys. How do your people regard a man who thus limits his affections?”

“As an eccentric, but socially useful. After all, most people lack the talent for dealing with pubescent devils. My weaponmaster was one such; and no one ever called him infantile. As for me, perhaps the circumstances of exile and a certain nostalgia have shaped my character. I left my homeland at sixteen and have not so far returned there. Xiri... seems so much part of a lost childhood...”

The barbarian’s face held no expression, but the ex-monk sensed how difficult his companion found this mode of confession. He was about to interrupt when Zaek spoke again:

“You’re the first outside my clan to hear this story. I embroiled myself in a conspiracy. My party lost.”

“Explain how a struggle for power can arise in a society that accepts no rule.”

“That’s an ideal, Valamiel, and we try not to swallow any ideals. Power is real. The free man or woman uses it to be free. In this case, the quarrel concerned one of the few titles in use among the Clans: Tryptarch, or war-lord. In the most conservative Clans, one must either fight for the title or be proclaimed unanimously. In my Clan of

Hraelle however, the title had been held for several generations in one family, passed from father to son. The Old Mothers hated this innovation. When I was fifteen the Tryptarch died and handed the... fetishes I suppose you'd call them... to his son, a lackwit not much older than I. Certain hotheads in the youths' huts threw their support behind a rival candidate, and several of the old women schemed and plotted... Well, it was a fiasco, ended with several dead, and the hereditary fool still holding the Tryptarchate, last I heard."

After a pause, Valamiel asked, "I take it you were the rival candidate?"

"That's me: exiled, pretender to a nothern throne of antlers and bones,

*...a land of pocked and misty
Shattered peaks, where storms
Scream like mad hawks of the lunar Void...*"

"Ah," laughed Valamiel, "then promise me high position at your restoration: Vazir of Buried Treasure, perhaps, or Chief Taster to the Matriarch."

Zaek grinned. "Consider it done."

"PARDON ME, GENTLEMEN. I couldn't help overhearing your last remarks. Am I correct in thinking that you seek profitable employment?"

Somehow a stranger had managed to appear on the dock without either monk or barbarian noticing the intrusion. They spun around startled at his first Pardon-Me. Then, annoyed at their own surprise, glared at him as he spoke.

They saw before them a tall and rather broadly built man of middle age, dressed — without the slightest camouflage — as a sorcerer. Valamiel studied the man's broad mammalian face, narrow eyes and crisp yellow goatee: something familiar about the fellow...?

"What a coincidence I should happen to stumble upon you, my friends," the sorcerer continued. "Perhaps you may remember that I was among the customers of the Water Fly Café last night. I saw you spring to the defense of that boy, and admired the expedition of your

tactics tremendously. Tremendously! I stand in awe of such skill... and such chivalry.”

The sorcerer contrived to give the impression that he could well afford such generous praise, being himself no ordinary mortal. The effect was disconcerting, but disarming.

“The hour draws near for refreshment, gentlemen. The view here is pleasant, but the food no doubt undistinguished. Would you be so generous as to accept my invitation to dine lightly at a nearby café of some small local fame, where I might be able to explain a matter of possibly mutual interest?”

The two friends could think of no plausible objection to this overture. Indeed, they’d been waiting for something to happen, and the word “profitable” had been uttered. Perhaps something was about to happen.

The sorcerer introduced himself as Marbreuse of the March of Chaeth. At the restaurant nearby — a small clean undecorated serious-looking place where plump Suvyamaran merchants were busily practicing their traditional gourmandise — Marbreuse ordered a “light collation” consisting of:

Brochettes of Wild Dog in a Crust of Red Tragacanth;
White eels in a Sauce of Milk and Dreamwine;
A Platter of Red Fingerfish, broiled in Fruitbutter & Various Aromatic Oils;
A Loaf of Yellow Bread Stuffed with Shellfish, Berries & Pickled River Ermine;
Pancakes Rolled with Fresh Herbs;

and several bottles of a colorless wine, “from the March of Chaeth, my homeland,” said Marbreuse — which were not bad, not at all bad.

Marbreuse ate and drank nearly as much as his guests, by which he demonstrated either good manners or good appetite or both. In any case, the two friends now felt inclined to view their host with some tolerance, and to finish another bottle while they listened to his tale — despite their distrust of the Sorcerers’ Guild robes, all starry and cobalt silk — and despite their suspicion that no “coincidence” had ordained this meeting with Marbreuse.

“You are familiar with my homeland?” he began.

“Not I,” answered Valamiel.

“Nor I,” said Zaek, “though I know of it: a long thin valley on the far side of the Anti-Orichian Hills, perhaps two month’s walk up the River from here and another month to the East, on the borders of the Chromatic Waste.”

“Precise enough. Perhaps you know something of the March’s recent history as well?”

“In my youth,” Zaek replied, “Chaeth was rumored an obscure land, ruled by sorcerers. Some ten years ago, I heard of a mercenary band in the pay of Suvyamara which subdued the March. Something about a war-tribute of treasures...”

“What was your opinion of that campaign?” snapped the sorcerer.

“I know the Red Captain only by reputation. I heard from others of my profession that she fought with true blood-thirst, lost half her men to sorcery, won by a brilliant ruse. If a fraction of the tales they tell are true, I’d say she was audacious and lucky.”

“Just so. You will understand that my own opinion of the facts must diverge, once I have told you that I am one of the sorcerers of Chaeth. Brother, in fact, to the Regnant Marchion. The Red Bitch was lucky indeed, but perhaps one day the Ring will bring her wheeling back... and under... But that’s no concern for the present. Gentlemen, may I ask you as professionals to give me an oath of secrecy on what I’m about to say? I’ll pay you for it, even if what I disclose proves of no interest to you.”

“Consider this delightful meal sufficient recompense to insure our most professional discretion,” said Valamiel over his wineglass. Zaek nodded gravely.

“Very well. In truth, I am visiting Suvyamara not as a diplomat suing for restitution of rights — although that is my public persona — but rather as a loyal subject of my ruler and clan, seeking how best to redress the wrong done against us. I ask you for no word on the matter of Chaethian rights, only for your utter and disinterested neutrality. In short, I seek a way to restore some of those lost treasures you mentioned, sir, and I have conceived of a means by which I might do it. The method of operation I envision necessitates the collaboration of a sorcerer, obviously myself, a religious scholar of some daring, a skilled warrior and a master thief.”

“How strange. The two of us together, Zaek and I, happen to add up to just the three men you require.”

“Another happy coincidence, leading (one prays) to our mutual advantage. And now, since so far neither of you has raised any objection to the broad general outline, nor to the political or moral base of that outline, may I ask you to defer questions and judgments yet further, while we make our way to the very scene of my proposed activity? Allow me the prerogative of my Guild, inveterate mystery-mongers that we are, and wait till you have seen that marvelous place before I disclose to you my plan.”

Having nothing better to do (and scenting money, perhaps a great deal of money), the monk and the barbarian agreed to the excursion proposed by Marbreuse.

Outside the restaurant the magician hailed a sleek enameled skiff with four sturdy oarsmen, and directed them to make haste for a landing on the Western shore of the lagoon of Hierophantis. “If nothing else,” said Marbreuse with a neat smile as they pulled away from the dock, “You’ll have an edifying afternoon.”

THE WATER TAXI DEPOSITED them at a desolate landing -where, however, a two-horse phaeton awaited them. Marbreuse bowed them into the carriage, seated himself, and without anyone saying a word the coachman whipped his steeds to a running start. Zaek raised an eyebrow at Valamiel, and the monk returned him a microscopic shrug.

The coach sped through a low-lying district of well-irrigated orchards and marsh-growing grass. The air seemed more sultry, the landscape soporific. The two friends took advantage of the sorcerer’s silence to digest their meals behind almost drooping eyelids.

After some time, they clattered across a long bridge and found themselves (rattled to full consciousness) in a new neighborhood, on higher solid ground, a vista of strong, ancient and widely-spaced trees, tall bluish-green mist-hedge, banks of fern and moss, clumps of parasitic orchid. On either side of the road as they galloped along, smaller paths branched out to left and right, vanishing into the palatte of green, the forest. From time to time they spotted through a break in the trees the squat or crenellated top of some antique tower.

Valamiel and Zaek glanced briefly at each other. They knew where they were: the Viridine Peninsula, district of the palaces and

temples of Suvyamara's theocratic aristocracy. Beyond the Peninsula lies only open sea. Marbreuse offered them another of his neatly packaged smiles.

Forty minutes later they realized they must be heading for the very top of the Peninsula, and felt no surprise when at last they emerged from the wood at the foot of a vast gentle promontory overlooking the South Sea. Around them were parked twenty or thirty carriages of various sorts. Ocean-smell met them: vaguely salty, fresh, musky and crisp at the same time, somewhat like the flavor of a boy's semen.

The promontory was given over to a clipped lawn of bluegreen grass, and occasional scarlet tragacanth in arrested explosions of botanic color, like permanent displays of pyrotechnic art. Pathways led up to the building which crowned the rise: the Viridine Temple itself.

The Temple's seven domes and seven spires reached the height of a seven-storey building: the tallest structure in Suvyamara (though not tall compared to, say, the Pentagon of Ffandir or the Giant's Needle of Vellamara). The Viridine Temple earned its listing among the Hundred Wonders not for its size, but because it was made entirely of polished viridine, a gemstone found only on Qamar and only in one mine. Except for a few priceless trinkets in private collections, the entire lode had been exhausted — nearly a millennium ago — to build the Temple. Green was the color of the Goddess Suvyamara, and her house in the afternoon sun flashed more shades of green than any language could list. Green within green within green: to stare at it too long drew the soul deeper and deeper into an enchantment that seemed the mirror of immortality, a seduction of unending vernal bliss, cuprous, olivine, smaragdine, jade-like, jasper-tinted grove of petrified undersea emerald life.

Dutiful pilgrims and curious travellers, both Valamiel and Zaek had of course visited the Temple already. They admired it now in silence.

A few stray worshippers and priests moved quickly across the lawn, hastening toward the portals and the distant hum of melisma that escaped from within, weaving its sound into the slow percussion of the surf.

“The Transformation has begun, the *Epode of the Dragons of Yss*, I believe. Shall we enter and witness?” asked Marbreuse.

UNDER THE VAST CENTRAL dome hung a mysterious light, suspended in mid-air: the true wonder of the Viridine Temple, according to its devotees, and the reason for the shrine’s existence in the first place. The light seemed to possess no material source. Day and night it poured out a soft, steady, slightly greenish radiance (though perhaps the green came only from the jewelled walls) over the great circular chamber, the altars, the worshippers. Legend said the light had always hovered there, long before even the Temple itself was planned and built. The Eye of the Goddess.

Around the high vaulted walls of the dome-chamber ranged the six smaller domes and altars of the divine Consorts or Sons of the Goddess. Each of them was a double-natured thing, half man, half monster of the deep. Each mer-god ruled an ancient clan or caste of pure-blooded Suvyamarans, the ruler-priests (and hidden priestesses) of the city. The altars were flanked by clan Guardians in robes of splendid but musty silks and furs and jeweled chainmail. Acolytes held silver pots of incense which billowed up out of the gloom toward the luminous dome-defined heaven above, weaving smoky tendrils into the beams of the Eye: weft of fragrance, warp of light.

A truly exciting and heavily choreographed Epode, such as *The Apotheosis of the Final Tide*, would have drawn to the Temple a crowd of cognoscenti and aestheticians, eager to detect new patterns in the score, or discover some freshly-flowered dancer. *Dragons of Yss*, however, tended to drag on and on, with endless boastful, recitatives and agonizingly slow War Dances. On such Fifthdays (especially in such weather!) the Suvyamarans preferred to let liturgy slide along without their presence, counting on clan-priests to represent their spiritual interests, and delivering their tithes by liveried messenger.

Thus the three men found themselves competing for a good view of the rite with no more than two-score laymen (some of them decked in such aristocratic ruffs and puffs of lace they seemed almost to belong to another and more exclusive world). Perhaps as many costumed ritualists of various ranks made an even grander spectacle than the congregation. The three men gained the front ranks of the

standing crowd with no trouble at all. On the great circular spiral-patterned floor of the Temple a choral dance was in progress.

Till this day Valamiel had felt himself simultaneously repelled and attracted by the fame of the transvestite Choristers of the Viridine. He hated to torment himself with the sight of what he could never hope to enjoy, and he knew that these children might as well live in a harem for all the chance he had ever to meet one. Half the men here today, he reckoned, came to pine and dream over some treble painted unattainable angel. After last night, he thought, perhaps I can relax and look on this as a purely religio-artistic experience, without breaking my heart on impossibilities.

The angels were not painted, he now realized. He'd expected them to look like girls. Instead, in their curious and archaic masquerade, they seemed to constitute some unexpected third sex unto themselves. As the slow choral line of robed children approached his view in ceremonial drifts of motion, he saw that their faces were innocent of all cosmetic, purely the faces of boys, human and male — but chosen for grace.

So slow was the *Epode of Yss* that only true adepts could appreciate the magical effect on the human heart of beauty so stretched out in Time. Dreamily slow, clock-slow, sunflower-slow dance slowed the rhythm of the blood and moved the mind gradually and incrementally sideways toward a gateway into some Otherness. But Valamiel grasped the essence of the thing at once, leapfrogged intuitively to a mature appreciation of this peculiar Slow Magic. The performance of such geologic art was all the more startling and effective because it was done by children, who are always thought of as quick, faster than ordinary. Hair rose on the nape of Valamiel's neck.

As the ponderous yet weightless rank of dancers inched yet nearer, he began to make out individuals behind the exquisite uniforms of subtle mauve and blood-dark ribbons, capes of slow-billowing sea-wrack, slender bare limbs and slender sijil-making fingers, all in the same pose, locked in mesmeric co-ordination.

At the very end of the line of boys now nearest his gaze, he noted three especially. The first of these appeared about thirteen or fourteen, and exhibited a touch of the coltish attenuation of sudden growth. Yet he seemed a graceful little athlete and possessed an incandescent mane

of crimson hair, almost leonine in its embrous intensity; green eyes of a future brawler-in-taverns; pug nose, generous bright mouth, a frivolity of freckles; sinuously long fingers; an aura of almost criminal exuberance.

The second: long straight locks the color of artist's chrome yellow, silken to the point of fluidity; lazy agreeable eyes like cornflower or richly vacant sky, to match the high summer color of his hair; cupid's-bow lips of an innocent choirboy. Thirteen, just on or just over the verge of pubescence. Skin very fair and smooth, bones well covered with childish plush. Narrow waist but plump belly, ass no doubt like a nectar fruit, cream-white. Ah, well...

But the third: as for the third, an entire Chronicle might be written just to describe him, to map out the weather of his mere outward appearance. But to be brief: he was the smallest of the three, clearly no more than twelve and perhaps less. At first glance he might have appeared skinny, undersized. But Valamiel could see that his bare arms were perfectly shaped and proportioned, despite their slender delicacy; his legs, vulnerable as they might seem, were smoothly sculpted and strong, and the knees as an artist might imagine. His hands too were wonderfully shaped, fingers tapered slightly, flexible, ivory-smooth.

One marvel concerned his hair: in shadow it appeared black as onyx, cascading in soft long twining tresses and vine-like ebony clusters of curls down his neck and nearly to his shoulders. But when he moved in light, these lovelocks seemed suddenly to be lit from within by a wine-red tint, a kind of mysterious midnight amber-scarlet, stronger at the tips of the tresses — which appeared almost like spun ruby — than at the dark roots near the skull. The boy had parted his hair in the middle, and the two anthracite waves revealed a sharp widow's-peak above a high clear candid forehead.

If the redhead and the blond were beautiful in traditional ways, this third was beautiful in a radical way, so odd that some might have missed it altogether and seen the child as pale, skinny and weird. His eyes were enormous and disturbingly wide-set, perhaps even a touch astigmatic, with tea-brown autumn-hazel irises and dilated pupils; long ashblack lashes and eyebrows like geometrically perfect pencil marks; a small straight nose that almost tended to vanish when one viewed the face full-on; mouth unnaturally wide, with bright full red

lips sculpted with an almost exaggerated delicacy. The shape of the face was unusual: long in the cranium, heart-shaped in the facial structure, with small pointed chin and high forehead; and the skull resting on an exquisite thin neck. Despite the curly hair, his ears still protruded, pointed thin pink seashells or — yes, animal's ears — which gave the face at once a charming imperfection and a touch of wild and precocious sensuality. Valamiel remembered that this sort of physiognomy is supposed to represent a person of over-heated imagination and occult leanings.

But a catalogue of features does not capture the essence of a face. Taken all in all then, this face radiated the sort of beauty that, once recognized, can never be forgotten: painfully exhilarating, uniquely strange: a face that will persist in memory.

Certain of the “true Suvyamarans”, the water-people, possess features of an almost amphibian cast: wide-set eyes, flat nose, thick lips, watery-pale skin. Some visitors find this erotic, others are repelled. Valamiel noted that in this boy, the Suvyamaran “look” was refined and sublimed to transcendence, without losing its mysterious exoticism. There was nothing saurian here, but rather an incandescence centered in the eyes, vivid and brilliant (that is, both sparkling and intelligent), mischievous, sensitive and quick.

The scrivener monk found this face more than beautiful: he found it haunting, as if it had haunted him for years in dreams and finally chosen to reveal itself by day, and claim its preordained power. The aura around the child felt unnaturally strong. Valamiel was unable to grasp its entire range and complexity, but one aspect of it struck him clearly. Despite the fact that this boy could not yet have reached puberty, he radiated a kind of rarified bizarre yet innocent carnality. “I doubt he even realizes it yet himself,” thought Valamiel, “but the child seems a sort of erotic saint.”

And yet still another marvel: his skin. Again, some observers might have found it more disconcerting than attractive. Very pale, but somehow with an effect of being lit from within, translucent, the blueness of veins visible even at this distance. But then, over the translucence, a powdery effect, like alabaster dusted with talc (or some more precious stuff, agate or crushed milk-opals). For an instant Valamiel wondered if the boy were wearing powder over the exposed parts of his body. But the beads of sweat on his forehead and upper lip

left no tracks. No, the miraculous skin was real, and even to look at it was to feel a texture which has no analogue in all the rest of Nature, and therefore resists all metaphor.

IN JETHAEL'S OPINION, the best roles, most elaborate costumes and finest solos were being given to boys no better, and some a good deal less talented, than himself. Here he was dancing an ensemble again. And the reasons for that were many, and oppressive.

First, he was thought still too small for demanding parts. Second, the Master Tharactus, as everyone knew, exhibited an unjust and demeaning prejudice against Blue Rain Tower. True, thought Jethael, we sometimes behave badly — especially Kael and Ravinan.

Moreover, Blue Rain was the most underpopulated of the five inhabited Towers. It had no Praeceptor to advance its interests, even from a remote distance. It lacked all power in the intrigues for liturgical advancement and petty revenge that plagued the House of Perpetual Benefice.

So, although Jethael could scarcely be called an ambitious lad, perhaps a certain frustrated creativity led him to consider adding an improvisatory flourish to the end of the glacially-slow cadence which was now, just at this moment, approaching its melismatically-prolonged resolution, to the drone of the baroms and the wailing incantation and monotony of the zerbals. Or perhaps he was overcome, possessed by the spirit of the Transformation itself, to express a portion of its depth through the medium of his primordial grace. He knew that if any priest or master were to notice his unauthorized action, the result might be either punishment or reward — depending on whether the act was judged egotistic or unpremeditated and pure.

In fact, Jethael's act *was* unpremeditated. As the cadence reached its penultimate phrase, he suddenly spun out from the rank of boys, quick as a whirlwind, twirled once, twice, thrice within a single beat; then threw all his flexibility into one impossible little pirouette and half-twist, which restored him to perfect symmetry with the other boys, exactly on the final beat of the cadence.

As it happened so quickly, no priest or Temple official noticed it. The only ones to witness the flourish were Kael and Ravinan, for the whole fancy had lasted no longer than the wink of a firefly.

No, wait. Someone in the congregation had seen it too. A grey-robed scrivener monk with a clipped beard. The man looked as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Jethael thought, "At least I seem to have impressed *someone* with my grace," and impulsively he smiled at the monk. The result was totally unexpected.

The monk saw him smile, but did not smile back. Instead, the man seemed to turn pale, his expression one of ill-concealed pain of some sort... or anger. A wordless message shot from his eyes, but Jethael was at a loss to interpret it. Was the man outraged? Why such a fierce look?

Confused and blushing, Jethael locked his own eyes back into the pattern of the dance along with the rest of his body, and avoided glancing at the monk again. But he could feel the man's eyes on him still, even without looking. Disturbing, exciting, embarrassing. "I hope no one else noticed," Jethi thought; then put it out of his mind and danced slowly on.

"YOU SEEM ILL, MY FRIEND. Is the incense too thick for you?" whispered Marbreuse.

Valamiel was staring desolately at the receding ceremony, his eyes unblinking, like those of a shipwrecked sailor watching some vessel vanish over the horizon, gone away without noticing the smoke of his signal fire.

"No, no...", he muttered. "It's nothing."

"Well, if you've seen enough of this sub-aqueous mystification, there's someone I'd like you to meet."

Valamiel allowed the magician to lead him away. Zaek turned and followed close behind. As they moved across the Temple floor, Marbreuse hissed in the scrivener's numb ear:

"Wonder of the Ring it may be, this Temple, but you — as a man of theologic background — can easily guess the truth behind this scrim of piety and tradition: a tapestried mishmash of meaningless titles, absentee priests and praeceptors, simony, usury, rites of forgotten significance, paranoic plotting, archaic customs and dark obsession. Not one prebend or deaconate or prelacy has ever been abolished here since the cult arose some thousand years ago. What you see here today are the newer titles, none with over five or six centuries' pedigree. The really old Livings are sold for their rents and

privileges, often to arriviste merchants of dubious clannage. These titled non-entities never inspect their ecclesial grants from one decade to the next. Who would want to actually live in some ruined pavilion, haunted by owls and lyrebirds? Or even worse, take up residence in a ruined tower at the absurd and archaic monstrosity called the Theocratic and Perpetual Benefice for the Evocation of the Forty Epodes!”

Valamiel forebore to mention he’d sell his soul just now for such a Living. Instead, he rallied to the defense of Suvyamaran religion. “Still, I feel that an institution capable of such transcendent art as I witnessed here must yet retain some spark of the authentic and valid, despite all the obfuscation and trappings and cyclopean pomposities.”

“You are, naturally, a connoisseur,” the sorcerer returned smoothly. “Sirs, pause here a moment.” He gestured them into the shadow of a disused sub-portal, flanked with tentacles of carved viridine. “I will tell you now that my plan revolves around this Temple, and certain treasures which are secreted here, guarded by human and other-than-human means. One of us must act as an insider. That is why I have sought out a religious scholar such as yourself, Valamiel. Making use of certain connections and opportunities for bribery, I have acquired a decisive influence in the granting of a certain Living attached to the Temple. Usually the post would go to an absentee, but no rule forbids a prelate to live in his rightful prebendry or carry out such ritual duties as may amuse him. In short, Valamiel, I’ve found a job for you. The stipend is low, a hundred a year. Consider it a mere advance on expenses. The main thing is to plant yourself *inside*.”

“But I’m a Maervaenite — by training if not conviction. I know nothing of the rites of Suvyamara.”

“Poof. You know enough to detect some value in these slow-motion antics. You can pick up the rest easily. In any case, you needn’t *do* anything at all. You may pretend to be a poor man who must live in his appointed prelacy, yet still have nothing to do with actual ritual. You can improvise, I’m sure. Well, what do you say?”

“What exactly is this title you’ve dug up for me, Marbreuse?”

“Ah,” said the sorcerer with an angler’s smile of anticipation. “I’ve bought you one of the empty Towers in the Choristers’ House.”

“You mean *inside* Perpetual Benefice?”

“A bit primitive I fear, but you’ll get things tidied up no doubt. Now, if you’re still with me, I’d like you to meet the Master of Boys, a repulsive creature called Tharactus, who’ll fill you in on details. I might add, since he’ll be too polite to mention it, that if you behave with discretion you should be able to pursue your interest in... liturgical art... to whatever degree proves desirable. My plot needs a while to ripen, and I’ve no interest in how you spend your time while I wait. Well?”

Valamiel had lost his tongue.

Zaek said, “We’ll have to hear a bit more of this plot and its profitability before we make up our minds.”

“Of course, of course. But the overly-effusive Magister Tharactus awaits us now. Zaek, perhaps you might attend us outside while we speak with him. Make no decision now, gentlemen. Later, we’ll seek refreshment and begin our final negotiations. Still, my dear monk, you’ll have to admit: a job doing nothing — in a cloister of such delightful temptations. Amusing, no?”

“Yes... I have to admit it,” Valamiel agreed — hoping he didn’t look like a hooked trout.

I feel slightly delirious, he thought — but clear-headed enough to pray that Zaek will like the plot once he’s heard all the details. Because I’ve already decided to take the job.

3. Between Sleep And Wake, Yes And No, Stars Fall From Their Places

IF JETHAEL SOMETIMES FELT imprisoned within the walls of Perpetual Benefice, he had reason. As an Orphan Ward of the Epodal Deaconate he would remain virtually in thrall to the Temple to the age of eighteen. Afterwards, if he proved both tractable and talented, the Temple would offer to employ him — for life. He might as well be a slave, he thought. And some of his Tower-mates were slaves in fact; Ravinan for one. When Jethi considered all this, melancholy overtook him... till fantasy and daydream offered some palliative refuge.

The walls and towers of Perpetual Benefice — some so ancient as to seem melted rather than merely crumbling — defined the borders of his existence. But within these walls he and his fellows enjoyed certain curious freedoms, almost as if in compensation for the neglect they suffered. Other children, whose lives were circumscribed by families, or narrowed by ugly poverty, might well envy such liberties.

No one cared, for example, if Jethael and Ravinan enjoyed a quiet swim in the fountain-pool before bed. Should an adult happen by, it would be rude to be caught naked, or noisy. But the Inner Court ranged vast as a park. Leaves, trailing willows, mossy orchid-vines and overgrown hedge offered the illusion of forest, sylvan solitude. On such a clear night the band of Moons and randomness of stars lit

the garden with an opalescence nearly as bright as twilight. Drops of water dripped from their hair and skin (slightly goosefleshed in the night breeze), and these drops glowed fluorescent on their moonpale limbs.

Around the fountain, ranks of sculpted sea-monsters dribbled fresh water from cracked and mossy lips and beaks into the pool, vibrating its surface with a constant moire of lunar refractions. The boys wandered away into the greenblack shrubbery till they found a private place, a bench of worn alabaster surrounded by the darkblue attar of half-seen flowers.

They stripped off wet loincloths and snapped them at each other's legs. They rubbed themselves dry with towels. They stretched out naked on the bench facing each other, feet and legs tangled together, each resting his back against an arm of the bench (which was shaped as a giant seashell).

No sooner had he touched himself than Ravinan let out a cry that startled a nightbird into fluttering escape. A drop of clear fluid shot at his chest, a few more squirted onto his groin. Jethael studied the discharge enviously. Ravinan smeared it over the head of his cock and began to rub luxuriously, eyes half closed with pleasure. "What about that man who was staring at you today?" he asked.

Busy with his own pleasure, cool wet fingers on warm flesh, Jethael answered, "What man?"

"Don't pretend. I saw you blushing."

"What's that supposed to mean? I thought he was angry at me for my improvisation. Or..." Jethael stopped playing with himself. The other giggled.

"Maybe he wasn't angry... You know why men come to stare at us... not the pious ones..."

Now Jethael laughed: "You're just imagining it!"

"Still... what if it were so?"

"What then? We're never allowed to meet outsiders, you know that."

"And if we were allowed?"

Jethael was silent a moment. "I've noticed the ones you mean. Leering and winking. This one wasn't like that. Either he was very pleased by what I did... or was shocked by it... the dancing, I mean. But Ravi, those other ones... what do they really want to *do* to us?"

“Wouldn’t you like to know!”

“Why should I ask? You’re probably just as ignorant...”

“I know something. I heard it from Kael, who heard that someone in Orchid Tower was doing things with one of the deacons. He wouldn’t tell me which one.”

“Doing what?” Not quite consciously, Jethael had begun to caress himself again.

“Kael says... they swallow each other’s jac.”

Jethael was shocked and impressed. “What else?”

“I don’t know... But Jethi, suppose someone wanted you to...”
“Don’t be rude!”

“No, no... maybe just to kiss and touch you... Would you...?”

“A grown-up? I’d be frightened!”

“What a baby! Too young to make milk,” Ravinan taunted.

“I suppose *you* wouldn’t be scared to taste it?”

“Not me! I’ve tasted my own, lots of times.”

“Liar.”

“I’ll prove it. Watch this.”

Ravinan re-doubled his efforts, and pumped his fist up and down. Ten or a dozen strokes more, and he leaned over, mouth open and tongue stuck out as far as it would go... Squeezed himself... but the few beads of semen that appeared only slid over his fingers. At once he stuck his hand in his mouth and licked it, like a cat at its ablutions.

“Now you try some,” he said, and squeezed his penis again till one last big drop oozed up into the cup of his foreskin. Catching this on the tips of his fingers, he bent over Jethael’s sprawling legs and thrust his hand...

“No!”

...and pushed his fingers past Jethael’s not-quite-closed lips and not-quite-clamped teeth... Till Jethi opened his mouth and the fingers reached his tongue. Ravinan held them there, probing gently. Jethael sucked and jerked himself off and spasmed so abruptly that Ravinan lost his balance and tumbled forward on top of him... as if they were wrestling... The slight musty odor of something alien on his tongue... the orgasm like a meteor rushing through the sky of his flesh, like stabbing light and shooting stars... Tangle of white legs and arms, confusion of wet locks of hair, gold and amberblack mixed...

Later, in bed, while Ravinan breathed long breaths of deep sleep, Jethael brought himself to orgasm again, thinking of what Ravinan had said... Rhythmic rustling of soft linen sheets, spilling the blue shadows of midnight over his body... A sudden moan, like a dreamer's cry of fear... Till at last he slept.

“WELL,” DEMANDED THE MONK with ill-concealed anxiety. “What’s your opinion of all this?” He waved his hand as if to include the space of the houseboat and dark landscape, as well as the time and events which had led so abruptly to their change of fortune.

The houseboat was moored on a sluggish and isolated back canal in one of the slightly less exclusive suburbs of the Viridine Peninsula, not five minutes drive from the Temple. Once, the boat would have been thought luxurious. Shaped like half an egg floating on an oval plate, some thirty feet long, it could have been the holiday toy of a wealthy family, or a poet’s studio. But the white paint was peeled, the windows looked as if they would leak; some of them were broken. Orchid vines had tendrilled out over the dock and onto the boat itself, which was half-hidden now in dangling blossoms.

In the moony darkness, Valamiel and Zaek took their ease under a small canopy on the stern, staring at the firefly-haunted thickets (and some ancient wall) across the narrow canal, and finishing a bottle of dream wine.

“I’ve hidden out in less pleasant places,” Zaek muttered at last.

“No, I mean what did you think of Marbreuse and his Plan?”

“I don’t trust the fellow.”

Valamiel snorted. “That goes without saying. I can believe he’s a sorcerer, and perhaps that he’s after something in the Temple. But the rest is image-weaving. The real question is: what do we stand to gain by playing along with it?”

“You gain access to that walled garden of songbirds. I however am faced with the prospect of languishing on this waterlogged bauble and carving toothpicks — till Marbreuse is ready to call on my brutality and cunning. Afterwards, I expect he’ll try to defraud us and leave us either dead or captured by the Temple Guardians, which probably amounts to the same fate.”

“Ha! Is that all?”

“Sufficient to make me doubt the probity of the venture, yes.”

“Well then,” the monk answered briskly, “as to your first objection: boredom. We plan to rescue Xiri, correct? Surely this project will keep you busy. Marbreuse’s advance will finance it; you can use my portion too if necessary. After we’ve snatched the boy, you can disappear here with him for an idyllic debauch. So much for boredom.”

Zaek grunted.

“As for the actual theft itself — if indeed Marbreuse is really after some treasure — I propose that we wait till we know more. We might prove clever enough to outwit the magician, who can say? At the worst, we should be slippery enough to vanish at the right moment.”

Zaek finished his drink and shared the dregs of the bottle out into both their glasses (since the lees of dreamwine are considered a delicacy). He scowled with hesitant doubt. Valamiel continued:

“Even if we have to decamp without wages in order to save our skins, at least we’ll have enjoyed ourselves. At best... who can be certain that Marbreuse may not keep his word after all? Whether he likes it or not? (If you see what I mean.)”

Zaek nodded slowly. “Still, I feel a great abyss of danger... Like walking blindfolded along a cliff.”

“Oh yes,” the monk smiled. “Very dangerous, no doubt of that.”

Zaek sighed. “Very well.”

“Good. Now tell me... What do you intend to do about Xiri? How can I help?”

“Well... oddly enough, I had thought of something almost as hair-brained as the mess we’re being offered by Marbreuse. I’m virtually certain that the proprietor of the Water Fly will never consent to sell him at a price we can afford — and I can’t wait for any hypothetical treasure to fall into my lap, of course. Moreover, the boys are never allowed unescorted out of the cafe, which is constantly guarded by hired Enforcers. Only overwhelming force, or subtle stealth, would seem the appropriate response.

“Now, during my last stint as a mercenary, a fellow who’d lived in Suvyamara told me about a certain sorcerer who specializes in affairs of the heart, a swamp-wizard named Sorolon. What caught my attention was the soldier’s account of Sorolon’s three apprentices, all pretty young boys. But I remember how the fellow spoke with awe of Sorolon’s power and expertise.”

“Obviously we must somehow abduct your dancing boy. Thus far, clear. But why must we add another sorcerer to our list of problems?”

“My idea is still too inchoate and too mad to frame in words. Nevertheless, tomorrow, while you install yourself in the mercy of Perpetual Benefice, I will seek out the address of this Sorolon. Then, in the evening, we will visit him and see what we shall see.”

“Very well, since you’ve agreed with my suggestions I’ll gladly accompany you thus far. But be discreet in your inquiries... Somehow I feel we should remain as invisible as possible from now on.”

“Invisible... yes...,” mused the barbarian, draining the lees from his upturned glass.

NEITHER OF THEM SLEPT WELL. The houseboat lacked all furniture, save a few age-tinted mirrors. The chamber had been cleaned recently, presumably when Marbreuse first acquired the boat. But the cleaning had only made the cabin look still emptier and more egg-like within. The curved triangular windows spread carpets of blumoonlight across the floor where the men lay on their cloaks, watching revenants of pale light cross from mirror to mirror. They thought — and wove their thoughts into the night of soft creaks and wavelets, rush-rustling breeze, scuttling of night-lizards and mourning of nightbirds (which mimic emotions of longing and melancholy).

Around dawn, a mist exhaled itself along the canal. Zaek dozed off at last. Valamiel arose and stepped outside under the canopy to watch the meteorology. Fog drifted in baroque and theatrically sinister swirls and tendrils over the lily-laden morning-grey water.

The mist lifted, but not far. Occasional freshets and lashings of fine rain began to fall. Zaek emerged on deck, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

In silence they trudged along the way beside the canal, soaking their boots on the grass which bordered the path. At the shore of a peaceful lagoon their track met the Temple highroad.

“The bazaar lies a mile or so north, the Benefice House a mile or so south,” said Zaek. “Let us rendezvous here, as near to sundown as may be, and set out to find this Sorolon.”

The monk agreed, and wishing each other luck, they strode off in opposite directions into the wet and monochromatic day.

VERY LATE THAT SAME afternoon the same crossroads were lit with feeble oyster-colored light, and a squall was just passing by, its drumming rain growing more muted, when a shabby one-horse fiacre clattered and splashed into view and pulled up. The coachman huddled damply under an immense cone of woven straw. Greasy leather curtains were drawn to keep any passengers at least symbolically dry. Valamiel pushed one of these veils aside and haloo'd into the dripping twilight.

Zaek stepped out from under a tree. He too had acquired a Suvyamaran rainhat, which hid his face. He climbed into the carriage, muttered, "Tell the driver Templegate Wharf," and settled back into the seat with a sigh. The fiacre turned around in a U and set off the way it had come. The coachman urged his nag into a serviceable trot.

"My day is quickly enough described," said Zaek. "Viridine Bazaar specializes in luxury goods, as you know. So I expected to find a Smarigdite herbalist easily enough, and I did. I reasoned that since they deal in nostrums and potions, and in the arts of love, the androgynes must keep up with all the local mages."

"But tell me: are they true hermaphrodites as legend claims, or only neuters, eunuchoids and transvestites?"

"Try one and find out for yourself," Zaek answered with a grin. "This crone, in any case, was ancient and withered, her shop little more than a crack between two buildings, piled up with the usual bottles and jars, ropes of astringent herbs. I bought a few waspwax tapers, then began to engage her in chitchat about practitioners of the Art. I hinted I was in need of a love potion more potent than any she could hawk me. Sorolon's name popped up at once. He lives in the West Fan on an island called Manticore's Tongue. I think if we hire a water-taxi one-way to Lookinglass Island, then rent a skiff and slip over to Manticore under our own power, we should elude any but the most intensive scrutiny. We will arrive well before midnight." Zaek paused, then went on:

"After my séance with the old androgyne, I had nothing to do for the rest of the day. I purchased some supplies for the houseboat, went back and busied myself and slept till afternoon."

"I've not slept now for two nights and two days. I hope I survive this epic sea-voyage you've planned," Valamiel commented.

They fell silent till the fiacre pulled up in the final gloom of twilight at Templegate Wharf. Heavy clouds scudded out to sea, leaving a few celestial pinpricks of light visible through the rents in the bank of stormhead. Across the wide Mouths to the east they could see a necklace of distant lights that marked the fashionable resort of Lookinglass Island.

Under the dripping eave of a poor eatery they found a crew of watermen willing at least to entertain the notion of taxi-work. While Zaek bargained with them, the monk purchased a sack of tiny birds, wrapped and roasted in broad spiceleaves; an enormous flat loaf of the ubiquitous yellow bread; and two bottles of local wine.

Zaek joined him. "We must pay the full round-trip fare. I thought it best not to argue the point," he said as they made their way across the dock to the watermens' skiff.

No sooner had they cast off than Valamiel began eating and drinking, somewhat mechanically, as if he had reminded himself that one must eat in order to live. Zaek joined him. When the last tiny skeleton had been picked clean and tossed over the side, the monk appeared to recover a touch of his usual balance and energy.

"As for my day...", he said; then stopped, seemingly at loss for words.

"We have several hours of stomach-churning and bone-chill ahead of us. Beguile the time. Speak of every detail," the barbarian suggested.

"I love your addiction to stories. Very well."

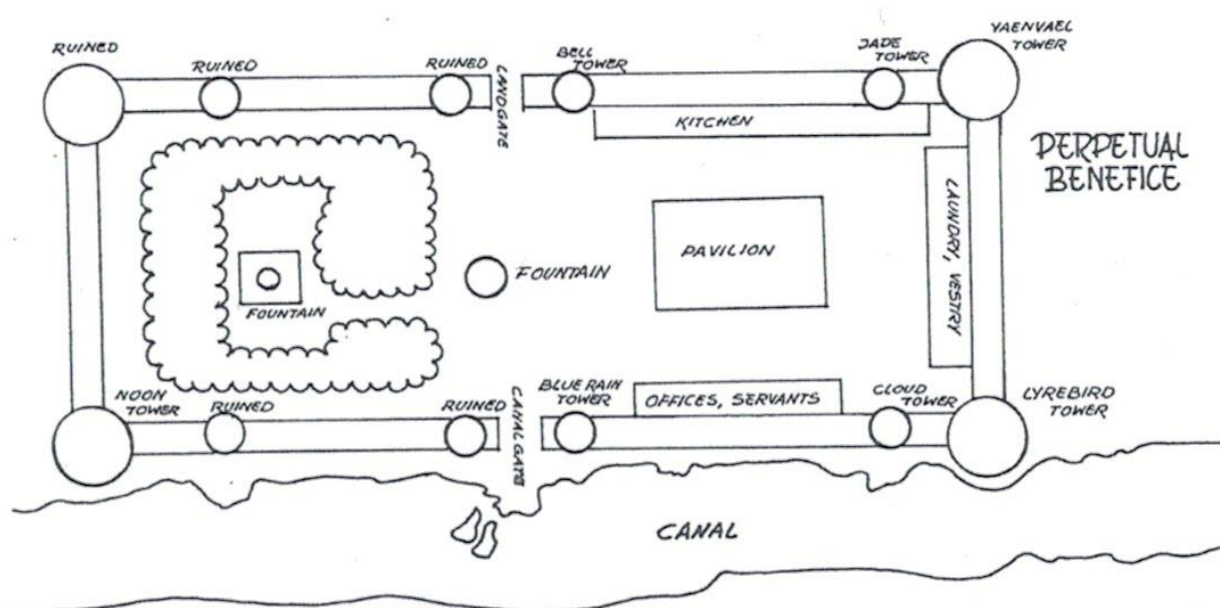
"ALL MONKISH KEEPS BREATHE the same atmosphere, I find," — said Valamiel — "some thicker than others. Perpetual Benefice exudes an aura which quite outweighs that of any Maervaenite retreat. After all, when our Order was founded, the Viridine Temple and its out-palaces had already fallen and been rebuilt half a dozen times.

"The Benefice itself is huge, well-hidden in its overgrown park: impossible for the eyes to encompass it all at once. It loomed up at me out of the rain and mist, an arched stone gate flanked by rounded towers set in walls which seemed to be melting in the rain. But half a millennium of rain must have fallen, even on that soft stone, to metamorphose such cyclopean blocks and turrets into such grey sandcastle fantasies. Undersea architecture, I thought. The hanging

beards of vine could be seaweed. I almost expected to see fish swim past me in the air.

“For some time I stood under the dripping arch, staring out at the greygreen park in a daze, trying to make up my mind to knock at the gate or shout... when suddenly a porter appeared with staff and ring of keys. Before he let me in I had to spin a good account of myself, but at last he led me down a dim passageway and into the Inner Court.

“By the end of the day I’d figured out the basic shape of the place. I even drew a sketch-map to orient myself. Still got it here somewhere... Ah, look!



“I entered by Landgate, here. The porter took me at once to Bell Tower, to be approved by the Master of Boys, Tharactus. Each of the towers reaches five storeys. The rooms are arranged around a central well in the core of each tower, each door opening off a wide spiral staircase. As you can see, there’s not actually very much building aside from the towers and walls. Most of the Benefice is open space, and only half of it is in use. Rows of one-storey rooms have been built of wood in a kind of lean-to style all around the inside of the walls, fronted by a covered veranda. Here on the inhabited side, these wooden rooms are used for kitchens and slave quarters and the like. But over here on the left the wood is all rotting away and the towers themselves are empty and disused. These two towers here, along the

canal, have actually succumbed to age and are gracefully collapsing into the water.

“Tharactus I found in his elaboratory or office on the second storey of Bell Tower. You were spared the pleasure of meeting him last evening, so I’ll describe him for you. A short blandfaced fellow with a beaky little nose; bulging watery eyes; scurf; a manner so ingratiatingly and gratingly polite that even Suvyamarans must reel away disgusted by such excessive formality. I’d never condemn a man for being homely, by the Blessed Maervaen. But I do feel a certain faith in physiognomy. Tharactus... One wants to blame him for his face because he seems to have chosen it rather than had it thrust on him... almost as if a flaking scalp were a badge of learning and piety. I couldn’t help thinking he probably enjoys whipping the boys.”

“Is he entirely a creature of Marbreuse,” interrupted Zaek, “or might he pose some danger in his own right?”

“Difficult to say. So far— last night and today, with Marbreuse present and without — we’ve kept up the same pose of normalcy, as if I were simply another Highpriest’s brother’s wife’s cousin, come to eke out my penury in a scabrous ecclesiastic Living... Subtly he lets me know my place. And yet I thought him terrified of Marbreuse, gravid with some well-buried guilt. Blackmail, I presume...

“In any case, he welcomed me in his oily fashion, and served tea in his rooms while he sent for someone to guide me around. Just as Marbreuse promised, Tharactus was far too formal even to hint at the vague possibility of any... impropriety... any indelicate urges which might occupy my soul in such a cloister of pearllike boys. Instead, we talked about Perpetual Benefice and its traditions and customs. His heavy furniture and dark tapestries grew claustrophobically more and more oppressive, as if he’d drugged my tea with some stupefiant.

“‘In theory,’ Tharactus droned at me, ‘each Tower belongs to a different Clan, which first paid for its construction five hundred years ago. The head of each Clan appoints a Lord Vizier of Endowment, and charges him with the business of finding an actual Praeceptor to administer the Tower. Again in theory, these Praeceptors recruit boys, pay for their board and costumes, buy slaves to care for them, and contribute to the wages of their tutors and dancing masters.

“‘In practice however, all this administrative detail has in the last century devolved on the office of the Chief Praeceptor or Master of

the Boys — in this last decade, your humble servant, myself. The individual Towers have declined in importance. Boys are now living in only four Towers. Only three have Praeceptors. Only two of those gentlemen live in House, and of the two one is senile, if I may say so. The other acts as my secretary.

“Four of the ruined and empty Towers still appoint Praeceptors, but they never visit us. Never. You are the first. The others collect their stipends by post. We are flattered, naturally, that you should choose to settle with us. I trust we’ll be seeing you regularly at the Transformations...’

“In short,” — the monk continued — “Tharactus blathered on and became increasingly liturgical, till my back began to itch and my palms to sweat most unpleasantly.

“At last we were interrupted by an extraordinary-looking old man, desiccated as a balding crow, but dressed in gorgeous peagreen and vermillion robes sewn with a Ring-pattern of seed pearls, and sporting a long cane with a silver handle in the shape of a leaping garfish. A centenarian fashion-plate with rubies in his yellowed ears and rouge on his shrivelled lips. Tharactus introduced this geriatric dandy as Poron, the most venerable Transformationist in Suvyamara, who had lived in Perpetual Benefice all his years and knew it as no one else alive. Somehow Tharactus managed to convey utter contempt and spite for the old cantor — the more he praised him, the more he seemed to belittle him. In any case, I thought Poron deserved better than being ordered to play native guide at his age. Once we were at last escaped from Tharactus and breathed fresh air outside Bell Tower, I offered to release him from the onerous duty and find my way about alone.

“‘Thank you but no, sir,’ he answered. ‘I seldom have the chance to introduce a stranger to this House. For me it is like seeing the place afresh, through new eyes... as if I were a traveller to far-away Moons such as yourself.’

“Needless to say, I found myself liking old Poron just as sincerely as I’d disliked Tharactus.

“As we strolled slowly along the wooden veranda, we passed by the kitchens. Poron was just explaining the schedule of meals to me, and asking if I could do with a bit of breakfast, when suddenly a covey of about five or six boys ran out of the door across the veranda

and across our path, heading for the great open Pavilion where rehearsals are held. Poron stopped them with a gesture. ‘Children,’ he croaked, ‘greet Master Valamiel of Saendeb, the new Praeceptor of Noon Tower!’

Naturally, one of the boys who responded to Poron’s order was... well... you know, the one we saw at the Temple yesterday...”

“You mean,” asked Zaek, “the little one who whirled around and then smiled at you like a thief of hearts?”

“The very same child. The others began bowing and wishing me good morning, but I fear I scarcely noticed them. As for the boy himself, he was dressed in what appeared to be discarded liturgical transvestments, if you’ll allow the pun... The pantaloons and sleeveless doublet of unmatched colors (berry red below, yellowish-cream lace above), much patched and stripped of ribbons..., and a down-at-heel pair of black velvet slippers. No cape.

“He seemed to have forgotten his manners. His eyes sprang open and his jaw fell and he gaped at me precisely as if I’d been the ghost of a famous tyrant, or a hundred-armed squid. I fancy his expression somewhat resembled the glassy stunned basilisklike stare I must have given him yesterday in the Temple. (Only I was filled with desire, and he seemed to feel only repulsion.)

“I’d hoped to find him, of course, but not so quickly. And I’d never expected him to react quite so... well, so unexpectedly. I muttered something incoherent and took a step toward him, whereupon he turned tail and actually ran away! Like a streak. Toward the Pavilion and out of sight.

“Poron tsk-tsk’d and the other boys stifled a burst of giggles. The old man dismissed them, saying, ‘Tell Jethael he’s going to have to apologize — or he’ll be punished!’”

“*Jethael.*

“So it’s Jethael — with a soft J, a susurrus, a soft breath of a name — I thought. Very well. But why is Jethael running away from me?)

“‘Don’t misunderstand, sir,’ Poron interrupted my gloom. ‘The boys never see anyone much from outside, and they’re shy. Jethael’s usually a good child, too fanciful and wild perhaps, but talented and intelligent. Don’t take against him for the rudeness.’

“‘Of course not,’ I answered him.

“He and the others in Blue Rain Tower, they’re a promising crew. But Tharactus... well, you see, Blue Rain has no Praeceptor now, not even an absentee. They’ve no one to push for them... But then, you’ve no interest in such petty matters... I suppose.’

“On the contrary, I told the old man, I intended to play an active role in the Benefice, and relied on him to inform and advise me. I hoped he’d go on talking about Jethael, but he simply nodded and began pointing out various items of interest... and I hesitated to seem overly concerned with the children of Blue Rain.

“The boys had begun rehearsing, out of the damp, under the Pavilion. Poron suggested we watch, but I told him I’d like to visit my own tower first and discover if it would prove habitable. In truth, I was afraid to confront Jethael again.

“The old Transformationist led me past the canal-gate and beyond the two ruined towers. I caught glimpses through the hedges and trees of a pool or fountain hidden in the midst of the Court and imagined that boys might bathe there in more clement weather.

“At last, when we had walked so far that the ancient dandy was wheezing, we came to the farthest corner of Perpetual Benefice, and arrived at my prebendary, the Tower of Noon. Outside, the walls were so choked in vines that it seemed as if only flowers held the Tower from crumbling into the dust of incantations and forgotten desires. Most of the windows were broken, and in place of a door, the carved and massive frame held only a weather-stained curtain. The top storey of the Tower, I could see, had opened like a rotten tooth to the probing tongue of centuries’ decay. No doubt birds nested in the jagged cusps of deliquescent stone and parasitic orchids that crowned my roof.

“Inside we stood in the silent hallway or well, staring up through the slant-beams of rain-grey light that pierced the columnar shadows and outlined the spiraling rails of the great staircase. I expected to see open sky above, but the collapsed upper level has been boarded over. The rooms on the ground floor seem dry enough. Two chambers in the rear, especially pleasant, share a rickety wooden balcony which hangs precariously over the canal. The windows are shadowed by a great blue willow that sprouts from the very wall of Benefice House and curves out to bend like a frozen diver, its hair just touching the water’s surface. The rooms were empty, dusty and slightly damp — a faint odor of mildew, nothing too offensive. I asked Poron to arrange for a

few sticks of furniture to be sent over, and eventually he creaked away and left me alone.

“The rooms I’d chosen are lofty, generously proportioned, so that even vacant and unkempt they adhere to canons of harmony. Without lamps, in the rain, the light falls soft, mediated by well-worn stone casements, violet-tinted glass, the green and watery world outside. I paced up and down, trying to relax and soak in the ambience of the noble rooms, but without success. All I could think of was the boy, Jethael.

“Strange that I should... fall in love... just when you’ve found Xiri... and Marbreuse has found us. Too much happening at once! Rings within rings within rings, to quote the Blessed Founder. I’ve had affairs... but Zaek, I feel now as if I’m sixteen again, in the teeth of a passionate obsession that blinds me to everything else around me... And as I sat there in Noon Tower, all I could see was that expression on his face before he turned and ran...

“Well, I remembered Marbreuse saying that a bit of discreet flirtation would pass unnoticed at Perpetual Benefice. But how the devil am I to go about it? I have no duties that bring me in daily contact with him... I might as well be a ghost, haunting the ruined Keep, for all the influence I can wield. For some reason the child seems terrified of me... Well, it’s not a brothel, I can’t buy his body. I know nothing of the curious customs and secret politics which no doubt direct his life. I can’t lurk in the bushes and pounce on him...”

“It sounds as if you might need the advice of Sorolon yourself,” commented Zaek.

“True. I may resort to witchery at last. But I’d hate to have to hex a boy’s love (not that I wouldn’t, if the alternative were to lose him). It’s different for you: Xiri’s heart is already won, it’s merely his body that’s lacking.

“Anyway, to resume: I moped about till a couple of servants showed up with chairs and bed and rugs and table and lamps... I showed them where to put everything...

“Finally, remembering something Poron had said, I found my way to the office of the Vestry, to claim my official Praeceptor’s robe: long trailing sleeves, black silk, a hundred and eight buttons of amber — much more stylish than my scrivener’s habit. I wandered about the Inner Court, but already everyone seemed to have vanished for the

day. From the towers I caught an occasional far-away child-voice, and the great squat donjons seemed like forbidden paradises. I knew which one was Blue Rain, and passed by several times, gawking up at the windows, but seeing no one. The place was deserted. The central fountain with its statue of divine Suvyamara's mer-horse emerging from the Maelstrom, plashed and echoed with no one but me to witness its display. By the other pool, drops fell from leaf to leaf, birds whispered, the marble seamonsters drooled water into the water, as if from moss-grown tongues. Greyer and greyer the light settled on everything, relaxing into the liquid embrace of the dense green park.

"I realized that dusk approached. I ceased my aimless wandering about the Court, left by Landgate, and came away — as far as I know — completely unobserved." The monk's tale faltered to silence.

"Ah," said Zaek after a suitable pause. "Tantalizing."

He opened a second bottle and passed it to the melancholy monk. Off to starboard, three little islands called the Upper Pearls could be seen quite clearly by the light of the Ring, which now beamed down through ragged swift clouds. The Mouths had grown choppier, but not alarmingly so. A seaward breeze flung the barbarian's long hair in his face as he tipped his chin to swig at the fresh bottle.

KAEL DREW A PICTURE by lamplight, sitting as usual naked at his table, brushing back locks of hair redder than the flame. Samples of his work were gummed to the walls: naive scenes of adventure, meticulously detailed fantasy airships and palaces. Kael chose to live alone (with twenty rooms for only twelve boys, why not?) but tonight (as usual) Michchaeris was visiting — sprawled on his stomach on Kael's unmade bed, propped on his elbows, idly flipping the pages of a picture book. Fourteen years old, his mother a slave from some island in the South Sea, his skin gold-brown, eyes almond brown, hair blackwalnut brown, straight and glossy, woven in one long queue that (just now) reached down the curve of his vertebrae nearly to the coccyx. He was dressed only in a white loincloth that left most of his buttocks exposed, the same spicy color as the rest of his skin.

As soon as Ravinan came in (still fully dressed) Kael looked up from his work and asked, "Well, how is he?"

“Still melancholy and cross. I’ve never seen him stay so miserable so long. Poor Jethi,” Ravinan giggled, “he doesn’t know what’s happening to him!”

“You shouldn’t laugh at him,” scolded Kael. “This could be a serious business.”

“I wasn’t laughing at him, exactly,” said the blond, for once actually sitting genteelly on the edge of the bed rather than flinging himself headlong upon it. “But you have to admit... It’s a bizarre story unfolding...” Absentmindedly he began unbuttoning his vest of plum velvet (worn away in patches).

“Why has this mysterious-monk followed Jethi into the inner sanctum of Perpetual Benefice?” asked Kael rhetorically. “Is he up to no good? Some nefarious business? Does Jethael need our protection?”

Michchaeris made a rude noise. “What do you propose, challenging the monk to a duel? Did you happen to notice his sword?”

“Not an ordinary monk for sure. We must spy on him...”

Ravinan untied the bow which held up his grey silk pantaloons, and began squirming out of them. “I don’t think you’ve got it quite right, Kael. Listen, since noon Jethi’s been maundering around our room, kicking at things and muttering. At first I tried to tease him about it, but he only snarled at me. Late in the afternoon he was sitting at the window staring out at the rain. Suddenly he jumped up and ducked back into the room. I ran to the window just in time to see the monk disappearing down the walk. ‘He almost saw me,’ Jethi said. So I asked him, ‘Are you afraid of that man? Why?’ And he said, ‘You know why’ — and started crying — not *sobbing*, of course, just tears running over his cheeks, and a tragic look on his face. So you see?” Ravinan kicked his pantaloons into a corner of the room and lay back with a smirk.

“See what?” asked Michchaeris.

“Well, *my* theory... Who knows, maybe the monk is some sort of villain. But perhaps he’s very rich, or a sorcerer, and yesterday at the Temple he saw Jethi and, you know... fell in love with him... and somehow he managed to get himself appointed to the vacancy at Noon Tower so he could... get closer...”

“You mean... *seduction*?” breathed Michchaeris.

“So the question is,” mused Kael, “the question remains: do we protect Jethi from him?”

“No, the question is: does Jethi *want* to be protected from him?”

Kael jumped up, leapt onto the bed, tripped over Michchi’s leg, sprawled between the two boys and began yanking at Ravinan’s long hair. “Explain! Explain what plot is cooking in there!”

“What if the reason Jethi’s so sad is because he felt he made an ass of himself this morning, and now he’s afraid the man won’t like him anymore? And of course, he’s terrified about... well, going to bed with a grown-up. But just suppose I’m right, and the monk *is* in love. He’ll give Jethi all sorts of presents. Lovers do that, you know. And if he were Jethi’s protector, he’d have to protect Blue Rain Tower as well. You complain how no one cares about us, how we never get any solos, how we’re never allowed outside excursions because no one will chaperone us, never any extra sweets or food, not enough books and toys...”

“Hmmm,” said Kael.

“...and finally... Suppose Jethi managed to get over being scared. *Then* we’d find out all about... what grown-ups do. We could spy on them...”

While Ravinan lectured his friends, he undid his loincloth and pushed the white ribbands down around his thighs. His plump penis, about the length of a man’s middle finger, jutted above his soft belly, the aureole of the prepuce half-stretched away from the glans. At the mention of spying, both Ravi and Kael began stroking themselves as if meditating on what such espionage might uncover.

At last Michchaeris too rolled over onto his back and exposed himself. A little halo of crisp black fuzz surrounded his stem, which was longer, thinner and straighter than Kael’s, straight as a knife. In a tangle of bare limbs, disordered sheets, discarded clothes and warm conspiracy, the three friends began their nightly contest.

“We can’t make Jethi do something he doesn’t want to do.” Kael objected (while seeing how far he could stretch his foreskin before it hurt).

“Of course not. But we don’t have to stand in his way or discourage him — or ‘protect’ him too much — or tell tales to the masters...”

“Let’s see what happens next,” said Michchi, “then we can plan what to do.”

Lining up on the edge of the bed, sitting knee to knee and shoulder to shoulder, they raced, jerking their fists faster and faster. Kael shot first, but he’d done it three times already since morning, and managed only to stain the sheet and dribble on his foot. Michchaeris came in second with a much better shot, though nowhere near his record of six feet. Ravinan had been chaste all day. He lost control, grunted and thrashed about and squirted all over Kael’s knee. Kael cursed and pretended to strangle Ravi, who squealed and pleaded for help from Michchaeris. But the dark-skinned boy had opened a jar of Hair Lotion and was preparing himself for the second round.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Jethael cried himself to sleep.

COINCIDENTALLY, SOME TWENTY MILES north-northwest, not far from Spiridon Gates with their shabby wharves and view of the great Oryx, so wide that even by day its far banks could not be seen, in the Water Fly Cafe, in a little room painted like a nursery, Xiri the violet-eyed Thurenian dancing boy was also crying himself to sleep.

“BAH. THE WHOLE ENCLAVE of Lookinglass seems to hibernate,” said Zaek. “We should not have allowed our taxi to leave us stranded here.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to borrow someone’s skiff,” Valamiel replied. “With luck we should be able to return it before dawn. Come, let’s pick out the best of these. I take it that single beacon, over there across the stream and to the south, represents our goal?”

“I trust so,” said the barbarian, beginning to slice and hack with his sword at the mooring lines of a small runabout. “Find us a decent pair of oars.”

THEY COULD MAKE OUT the landing at Manticore’s Tongue, lit by a single small beacon-lamp, but now dimly illuminated by the glow of night-sky as well — for most of the clouds had finally scattered. They tied up their vessel next to a narrow old-fashioned launch, and leapt out onto the dock. Only then did they realize that someone was standing there, apparently waiting for them.

A boy, in fact, no more than ten, diminutive. Dressed in a short sleeveless tunic of... no, impossible. And yet, what else except firesilk could iridesce and corruscade and ripple with such prismatic scintillation, even by night? Firesilk (like viridine) comes only from Qamar. On other Moons only kings can afford it, and on Qamar — people say — only high priests and expensive courtesans. The boy's long hair was braided in a single pigtail, glistening black. His big eyes were brighter than the silk: an emissary of the Paeraen*, so he seemed, come to guide them through a crack between Dimensions.

"Sorolon is expecting you," piped the child; then turned on his heels and beckoned them to follow, off the dock towards a flower-lined and shadowy path.

"More hocus-pocus and thaumaturgification," whispered Valamiel to Zaek.

"Perhaps all customers are greeted thus," the barbarian whispered back.

"At midnight?"

The child turned and gestured impatiently. They followed.

The odoriferous pathway led them soon enough to a tower, yet another of the ubiquitous blunt towers of Suvyamara. An almost phallic shadow against the moony night. Every Suvyama-ran, thought the monk, dreams of owning his own Keep on his own island or deep in his own swamp, where no one can intrude on peace and solitude.

The ground-level storey of the place lacked all furnishings and was but dimly lit. By the faint marine smell of the rooms, one might guess that storm-tides occasionally flooded them. The boy in his gleaming liquid carapace of silk, a barefoot psychopomp, preceded them up a centuried staircase hung with unravelling tapestries and guttering sconces.

*The "little people" of legend, supposedly the aboriginal inhabitants of the Ring of Moons, creatures of supernatural beauty and power — who nevertheless retreated from the advent of mankind into some alternate universe or parallel reality.

They emerged into a reception hall, and found themselves alone, their guide vanished. They studied the chamber, which occupied the entire round second storey of the tower. Tall windows shrouded in long velvet curtains alternated around the walls with high heavily-carved cabinets, some locked, others open to expose rows of books and manuscripts. Finely-woven reed mats covered most of the stone floor. On the far side of the circular chamber another staircase led to the upper storeys. In yet another corner a few brocaded carpets and plush cushions were strewn about a low table carved from a single piece of some milky stone like agate. Nothing else.

The man who uses this room, thought Valamiel approvingly, owns an uncluttered mind: classical Qamarian taste, unpolluted by the serpentine baroque of Suvyamaran modishness.

Zaek bent down and lifted a corner of one of the mats. On the stone tile, sijils had been drawn with colored chalk. No doubt the whole floor pullulated with hidden runes. Footsteps sounded. Zaek dropped the mat in place and stood straight.

The man coming down the stairs violated their preconceptions in a way that seemed at first somewhat disappointing. To put it bluntly, he was ugly. Perhaps fifty years old, slightly stooped, shorter than either of his visitors, his face amounted to a caricature of the “ancient” Suvyamaran physiognomy. The ears protruded alarmingly. The bulging eyes parted company disconcertingly far to either side of a flat, round-nostrilled nose. The chin receded under a mouth that a frog might admire. Ineffectual wisps of colorless beard fluttered beneath the chin. Crooked teeth were bared by the sorcerer’s welcoming smile.

And yet... the smile genuinely welcomed, and the weird eyes radiated... What do they radiate? Valamiel wondered. He couldn’t decide.

Sorolon might by his costume have been a back-canal squire rather than a sorcerer. His kilt of sober brown and dark-wine pattern fell to his ankles, and his robe of matching stuff was patched thriftily at the elbows. In one hand he held a long curved silver pipe with a bowl of real viridine carved in the shamanic shape of a chaosawk’s blind head and beak: apparently his one concession to personal elegance.

As they linked thumbs and introduced themselves to the sorcerer, Valamiel remembered himself saying, “Far be it from me to blame a

man for his homeliness,” or something of the sort. Sorolon’s hands felt warm and dry, the fingers long, supple and strong: beautiful hands. The formulae of polite greeting sounded gracefully simple in Sorolon’s quiet voice, rather than tedious and hypocritical. Consciously and unconsciously, the sorcerer seemed the embodiment of that intangible quality, the illusive spirit of *vaehh* so prized by the ancient Clans of the Half-Drowned city.

“...and you, sir,” Sorolon was addressing the barbarian, “must be one of the votaries of Thurenian Chaos, to judge by your ear-gem. Ah, the most dangerous and attractive of all our gods. It bids us, even the most ordinary of mortals, to act as if we were free! Or... perhaps I haven’t phrased it quite correctly...?”

Zaek said — in a tone which indicated he was quoting from memory:

*“The ‘ordinary’ mind does not exist;
Each of you is a daemon in your own right.
Chaos never gave way to Order;
Gods, spirits and men were never born.
Only the illusion of Law can bind you;
In truth, you were never chained.”*

Sorolon laughed an unexpected laugh, a delighted child-like giggle. “Wonderful! You begin the evening by providing all the answers. So we shall have nothing to talk about now except the questions.”

Valamiel found himself imagining that Sorolon had somehow set a preliminary test for them, and they had passed it.

“You’ve come a long way, you may be chilled and hungry. Sit for a while and refresh yourselves before I unleash my curiosity upon you. Mostly my visitors are a quotidian lot. It’s seldom I meet Ring-travellers or warrior-mystics.”

No sooner had they seated themselves around the agate table than three boys appeared unheralded from the downstairs entry, bearing trays and flagons. One of them was the firesilk imp. The other two were older, perhaps twelve and thirteen. And all of them were undoubtedly brothers: the same ravenblack hair, coal-black eyes, fair skin and lips the color of dove’s blood. The two visitors felt that, if

their hearts were not already engaged elsewhere, they might well be consumed with envy of the genially ugly sorcerer.

“My nephews,” Sorolon announced. (An obvious and traditional euphemism, Valamiel assumed.) “Also my apprentices: Esteva, the eldest” (who wore a spidery gold tunic, an unbelted white tunic, and web-sandals made of semi-precious gems); “Valvaen, the next eldest” (ears pierced with gold hoops, dressed in a kilt and sleeveless vest of blue shot with silver Moons-and-stars pattern); “and the youngest, Varonael” (still in his firesilk).

The older brothers smiled and bowed. The youngest simply stared at the two guests with disconcertingly vivid eyes.

The sorcerer gestured, and the boys set their trays and flagons neatly on the table and stepped back, models of etiquette.

The magician’s midnight cold collation included a platter of horncrabs, their spiral shells split open and stuffed with a mince of dog and apricots; blue eels baked in clotted cream; a salad of some dozen different herbs, not one of which Valamiel could name except for the autumnleeks; and a very dry wine the color of overblown roses.

“Clearly,” said Sorolon, “I have passed beyond mere acesis and self-denial and spiritual discipline. Who the devil prepared these crabs?”

“I did,” said Valvaen.

“We’ve already eaten most of them,” said Esteva.

“Even my advanced degree of sanctity will not permit me to consume and digest crabs at midnight. But I’m certain our guests will enjoy them. And what about you three? Still hungry? Sleepy? Our conversation may stretch on and fail to amuse you.”

“We’ve eaten enough,” said Valvaen.

“We’ll go to bed,” said Esteva.

The two of them rose, uttered such words as were customary, and withdrew;.

Sorolon looked enquiringly at the youngest, Varonael, sparkling in the lamplight like a very convincing hallucination. Gravely the boy said, “Not me. Still hungry. And I will not be bored.”

“No, I suppose not.”

So the imp sat down next to the magician, and all began to eat: a serious business on Qamar. “Your nephew’s an excellent cook,” said

Valamiel. Sorolon raised an eyebrow, and helped himself to a bit of salad and a large glass of wine.

“According to custom,” he said, “a host should not cease to eat till his guests refuse to continue. I usually take but one meal a day. Varonael, however, will stand in for me and play the tablemaster — although you’ll have to eat rapidly to compete with his voracious appetite.”

So they fell to work. Sorolon reclined in his cushions and lit his pipe. The smoke that curled upward seemed to possess absolutely no touch, no substance, no trace of any discernable smell. The smoke smelled of the absence of all odors. The pattern it wove in the air grew more dense and complex, a cats-cradle of scentless incense, a series of smoke-rings like zeros.

Valamiel glanced at the boy. Little Varonael indeed possessed a prodigious appetite, eating as much as either of the men, but drinking milk rather than wine. The boy noticed that Valamiel was looking at him. The monk smiled at the child. Varonael’s beauty reminded him of Jethael’s beauty.

Suddenly a green and ghostly nimbus or globe of illuminate ectoplasm or halo of eerie light appeared around Varonael’s head. It expanded like a bubble, leaving the boy’s face quite visible within its lambency, then swirled away in a tumult of prismatic pseudoflame and vanished into nothing — all in the space of three heartbeats.

For the first time that evening, the boy smiled — a grin in keeping with his impishness — and then turned his fastidious attention to sucking out a crab’s leg.

No one else seemed to have noticed the bizarre phenomenon. The scrivening monk felt curiously elated, as if at some favorable omen.

“SO,” SOROLON SUMMED UP after an hour or so of conversation, “You have come to me, Zaek, seeking no usual potion, not even the most potent of Compellations, for the boy you love is quite literally a slave. Forgive me, but... since you cannot afford the price of his freedom, you hope to interest me in conspiring to commit what is locally adjudged the double crime of kidnapping and theft.” He raised a hand to ward off protests. “You will argue an intention to reverse the effect of an act considered a crime by your Clans (if indeed the

Chaotes can be said to follow any code whatsoever), namely: the original theft of the boy into slavery.”

Sorolon still puffed his pipe. The viridine bowl glowed like an undersea star. Valamiel suspected that the pipe fulfilled a larger function in the sorcerer’s life than a mere postprandial placebo. Is there such a thing, he wondered, as divination by pipe-smoke?

The imp-boy reclined with his sleek dark head lightly resting on the sorcerer’s shoulder, pretending to have fallen asleep. Valamiel was fighting off the urge to dream about Perpetual Benefice. Zaek however was sitting up like a sprung trap and concentrating on Sorolon’s every utterance.

“Tell me,” their host asked, “what precisely had you thought of requesting me to provide?”

“A Cloak,” answered the barbarian, “of Invisibility.”

Valamiel sat bolt upright and focused his gaze, not on Zaek but the sorcerer. The firesilk Varonael opened his eyes and then blinked them shut again.

Sorolon frowned. “Have you ever used one before?”

“No.”

“Very tricky. Not considered good form for non-initiates. Not to mention the fact that you probably cannot afford the... ingredients. Still...,” he smiled, “it’s a marvellous idea. Since you have honored me by presuming me capable of such audacity, allow me to inquire: have you truly asked me everything you want to know? Have you unfolded to me the entire significance of... what shall I say...? the pattern of your fate and will?”

Zaek looked puzzled, and ventured no reply. Sorolon continued: “What about you, good scrivener? Have you no boon or advice to ask of me? Please feel free to snub me for a nosy fool — but somehow I sense there’s something more I should know before I answer Zaek’s question.”

Valamiel unfolded in a few brief and guarded paragraphs the essence of his romantic involvement with Perpetual Benefice, and admitted his upsetting experience that morning with the boy Jethael. “I had indeed given some thought to asking your advice on the matter, should the opportunity arise. Since you actually invite me to do so, well... I must admit...”

“But sir, allow me! This all sounds promising enough. At least the child’s not ignoring you, eh? I suggest you pay a pilgrimage to Varon’s shrine off Ashgate and sacrifice some flowers. If your suit is still refused, I can prepare some Attractive Spell. But I must confess, I’m still puzzled. I see I shall have to be frank with you. This morning, I... But wait, first let me say that, generally speaking, I have no interest in the future. Amatory magic demands a concentration on the here and now, on primordial forces that lie outside the usual theorems of temporality. Prognostications are always delusive, for the fabric of the future is woven with the indeterminate, the truly random. Premonitions, however, represent a reality that no working sorcerer can afford to ignore.

“Now: this morning I felt an overpowering urge to consult an oracular function which from time to time manifests itself with some keenness through the medium of my friend, the dormant child here, Varonael. I won’t trouble you with the details.

“We were disturbed by portents of a certain magnitude. Vast changes seem to loom. Some object of great power hovers nearby. Emissaries of destiny... that sort of thing. Vague, needless to say — but quite alarming. Now, Zaek’s proposal is alarming to be sure... but still...,” he puffed a long tendril of smoke into the air. “It’s not quite alarming enough.”

“So...,” mused Valamiel aloud, “you really were expecting us?”

“More or less. Well, gentlemen... you have no idea of the expense involved in a Cloak of Invisibility.”

“I see,” said Zaek. He glanced at his comrade and lifted an inquiring eyebrow. Valamiel shrugged.

“We could,” the monk said airily, “describe some of our other recent adventures to Sorolon. Perhaps he might make more of their mysteries than we ourselves have done. I feel certain, in the light of his premonition, that we can rely on his discretion.”

“You have my word on that,” Sorolon assured them.

“Very well,” said Zaek.

“Have you ever met a magician named Marbreuse, brother to the Regnant Marchion of the March of Chaeth?” asked Valamiel.

Suddenly Sorolon seemed to go rigid. He stared at them. The boy stirred uneasily at his side.

Valamiel noticed that he could not focus on both of Sorolon's eyes together. They were spaced too far apart. The effect was vaguely upsetting.

"The Regnant Marchion," said the sorcerer at last, "has no brother." Then, after a pause, he asked, "What sort of man is this Marbreuse to look at?"

"Tall, a broad face, slit-slant eyes, a yellow beard. Charismatic but repellent simultaneously. A mountebank, but — so we judged — a deep one."

"You judged well, but not deeply enough, my friends. I've never seen him in the flesh, but I feel certain you've met Marchion himself. Marchion, so they say, murdered all his brothers."

"Indeed?"

"Let me tell you a story. Eighty years ago Marchion's father was a mere Captain of a troop of Orichian border guards, stationed near the Chromatic Waste. But he was also an aspiring sorcerer, one of those we call Errants, not affiliated with any Guild. During a raid against one of the nomadic tribes of the Waste he looted a sacred pavilion and removed a certain gemstone from a certain matrix... what some might call a fetish or totem. This stone was the tribe's occult focus, its Ally. Once Marchion's father had seized it, he went on to exterminate the entire tribe.

"He then led his own troops in rebellion against Orichia, and attracted a number of mercenaries to his banner. He set himself up as lord of a mountain state in the wild Marches of Chaeth, hoping to found a dynasty of sorcerers. He was a strong cruel man, and he raised strong cruel sons. When they came of age he goaded them into conspiring against each other — then died laughing. Marchion poisoned the others, and ruled by himself.

"Some ten years ago, a wandering adventurer appeared in the Marches — alone — and very nearly managed to steal that gemstone. But he failed. Marchion captured him and tortured him to death, so they say, with the Death of a Thousand Unseen Knives.

"This unfortunate youth had a lover, a bold woman, leader of a band of mercenaries, who calls herself the Red Captain. She set out to avenge her sorrow. Her expedition was financed by the theocrats of our city, Suvyamara. She failed in her revenge, since Marchion escaped her sword. But she got the Crowstone.

“The Red Captain is no fool. When she realized what she’d stolen, she felt no desire to keep it. Moreover, her backers gave her a good price for it. A very good price, almost enough to assuage her grief. And that, so far as the world knows, is the end of the story.”

After quite some time Valamiel asked, “And where is the Crowstone now?”

“At the Viridine Temple, of course. It’s displayed there every year.”

“Of course. Well, Sorolon, it appears that Marbreuse — or Marchion — has hired us to steal it back for him. I didn’t quite realize it till just now, since he spoke to us only vaguely of ‘great treasures’. But I’m certain that’s what he must intend. He’s planted me at Perpetual Benefice, perhaps as a spy. Zaek is expected to supply most of the cold steel. Does all this information throw any clearer light on your oracle?”

“More than I like to contemplate. Hmmm, I’m glad the little one has finally actually fallen asleep. This begins to sound... unpleasant. If I were a wise man I’d ignore the promptings of Fate — for is that not the very summit of wisdom? — and suggest that you leave Qamar at once, by the next convoy fleet. Or at the very least, I’d beg you to forget you ever met me. I suppose that my calling does not lead to such quietism and hermitry. What has love to do with non-involvement in the flow and ebb of the world’s tides?”

“Not much,” answered Valamiel.

For a long time they were silent, watching the evolutionary partifurcations of Sorolon’s pipesmoke meandering toward the rafters in a cryptic phantasmagoria of mantic haze.

“As for me,” said the sorcerer, “I shall consult my dreams. Gentlemen, do you wish to rest here tonight? You are, of course, welcome.”

“We have a borrowed boat to return before dawn,” said Zaek, speaking for the first time in what seemed hours.

“Return in two days for your fitting,” Sorolon murmured, already sounding sleepy.

“My fitting?” asked the perplexed barbarian.

“For the Cloak,” he yawned. His pipe went out. He began to snore gently. The lamps seemed to grow dimmer. The guests tiptoed out and down the stairs.

IN THE HOUR OF THE FALSE DAWN, when silence is deepest, a man in a cobalt starry cloak stands on the edge of a jetty, staring across the now-placid Mouths toward the east, where the echo of a rumor of pale unborn day might or might not be hovering like a mirage above the horizon.

He strains forward, like a hawk in flight, or like a snake tasting the wind, his neck thrust out in concentration, sinews and veins bulging at his throat.

At last he relaxes, pulls in his questing head, untenses his muscles. A look of vicious malevolence clouds his face. Then a calculating smile.

He wraps his cloak about him, turns and strides off the jetty and across the beach.

On the road a coach is waiting. He climbs in and shuts the door without a word to the shrouded coachman. With a snap and a clash and a clatter, the carriage wakes the last watches of night and speeds off into the shadowy west.

4.

The Doctrine Of Separation

HE COULD NOT SEE HIS HAND before his face.

The night had grown unnaturally clear, as if by some aurora hyperborealis... So weather was not causing the problem, not blinding him with fog. In fact, he could make out the landscape quite well. Before him stretched a great body of water, and on his left in the mid-distance he noted two immense “Gates” — wide stone jettys — thrusting their way into the water. Beyond the Gates the masts of two-score sleeping ships rose black against the pulsing sky. Some hundred yards to his right, a cluster of wooden buildings. All around him, sand and palmetto-grass.

All perfectly clear. Better than perfect, in fact: serenely beautiful, significant, hallucinatorially precise, color-saturated (even by night). The world stretched out before him, crystalline, alive.

His other senses seemed magnified as well. The wavelets murmured from the water, the nightwind soughed in the grass, distant echoes of human voices reached him. All sounded sharp and harmonious. Layered into the water-smells were a myriad other scents, most of them tantalizingly alien, messages without content. The breeze touched his naked skin like a bodiless hand.

He was filled with an exultant sense of omnipotence, as if merely by wishing it he might transport himself in an instant to any place in the world.

Why then could he not see his hand before his face? Or his feet beneath him on the ground?

He clapped his hands, and startled himself with the sharp sound, the sting of palm against palm. But that which cannot be seen cannot exist — except perhaps as a cloud of gas. Was he a cloud of gas? Panic seized him for an instant. Who was he? Where? Why?

By an effort of will he forced himself to be calm. He dimly recalled: he must walk to those wooden buildings, and enter one of them. Which one? Never mind, walk.

He walked. It felt right. He lost some of the ghostly sensation of dissolution, of non-being. He began to remember.

FOR TWO DAYS AFTER their visit to Manticore's Tongue, the barbarian and the monk saw nothing of each other. From Lookingglass, Valamiel vanished eagerly into the north-east towards Ashgate, on pilgrimage to the shrine of Varon; and presumably from thence back to Perpetual Benefice. Zaek could think of nothing better to do at first than retire to the houseboat and lie low.

After too many hours of sleep and too many hours of pacing about the boat like a caged wolf, he walked to Viridine Bazaar. In a curio shop he found an amulet, an uncut crystal grasped in the talon of a lyrebird, which could have been crafted nowhere else but Far Thuren. He bought it, wrapped it and addressed it to Xiri.

At a booth of the Messengers' Guild he hired a runner to carry the packet to the Water Fly Cafe, deposit it unannounced in the delivery box, and leave again without a receipt. If Quelleron the proprietor intercepted the anonymous package, he might guess its meaning. Nevertheless, Zaek thought the risk worthwhile, for he could not bear to imagine that Xiri might doubt his oath, or begin to despair.

No word came from Marbreuse. No one disturbed Zaek at the houseboat. By the morning of the appointed return to Sorolon's tower the barbarian was strung tense as a bow, fletched with worry and anticipation.

They met at Templegate and once again hired a boat to ferry them across to the Fan.

Valamiel appeared somewhat pale and drawn, but exalted, as if in the grip of some spiritual fever. Affairs at the Choristers' House were nearing some dénouement, so it seemed. "I have attained that state,"

the monk declared unsteadily, “where intensity of desire in itself becomes a kind of fulfillment, like the flood of faith and longing that engulfs a fresh convert to the Mysteries as he contemplates the deity in an ecstasy of separation, an epiphany of frustrated proximity. I’ll tell you about it, but not now. I need to keep it hermetically sealed, boiling and bubbling and baking away over the fire of my prayer... can’t break the egg yet...”

As they settled into the plush seats of the watertaxi, the monk continued to mutter like a madman. Then, as they pulled away from the wharf, his head sank forward onto his breast, his eyes drooped; he jerked up, made a few incoherent remarks, then folded like a discarded puppet in the bright sun and began to snore.

Zaek was content. He had enough to occupy his mind, and no need for a discourse on the doctrine of the Absence of the Beloved.

THE SORCERER’S APPRENTICES had gone fishing. Valamiel had retired like a somnambulist to a hammock in the shade of the tower’s garden, apologizing hazily for his haziness. “I had begun to think I’d lost the need for sleep... not quite that advanced yet, I suppose... perhaps only when I’m near him... waves of mellifluous energy...” He wandered away.

As Zaek and Sorolon climbed the staircase to the round-chamber above, the ugly magus asked, “Have you had any further thoughts on the Affair of the Pseudonymous Sorcerer?”

“No.”

“Neither have I. Dreams, yes. Thoughts, no. Let us not discuss it then, since words will only muddy the pattern at this point. We must concentrate instead on other matters.”

They stopped at the top of the stairs, and Sorolon turned to face his guest. “The expenses involved in this operation amount to two thousand three hundred Suvyamaran sequins. I will accept your word to pay in cash or service, as or when you may. My labor is gratis, except for one silver penny, which must be paid me now.”

Zaek paid. Sorolon pocketed the coin, turned and opened the door to the round-chamber. Inside, all the reed mats had been rolled away, and the floor indeed now revealed as a mass of runes and sijils, patterned in a magic circle around the room’s center, where a small metal cauldron rested on a low tripod.

A slave like Xiri, Zaek thought, would cost at least ten times the price of this Cloak.

“I mentioned the other night,” Sorolon continued as they stepped into the room, “that Invisibility involves certain dangers, both psychic and physical. Rarely have any but the most puissant of magicians succeeded in making good use of a Cloak. Ideally, you should practise first — but I cannot afford to concoct two of these things. Moreover, I sense that you are ready, that your purpose is honed keen, and that further delay will only blunt its edge. Remember, the warrior and the magician share certain traits and disciplines. Think of this operation as a guerilla raid into another Dimension, and you may be able to function as you wish.”

“You sound doubtful.”

“Nothing is certain in such a science. Sit here on this cushion by the door.”

Sorolon now edged his way around the wall to a cabinet, careful not to step on any of the chalk-marks. He opened the cabinet and took out a wooden box tied in an elaborate knot of scarlet cord. He returned and seated himself beside Zaek. His long fingers worked quickly at the knots (though certain movements of his hands seemed symbolic rather than mechanical). At last the cord fell away and Sorolon opened the lid on its hinges.

The interior of the box was lined with grey plush, and at first seemed empty. Then Zaek noticed it held a filmy and delicate scarf or length of insubstantial material, infinitely finer than silk or lace, and colorless as moonlight.

“This alone represents most of the expense of making a Cloak; this is the material warp upon which the immaterial weft-spell is woven. Made of spider-webs, of course, gathered under the proper constellations — and the spiders themselves so tiny the naked eye can scarcely discern them.” He closed the lid.

“Now let me explain what we must do. In a few minutes it will strike noon, and we shall begin. You will sit here, and concentrate, imagining yourself into the state of Invisibility, while simultaneously recalling your Intention. From noon till sundown, I shall work on the Cloak, and you must not speak. Watch me, if you will, but say nothing. At sundown I shall summon you. Walk carefully along that

rune-path which leads from your seat to the cauldron. I will then give you the Cloak, and tell you how to use it. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Then let us be silent now."

Sorolon stood poised at the edge of the magic circle for some minutes, holding the box in his arms. At last he stepped slowly and deliberately into the ring. Placing his feet carefully on certain figures and avoiding others, he began to walk. He did not approach the cauldron directly, but widdershins in a perfect spiral around it. He zero'd in on it gradually, and reached it after about five minutes of glacial pacing.

He stood staring down into the cauldron, his back to Zaek's view. Perhaps he subvocalized some incantation. Zaek never heard a sound.

Time passed. Sorolon opened the box and with one hand reached in and plucked out the spider veil. Already it seemed less than fully real. At once the sorcerer dropped it into the cauldron - but it seemed to take a long time to flutter and fall, as if it were almost as light as air.

Sorolon closed the box, set it on the floor, and began to retrace his spiral path. At some point he took an alternate vector across the runes, and arrived ceremoniously before a closed cabinet. He opened its doors and took out yet another box, slightly larger than the first, this one tied with blue knotted cords. He knelt and moved his hands till the knots fell away. He picked up the box and stepped back into the circle. Again he spiraled his way to the cauldron.

He knelt and placed the second box upon the first. He opened it.

For the next few hours he busied himself extracting bottles one by one from the box. The bottles were blown of opaque glass, and shaped gracefully as flagons of attar. Each bottle in turn he opened, and poured its contents into the cauldron. He then stared into the pot for fifteen or twenty minutes, turned to the box again, produced another bottle and repeated the sequence.

Sweet smells and disturbing smells and utterly unknown smells reached Zaek at the periphery of the circle. He concentrated, emptying his mind of all but the ritual, and his Desire.

At last Sorolon seemed to run out of bottles. Now he simply stood, motionless, still staring intently down into the cauldron. Time passed. Hours passed. Zaek began to grow weary of sitting. Outside,

to judge by the light which filtered through the shaded windows, shadows began to lengthen into afternoon.

Finally...

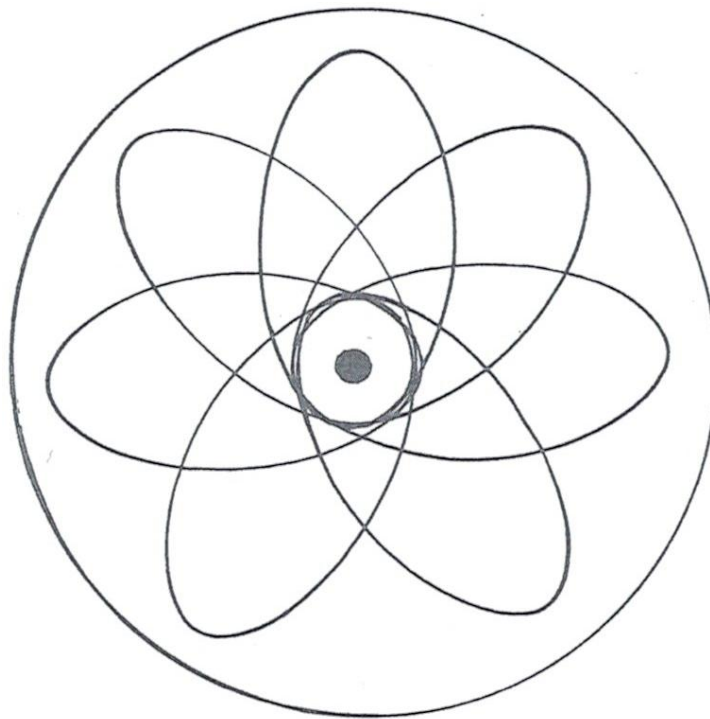
...Sorolon began to move again.

He slowly turned in place where he stood. Zaek could see his ugly face, transfigured, serene. Then he turned again. And again. With each turn a tiny bit faster. Incrementally he increased his speed as he turned.

Soon he established a steady rhythm: a slow stately turning, gyroscopic, graceful.

Only then did he step out into the circle, still turning, turning. His robe swirled slightly. Like a dignified top, he began to describe a new pattern across the runes. His perfect poise was uncanny. Hairs bristled on the back of Zaek's neck. The barbarian felt tired no longer. He was spellbound.

Time passed. Zaek came to understand at least the shape of Sorolon's dance, if not its meaning. The dancer circled the cauldron as a comet circles a star, linking the individual orbits into a galactic (or atomic) overpattern something like a seven-petalled flower. Thus:



SOROLON'S DANCE

By the time Sorolon had completed two full cycles of this dance, Zaek felt himself literally entranced. Nothing existed for him but the astounding figure of the middle-aged and slightly potbellied magician whirling around the room in eldritch silence. He realized that Sorolon was still gradually increasing the rate of spin.

Now the sorcerer's whirligig body was reduced to little more than a blur. Still he continued to unfold the pattern of the inexorable dance. So much whirling and twirling! Zaek felt that either the room itself, or the cauldron, must soon begin to rotate in vibrational sympathy. Or perhaps, he thought, the cauldron's contents are spinning.

Zaek glanced at the floor under Sorolon's feet. Suddenly he experienced a moment of vertigo, sheer incomprehension and terror. The solid stone appeared to have vanished, as if the runes and sijils were painted on a sheet of glass — or rather, as if the magical inscriptions themselves were all that separated Sorolon from a bottomless and featureless abyss. Zaek could not quite see the abyss, but he could sense it, like a geometrician's nightmare of extra-Dimensional topology. Dream knowledge intersected the flavorless rationality of day. Sorolon spun faster and faster. The sun sank lower and lower. The chamber grew dimmer and dimmer. Zaek fought, nearly engulfed by panic, against the Void.

Just when daylight and sanity were about to implode into final dissolution, Sorolon's dance abruptly ended. With the same perfect poise, he slowed his whirling and came to rest once again before the cauldron.

He reached into the pot and extracted something... impossible to see in such dim light. He placed this something in the first box and snapped the lid closed. He turned and beckoned to the barbarian. "Come here," he said. "The Cloak is ready."

With infinite care, Zaek stood and threaded his way across the runic floor (not daring to glance down) and stood before Sorolon. The magician's breath came slow and normal, but even in the evening gloom Zaek could see he was drained, exhausted, holding himself upright by will alone.

"The Cloak is here. Outside you will find that my apprentices have summoned a watertaxi which belongs to our Clan. The oarsmen are sworn to silence and secrecy. Valamiel will accompany you. All must remain as silent as possible. Idle words weaken the fabric.

“The boat will take you north across the streams and bogs of the Fan, then through the Bootstrap, over the Claw and into Spiridon Island by one of the back canals. Some time after midnight you will reach the Gates. There, in a secluded spot, leave the boat and go alone. Where no one can see you, strip off your clothes and open the box. Lift the Cloak with both hands, thus. Sit crosslegged on the ground. Wrap the Cloak over your head and around you, like an old woman’s shawl. Stand up without touching your hands to the ground.

“You will then be invisible till the precise moment of sunrise. Then, wherever you may be, the Spell is ended. Work as quickly as you can. Return to the boat with Xiri as long before dawn as possible, taking advantage of darkness to escape. Let nothing deflect you from your Will and Desire. Now... good hunting.”

Zaek took the box, turned, retraced his steps across the circle and left the room without looking back.

NOW HE REMEMBERED.

He remembered kneeling alone on the beach before the open box. A moment of panic: the Cloak not there, the box empty!

But no: his fingers felt something, a tangible nothingness. He lifted it from the box. He shuddered.

Huddling and hunching himself, he raised his hands above his head and mimed the motions of drawing a shawl around his entire body. For an instant he felt nothing. Then, slowly, a light cool fabric seemed to settle over his naked shoulders like dew. As the Cloak moulded itself over his back and thighs it seemed to melt into his very skin and vanish. A chill of dread settled, a ghost shroud.

He stood up. He held out his hand.

Nothing.

ZAEK HAD REGAINED HIS EGO. He remembered now. His desire burned inside him like frozen lightning. Power surged through him. Invulnerable. Invincible. He strode toward the Water Fly Cafe. Invisible.

Not the front entrance. Over fences, down twisting back alleyways. Crash, knock over a pile of old crates. Freeze. Did anyone hear? Laugh. So what if they did? There’s nothing to see!

A door ajar. Shadow. Silence.

The kitchen, deserted, rancid-smelling, dark.

Deeper into the building now. The back hallways. Into the warmwomb boywhorehouse hothouse of caged perfume. Zaek, the prowling incubus, lurking through the blowsy hallways, body held at an impossible angle to the visible spectrum.

Not even a faint man-shadow cast by the dim lamps, the perfumed lamps. The house is silent now. Out there in the Café itself the show must be over, only a few sluggards slipping into vhang dreams on their placental couches. All the boys auctioned off for the night. In their rooms with customers. Moaning. Thumping. Giggling behind the flimsy walls, unseen.

A magenta couch. Somewhere in this hallway... which room? (Everything looks different somehow, only vaguely familiar.) Behind that curtain? Where is the nursery (smelling of attar and sweat) which I have come to haunt?

Carefully he pulls aside one of the curtains and peers into a room.

On a low bed a naked man lies, face up. A boy sits straddled across the man's hips, and the man's cock is up the boy's ass.

Another boy is straddling, or rather squatting, astride the man's shoulders. This second boy's cock is in the man's mouth. The two boys are linked together as well, because the first boy's cock fits neatly into the second boy's rectum.

Perfect circularity. Wonderful to watch. The bodies are beautiful. I could become one with the bodies, lose my own form and flow into the bodies, bring all three to orgasm at once, and on the explosion of that triple flame, shoot high into the air, beyond the Ring, into the great Void of Storms.

But none of the bodies belongs to Xiri.

He drops the curtain and drifts across the hall. He lifts another curtain.

On another low bed, naked Xiri sits, looking bored. Kneeling before him, a naked man, sucking Xiri's penis and masturbating himself. Around the child's neck, two amulets: a silver skull, a gem in a bird's claw.

A snarl of rage crosses the invisible face. Then a smile of devilish mischief.

Zaek waits for the naked man to pause for breath. At length the man looks up and says petulantly, "Aren't you enjoying this at all?" Xiri's sweet cock is flaccid.

In ghostlike tone, Zaek whispers: "This boy belongs to one of the daemons of Chaos!" Simultaneously, he steps into the room and kicks the naked man's ass. "Get up, mortal! Flee the wrath of the Unseen!"

The man screams and leaps to his feet goggle-eyed, stares around the room in dumb terror.

Xiri appears no less appalled, but remains frozen on his pallet; except for his eyes, which dart about searching for the source of the voice. It sounds like...? Could it be...? But where?

Zaek kicked the naked man in the shin. "Run for your miserable life, you slug," he hissed.

The man shrieked again and bumbled blindly into a wall, bounced off, hit another wall. "A daemon!" he wailed.

Zaek pushed him toward the door, whirled him around and delivered a last swift kick to the flabby posterior. The naked man shot through the curtains and (by the sound of it) bounced once more off a wall and finally fell crashing into some pile of fragile furniture. "Haunted!" he screamed. "The boy is possessed by a daemon! Help! Ghosts!"

Zaek turned to the boy, whose golden face had gone utterly colorless with shock. "Xiri," he whispered, "it's me. I'm invisible."

Xiri fainted.

Zaek had not expected this. He fell to his knees beside the prostrate child and began to kiss and caress him, whispering urgently, then frantically: "Xiri, it's me, Zaek. Wake up! Don't be frightened! Wake up!" He forgot what he was doing. He should have picked up the boy and escaped from the building. He did not. He was afraid he'd killed Xiri. He succumbed to panic. He... lost himself again.

Meanwhile, fate prepared to play a very unpleasant joke on the Prowling Incubus.

"YOU ARE FORTUNATE," said the short fat man with the food-stained robe, "to have among your customers tonight a member of the Exorcists' Guild."

"Yes, yes," agreed Quelleron, who was ridden with superstition, his face the color of cold suet. "Can't you get to work at once?"

“Please, please,” pleaded the naked customer (now wrapped in a tablecloth). “I dare not move from here till you’ve cast out that Chaos-thing... Suppose it *follows me!*?”

The self-proclaimed exorcist drew himself up and faced the small crowd of customers and boys, Enforcers, waiters and musicians who hovered and huddled fearfully around the trembling victim of the Unseen.

“You’re fortunate that I was lying here, on this pestilent couch, dreaming vhang dreams of the boys I cannot afford to enjoy, when this eruption of the supernatural occurred. Otherwise, what would you do? Exorcists are few. A tiny elite.”

Quelleron sighed. “Cleanse the boy of this possession, and you may enjoy him for a week.”

“I shall begin work at once,” said the short fat man, reaching for his leather pouch.

ZAEK CAME TO HIMSELF again at the sound of Xiri’s voice. The boy was touching the man’s body and whispering, “Zaek, I can feel you but I can’t see you. Zaek? Speak to me, please, please!” The voice sounded close to hysteria, choked with sobs. The young hands brushed him, cold and trembling. “Is it really you, or is it a daemon? Creature of Chaos, I command you... speak!”

“It really is me, child. Or at least, it was me. Now... who can say? Am I an idea in your head?”

“Zaek!” Ziri wept. “It’s you! What’s wrong? How did you...?”

“I came to rescue you. Or perhaps it’s the other way round. A warrior shares the tastes... no... the traits and disciplines of a sorcerer. Pull me together!”

The barbarian embraced the boy, who squeaked with panic. “Don’t crush *me!*”

“No my dear, you crush me... back into one piece... keep me grounded... put your arms around me...”

“It’s really you. I can feel and smell you. Zaek, why are you invisible? How? Talk sense!”

“Xiri... how long? We fainted. We... we’ve got to get out of here. Rescue each other. *What’s that chanting?*”

Xiri regained a little control. “I don’t know. People in the hall. Muttering... sounds like a priest.”

Zaek had a moment of utter clarity — except that he greatly feared for his sanity. Somehow, in his heightened awareness, he knew that outside the room, a *magical* enemy was preparing to cut off all escape.

“I am wearing a Cloak of Invisibility. I will be invisible till dawn... which may not be far off. Outside this room, someone is setting up a trap for ghosts. Do you see how the wall has begun to glow?”

“N... no!”

“Of course not. Xiri, let go of me for a moment. I’m going to peek out the curtain.”

Zaek stood up and approached the door. He seemed to be moving underwater, or in slowdream-time. He touched the cloth curtain. It felt like stone. It was *locked*. Outside the room: a chant, sinister and monotonous, droned on and on.

Zaek felt himself once more on the brink of the Void. Carefully he turned back and stumbled to the bed. He touched Xiri, who jumped with the sudden shock of it. “I can see *you*,” Zaek said, “Your dance is so beautiful I would die for it. We’re trapped here. The curtain will not open for a ghost. Xiri, I do not want to be a ghost, I love you.”

The boy embraced him fiercely, trying to cover and touch as much of the man’s body as possible. “Zaek, I won’t let them hurt you!”

“This,” said the barbarian, calling on what felt like the last shred of his mind, “is an ontological crisis. Am I correct?”

“A what?”

“I’m drifting apart. Losing my self. Only you can hold me back. Sorcery is a powerful aphrodisiac. I need you now, earth to earth. Salt my tail. Assault your tail. A salty tale. Right?”

“Zaek... what do you want me to do?”

“I’ll tell you.”

FORTUNATELY FOR QUELLERON, but unfortunately for the Incubus and his Succuboy, the plump exorcist wasn’t lying at all about his abilities. He unloaded his bag of tricks on the floor and shoo’d away the gaping crowd. All of them. As he worked, he cocked his ear and listened.

Ah. Bivocalism. Two voices in one body? A common enough phenomenon. But the naked man spoke of physical manifestations as well. Truly a Chaos daemon? No. Likely enough, the empty boast of some petty entity, perhaps the random revenant of a sorcerer's spilled semen? Again, common enough. It would explain the attraction to nubile flesh.

The exorcist began to chant.

The preliminary steps went well. The Cube of Containment seemed to function perfectly. The short fat man chanted on and on. Inside the room the voices grew quieter, then ceased.

He stopped his chant. He listened. Behind the curtains he heard rasping breath, sighs, a moan.

Curious. By now the daemon should be frantic, shrieking to escape.

Cautiously the exorcist inched toward the curtain. With infinite finesse he twitched aside the veil and peeked in.

The dancing boy was *levitating*! suspended in mid-air, several feet above the bed. The child's arms and legs were locked tight as if he were embracing an unseen daemon. His head was thrown back, his face contorted in a rictus of pain — or of some alien lustful emotion. His hips moved in muscular spasms, jerking against the empty air.

Most horrifying of all: the child's penis was rigid, and the ring of his anus was distended and open. He was being buggered by a devil!

The exorcist reeled. Never in all his years of dealing with the Unseen had he witnessed such diabolism! Never had he faced an adversary of such awesome power!

He tottered. He fainted.

DURING THE FEW MINUTES of the exorcist's unconsciousness, Zaek missed yet another chance at escape. The ghost-wall flickered and faded out, but he failed to notice it. Saving himself from instantaneous cosmic entropy took up all his attention. He was grounding himself in another awareness. His mind touched Xiri's mind, even as his flesh penetrated Xiri's flesh. (Nor should I find this surprising, he thought, since the essence of salvation is bliss.)

It occurred to him in a fear-flash that the moment of orgasm might hurl him out of the pattern or template of bodily reality

altogether, and scatter the atoms of his being through the well of the stars.

No. Love entails involvement in the world's tide. This ecstasy will not disembody, but rather re-incarnate me. Zaek's penis grew into the Tree of Life, and filled the boy with the roots of an approaching cascade.

He let go. They flew.

OUTSIDE IN THE CAFE, Quelleron and the others heard how the shrieks and moans of the daemon mingled with those of the ghoulish boy. They shuddered and blanched and prayed to various gods.

The exorcist came to himself at last, lurched to his feet, and moved swiftly to re-establish his Cube. Sweating, he muttered rapidfire incantations. He sighed with relief. The wall was rebuilt.

Now... how to get the bloody thing *out* and back to its own Dimension?

He sweated again. He wished he were a real sorcerer, instead of a mere exterminator of psychic pests. He wondered if he'd gotten into something he couldn't handle.

Outside the building, somewhere nearby, a rooster crowed once.

TIME PASSED.

"Xiri, I'm back together again."

"Thank Chaos!" They kissed. Xiri tasted invisible saliva.

"Indeed. My love... go to the door, spy out, tell me what you see."

The boy jumped up. "Wait... there's one man sitting alone in the hall, just outside the door. He's muttering and moving his fingers in magic signs. He's got some vials and jars and bones. What does it mean?"

"It's nearly dawn. If I'm caught here and arrested, our last hope is dead. That shaman has woven too tight a web for me. You must jump out of the room and attack him, destroy his attention to the Spell. I'll follow as soon as I can, and we'll see if we can get past him in safety. No matter what happens — unless I'm killed — don't give up hope. If we're separated, run to the grove of acanthus just up-canal from the Gates. Valamiel attends us there with a boat. Don't wait for me. Kiss me. Now... *go!*"

Xiri ripped the curtain off its rings. With a warlike snarl he leaped at the huddled figure of the exorcist, who looked up in horror, just in time to see the naked boy fly through the air — crash! The athletic little dancer knocked him over and began punching him in the nose.

The wall still glowed. Or perhaps... had it begun to flicker and waver? Zaek hurled himself at the doorway, and bounced back from thin air with a grunt of pain.

Outside, the rooster crowed again.

The exorcist shouted for help, and began flailing back at the berserk boy.

Zaek flung himself at the invisible barrier again. He felt something give, almost like wood splitting.

Once more. Invisible shards of agony shattered in an explosion of light as he fell through into the hallway. Almost insensible with pain, he staggered to his feet and tried to pull Xiri away from the exorcist. “Come on! Let’s run!”

The exorcist regained his wits. A last desperate attack... he groped with one hand... and found the sack of spirit-fire powder he needed.

He could make out the mark of the daemon’s claw clamped on the boy’s wrist. He flung the powder — there!

Zaek released Xiri’s arm and screamed with pain and terror. He could see flames leaping around the empty outline of his hand. His hand burned with some subtle but acidic ghost-flame. He screamed again.

“What is it?” shrieked Xiri.

“Run! Run!” Zaek ordered him. With admirable presence of mind, the boy turned and made off down the hall. Just at that moment, however, a few brave Enforcers and customers finally came to the rescue of the exorcist. Some of them carried knives and swords.

“Strike there! Where you see the flame burning! I’ve wounded it! Quickly! Your steel may kill it now!” (In truth, the exorcist was a professional, and no coward — despite his faint moments.)

Some of the rescuers caught Xiri. The boy struggled (they all agreed later) as if possessed. Thank the goddess, they were able to subdue the poor child.

Others hurled knives and thrust swords in the general direction indicated by the exorcist, seeking to impale the daemon.

Several of them succeeded in wounding their prey — till at last Zaek, crippled in one hand, managed to get his other hand on a sword and wrest it away from his attacker.

“Aahhgh! A sword is flying in mid-air!”

The enchanted sword slashed wildly in the hallway. One of the men took a deep cut across the chest and fell back in a welter of blood. Sheer ungovernable madness seized them all. Screams and moans and curses, flailing limbs, roars of daemoniac pain and rage.

A door burst open.

“It’s escaping!” cried someone.

“After it!” cried someone else.

“No, let it go,” ordered the short fat exorcist, his face scratched, robe torn, eyes exultant with victory. “It won’t dare come back. I’ve won!”

Outside the rooster — *tra-cara-caroo!* — crowed a third time.

A naked man with long yellow barbarian hair, bleeding from half a dozen wounds, one hand blistered as if pulled from living flame, ran fleeing across the dawning landscape. Staggered, fell, crawled, picked himself up and ran again.

Anyone might have seen him.

But in all the pale world, he ran alone.

ASHGATE LAGOON, PERHAPS the oldest of Suvyamara’s Drowning Quarters, earned its name by the peculiar grey tint of its waters — attributed by legend to the inundated cenotaphs of an antediluvian necropolis. Only the stumps of decrepit keeps and towers remained of the ancient district.

Yet Ashgate refused to be engulfed by its heritage of gloom. Each of the sunken heaps of stone sprouted its cluster of brightly painted houseboats, artificial islets, huts on stilts with balconies hanging over rooms built on derelict barges moored to docks shaded by pavilions of woven reeds. People still remembered the names of the towers, or pretended to remember. Indeed, the clans of waterfolk who floated upon the lagoon claimed direct descent from the inhabitants of the watery tombs beneath the surface, over whose ashes they now plied their skiffs and shop-boats, pirogues and launches.

Among the surviving architecture of the lagoon, five slender stone towers in the shape of graceful and unclimbable ziggurats, much

blurred and worn by centuries of storms, rose like the fingers of a giant's hand from the cloud-colored water. At one time these spires might have stretched a hundred feet or so above the surface of the water, but now all were cracked and half fallen, worn to uneven nubs of forty or fifty feet each.

At some time after the creation of the lagoon, new entrances were cut into these spires just above water level, and all five were connected by a pentagonal boardwalk. The central pool (resting in the drowned giant's palm) was choked with lotus. The walkway supported a host of narrow shops and flower-sellers, vendors of food, books, religious articles, drugs and poisons, horoscopes, antique weapons and airship tickets. The spires served as temples, each devoted to one of Qamar's minor but locally-favored gods or goddesses.

Paeg, the seventh and youngest son of Suvyamara herself, a bastard unrecognized by the official cult of the Viridine Temple. Half man, half fish, repulsively ugly. Popular myth considers him an utter fool, the laughingstock of the gods, a mock-monster incapable of frightening even a baby. Comic dance-dramas are performed outside his spire, and many Suvyamarans worship him passionately.

Jarix, the only female Trickster in the Qamarian mythos. Patroness of all wily slippery metamorphic sneaking trades: pickpockets, cheaters at dice and midwives. Sedan chairs, shiny black eggs on poles, carried by four slaves or hired bearers, brought Suvyamaran women to this spire, but no one ever saw more of their anatomy than eyes peering through curtained slits.

Smarigdon, the Androgyne, child of the Void of Storms, link between earth and sky, patron of crossdress shamans, hermaphrodites, dealers in ceremonial and amatory herbs and potions, flower-sellers and — curiously enough — professional duellists. His/her devotees identify this deity with the Moon of Qamar itself. The festivals of Smarigdon attract only the most reckless, for the dancing of the androgynes is said to induce madness.

The Turtle, a hunchback albino who lives on an invisible Moon. Believed by his worshippers to embody the Primordial and Undivided Oneness. The cult was small, but produced more than its share of scholars, and the Turtle's spire was surrounded by the booths of scribes and purveyors of manuscripts.

The fifth and appropriately smallest spire belonged to Varon. Identified by some as a prehistoric dying-reborn vegetation deity from the Oryx valley, Varon was recognized in Suvyamara as the god of boys. Fathers who wanted sons came here to pray, but had to rub shoulders with men who worshipped boys for their own sweet sakes. Popular prints of Varon showed a handsome pubescent with green skin and yellow eyes like a firesable. Inside the spire however, no idol was displayed. Varon ate flowers. The shrine-chamber was heaped with layers of flowers, fresh bunches piled on top of decayed and desiccated floral wreaths, violets and amaranths, roses and poppies, tragacanth and blue orchids, jasmine and scarlet papyrus, a great ruck and muck of rotting blooms and fresh petals making a stench like an attarist's distillery. No one could have meditated for an hour in the boygod's shrine without fainting from excess of perfume.

THE CHRONICLE MUST NOW backtrack in time, to the morning after Zaek and Valamiel first met the amatory sorcerer, Sorolon of Manticore's Tongue. While Zaek went off to brood and await his experience with the Cloak of Invisibility, Valamiel set out at once to follow the mage's advice, and made his way by ferry, foot and watertaxi to Ashgate Lagoon.

After he had tossed his bouquet of white roses and purple lorix into the perfume pit of the patron of boy-love, he strolled outside the spire and looked around him.

With the singlemindedness of a true pilgrim, he had scarcely glanced to right or left while on his way to Ashgate. He had brooded, intent upon the unexpected agony of his desire for the Chorister.

Now, however, his spirits lifted a trifle. He began to think of himself as a lover, and so noticed that everything and person within sight was radiating and reflecting back the overflow of his love. Every day is a beautiful day — to lovers. As it happened, the weather had cleared up nicely too.

Boy prostitutes never practiced their trade around Varon's spire. In fact, boys themselves worshipped other gods. But outside the spire there flourished a small bazaar devoted to toys and other produce of interest to male children. This make-believe-land attracted young customers (with fathers, uncles or lovers in tow) who darted about picking up and tossing away the delicate merchandise, demanding

frozen creams and confections, pouting, staring wistfully, in love with all the artifice and intricate beauty of creation. Inside the spire Varon was adored with flowers. Outside, his avatars were appeased with baubles, sausages, gadgets, cups-and-balls, model airships, sugared fruit and silver whistles. If Suvyamaran boys were spoiled, here was the very fountain or vortex of the decay, the noisy playground of their charming greed.

The monk decided lack of sleep agreed with him. He felt as if he'd drunk three drops of alchemist's Oil of Gold. His purse contained the hundred sequins of his sacred Salary, the pittance of the Praeceptorship. He resolved to dissipate all of it on bribes and bait for Jethael. Gifts are like magic spells, setting up unseen links between hearts.

THE FERRY FROM ASHGATE all the way back to Templegate offered little privacy or comfort, and less of cleanliness. Two double masts shaped like giant V's held cracking sails, once dyed a bold crimson, now faded to mottled rust. The monk gazed out to sea till the Viridine Peninsula came into view on the western horizon, then shifted his attention landward, toward Jethael.

He knew well enough that the world holds sadness as a fruit holds its core; that all projects end in dissolution; all beauty fades toward death. From his own experience, he knew as well that violence, perfidy and greed held sway everywhere, even over those few who had managed at least in part to pass beyond selfdeceit and illusion. And yet... "A more perfect world than this Necklace of Moons cannot exist, for if the gods could have made a better world and yet did not do so, then we might justly accuse them of niggardliness; or, if a more beautiful reality could exist, but the gods cannot achieve it, then they are not gods..." — according to the Blessed Maervaen (a prim scholastic prophet, perhaps, but not a stupid one).

The world's perfection, Valamiel realized, flows parallel to its ugliness and pain, but somehow at a different angle, through a different part of the spectrum. Vision dulled by selfishness, unwilling to accept responsibility for pain, cannot perceive this perfect-world. But if one fixes total attention on a manifestation of perfection, and yearns for it with the living self, then suddenly one stands at a slant to Time, and victorious light suffuses all vision.

With such thoughts as these the monk beguiled his hours till, late in the afternoon, the ferry finally docked at Templegate.

Head spinning feverishly, he walked to Perpetual Benefice and arrived just at that hour of day when slanting light achieves a hazy aureate clarity, like a clear dry wine with a memory-laden bouquet.

At the fountain of the seamonsters half a dozen boys were splashing or floating, or lying stretched out on the grass, or on the cracked marble pavement, sunning themselves. They were dressed only in dripping white loincloths. A few others, fully clothed, watched the swimmers. One of these latter was Jethael: he sat a little apart from the others, not sharing their mood, chin resting on his hands, wearing pantaloons and sleeveless tunic the color of fresh grapes... perhaps daydreaming, by the lost look of him.

The monk strode across the lawn toward the group. The others noticed him first, and studiously ignored him. Jethael glanced up, startled, sprang to his feet, eyes darting right and left as if thinking of bolting again; then realized he'd have to get it over with; and stood waiting for the strange man to reach him.

All day Jethael had been held captive by his own miserable confusion. At the Pavilion he'd performed ineptly enough to earn a lash across his stumbling feet from Tharactus. The shame of it! and now *this* as well.

Oddly enough, this time the man was smiling instead of scowling. It seemed he never did what was expected of him. Jethael's confusion increased. Now the man stood before him, and the boy stared at the ground and blushed.

"Hello, Jethael."

"G...good afternoon, sir."

"I wanted to apologize for my behavior the past two days. I fear you must think me a madman or boor. I watched you in the Temple... and I was admiring your grace and skill... when suddenly you made that... little turn or flourish. The mysterious slowness of the dance had affected me deeply, and your action seemed to trigger something... a Transformation, in fact. When you smiled at me, and then turned away, I realized I must have startled you by my expression. Then, next day..."

Valamiel's voice faltered. He had forgotten the rest of his memorized speech.

The first paragraph, however, had served its purpose. For Jethael, the whole situation suddenly began to change. For the first time in his life, an adult was speaking to him not only as a fellow human being (rare enough in itself) but as an artist.

“But... that was my fault, sir. I acted like a baby. I don’t know why I ran off... Poron is right. I do apologize, sir.”

“Well then, shall we trade apologies and consider ourselves mutually forgiven?”

“Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

Various bits and pieces of Valamiel’s prepared word-hoard flashed and jumbled about his skull. “I wanted... to express my appreciation of your... grace. So, Jethael, please accept this as a token of... of...” He reached into a pocket and brought forth a small book, bound in marbled leather. “Oh! It hadn’t occurred to me... you *can* read?”

“Yes sir. Most of us can. We have to read the chants in the ritual. And we have plenty of time for books.”

“You like books?” the monk asked, handing over the volume. “Go on, please take it.”

“I love to read.” Jethael stared dumbly at the object in his hands.

“Go on, open it.”

“Oh!” The boy blushed again. He still had not smiled. He opened the book. *Tales and Legends of the Ring of Moons*. With One Hundred Lithographs In Color. The title page was hand-inscribed (in the monk’s professional writing) “To Jethael from Valamiel”.

The boy was stunned. Perpetual Benefice gave him what he needed to live, including a few pennies a week. Occasionally the boys gave each other presents, things they’d made (or stolen). Occasionally old Poron treated them to cakes. Otherwise, no one spoiled the boys of Blue Rain Tower (much as they might like to, those ones who came to admire them in the Temple). Not since his aunt died, when he was nine, had Jethael received a real gift.

Boys’ emotions, in such a situation, tend toward the volcanic. He tried to say Thank-you-sir, but feared to erupt with an embarrassing sob. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

If the monk had imagined just how isolated and neglected the boys of Perpetual Benefice sometimes felt, he might have proceeded a

bit more cautiously. Now he realized he'd committed some sort of blunder. "Come and sit with me on that bench there," he suggested.

The short walk restored Jethael's self-control. As they sat down together, he said gravely, "It's a wonderful present. Thank you sir."

Valamiel smiled at him, perhaps a bit too intensely, for once again the boy stared shyly down at his own feet.

"Why not 'Thank you Valamiel,' rather than 'sir'?"

Jethael looked up again. A tentative little smile quirked the corners of his wide mouth. His red lips, the monk noted, were moist and almost seemed swollen ("bee-stung"). Incredible amber-raven hair caught the declining sun and out-dazzled it. Valamiel could scarcely believe his eyes, barely keep himself from babbling. He dared not breathe, lest the spell be broken. Seen this close, the child's powderpale delicate-veined skin radiated the quintessence of purity. The shape of his bare legs and arms traced the very morphology of desire.

"Thank you, Valamiel," the child whispered, then coughed and cleared his throat. For an instant their eyes met and locked.

Jethael's were open wide, the pupils so dilated that their irises seemed black and deep, barely ridged with greengoldbrown.

At last... he smiled.

The catalogue of similes and adjectives which might be heaped upon that single smile could be bound as a separate slender volume, but would only confuse the narrative by paradox. Valamiel, a connoisseur of boysmiles, found it unique. He had a sudden mental picture of himself reeling over backwards, felled by the smile's destructive charm. No doubt, he thought, my face is once again that of a basilisk — but the thought made him smile.

Without thinking, he reached out and touched Jethael's hand. Without thinking, the boy laced his soft fingers with Valamiel's (a formal gesture, but more intimate than mere linking of thumbs). This clasp lasted longer than convention might have required, by about five seconds — which could have been (for all the monk knew) five rotations of the galaxy — till the boy, blushing again, pulled away his hand.

"Are you a sorcerer, Jethael?" asked the scrivener wonderingly.

"Wh... what do you mean?"

“Your hand: from your fingers... a golden fire or invisible plasma... vibrates within me like alchemical epilepsy... but... Jethael, you’ll think me mad again. I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you!”

“But you... No, it’s nothing. No... you do upset me, Jethael.

As a Transformationist should. But also...”

A bell rang.

“That’s for supper,” explained Jethael, as the other boys around the pool began running off toward the kitchen. “Do you want to eat with us?”

“No, not just yet. But Jethael, listen. Don’t be afraid of me.”

“No sir... I mean, no Valamiel.” He turned to go. Then paused. “Will you be here tomorrow?” he asked.

Valamiel nodded, and was rewarded by another shy smile. Jethael turned and ran away after his fellow-Choristers.

HIDDEN IN HIS NOON TOWER the scrivener sat trembling uncontrollably for more than an hour. Night fell, and the beams of the glowing Ring pierced through his windows and bathed him in cool fevers. He paced around the room, then up and down the dusty worn steps of the inner well. He banged his head violently against a wall, trying to restore himself to something like normal consciousness. The experiment failed. His penis had sprung painfully erect at the touch of Jethael’s hand, and by now it was aching and steaming under his kilt — but he never thought of touching it.

Around midnight he gained enough composure to walk outside in the garden of the Inner Court. The night poured balsam into the still shadows. Under the great Pavilion a single lamp burned vigil. Drawing near, he witnessed old Poron, busily sewing at some bit of embroidery, alone in the warm night.

Any other mortal might have frightened Valamiel away, but the old dandy somehow radiated serenity and detachment. They greeted each other courteously. Valamiel sat and stared up into the heavens. Poron kept companionable silence. The night deepened, inexorably; but in utter disregard of any paltry philosophy of predetermination.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, no visible nuance of the scene at the pool had escaped the scrutiny of Jethael’s friends, Ravinan, Kael and

Michchaeris. After supper they quizzed him till the entire dialogue had been reconstructed in detail as well — (except for the monk's last strange remarks about sorcery, which Jethael kept to himself). He puffed up with pride as he repeated the words of praise for his dancing. He enjoyed their admiration of the book with its superb illustrations — much finer than the lurid stuff they usually consumed, Kael repeated enviously, till Jethael promised to let him borrow and copy from it.

Not one of them breathed a word about “love”, or asked penetrating questions about Jethael's own feelings. They sensed, perhaps, that their friend was not yet ready to answer. They were curiously subdued, and behaved toward Jethael with unwonted deference.

After the two older boys had gone upstairs, he and Ravinan undressed for bed. Naked, Jethael stood tiptoe at the window, arms stretched to the jewelled sky, elbows bent back slightly, hands open, fingers splayed and curved back like open wings. His cock jutted upwards at the sky as well.

Ravinan, masturbating lazily in bed, admired this dancer's pose and thought, No wonder that man fell in love with him. “Jethi,” he whispered.

Jethael danced away from the window, giggled, jumped onto Ravinan's bed. They tangled their legs together.

“Jethi, remember what we were talking about before...?”

Jethael nodded, tossed his head to get the long curls out of his eyes, fell backwards on the sheets, began pulling at himself with thumb and forefinger. Ravinan sat up. “Now do you think I was right?”

“Maybe.”

“I *am*, I know it. What are you going to do?”

“I don't know. I'm still frightened.”

. “You don't *look* frightened,” Ravinan grinned.

“What do you suggest, wise elder brother?”

“You ought to let him see you naked. Then I bet he'd give you a hundred books!”

Jethael kicked him.

“Maybe you should let him do *this*,” Ravi said, grabbing for Jethael’s cock, but getting kicked again. Stiffling giggles, the blond boy asked, “Have you ever been kissed? Want me to show you how?”

“What would *you* know?”

“Everything! People suck each other’s tongues. I’ll demonstrate for you... ouch! Don’t bite me!” They wrestled on the bed, laughing, Ravinan licking Jethi’s cheeks, pinching and slapping.

They lounged side by side, arms around each other’s shoulders, each busy masturbating himself (a comfortable arrangement, since Ravinan was left-handed). As Jethael began to sigh and gasp and tremble, Ravinan deliberately and tenderly kissed him on the cheek. “Would you let *him*... ?”

“...Yes!” hissed Jethi between clenched teeth; then sobbed as if in pain. They hugged each other tight, close. Ravinan’s white spunk shot against Jethael’s white belly.

BY MORNING THE WEATHER had changed - as it usually does on Qamar. A storm blew up, a typical lightning-thunder-bluster out of the north. Rain bucketed down the carved drainpipes of the great Pavilion, and whipped gusts of spray across the boys, musicians and dancing masters. Valamiel for the first time joined the privileged few spectators of a rehearsal at Perpetual Benefice.

Jethael danced perfectly, but found himself cursing Tharactus with ten times the usual ferocity: for not giving him a solo, for crushing and ignoring his abilities. How he longed to show off!

Today he wore old silk the color of a marshtern’s egg, sky blue, a violet sash around his waist, and another around his forehead, binding back the curls and tresses.

Every time he glanced up, he found the monk’s eyes following him, smiling, admiring... Jethi felt embarrassed and pleased at once to have such attention lavished on him. Damn Tharactus the tyrant! Jethael felt capable of flight, and all he was allowed to do was crawl.

To Valamiel, of course, every motion the boy produced appeared exquisite. But he also noted that none of the Blue Rain boys seemed to be practising for solos. How can Tharactus fail to grasp Jethael’s innate brilliance, grace and imagination? wondered the monk incredulously.

That afternoon, after siesta, the sky remained too overcast for swimming. But Jethael and the others were loitering around the pool anyway, obviously expecting the new Praeceptor of Noon Tower to appear again.

Valamiel was introduced to Ravinan, Kael, Michchaeris and his little brother Daevaen; also an eleven-year-old with straight chestnut bangs cut in a neat mop around his head, named Anathael; and an exquisite tiny nine-year-old with slanting tawny eyes and a jumble of perfectly round honeydark blond curls, named Venyamin.

These creatures composed half the population of Blue Rain Tower, but obviously the half that counted — or so the children themselves seemed to believe. If these are Jethael's friends, thought the monk, then of course I agree. He treated them with the finest manners, remembered all their names (which was more than some of their teachers could do), encouraged them to relax, to speak, to be themselves, and little by little forget manners altogether.

Valamiel had long since discovered in himself a degree of talent for talking with boys. First, he listened to what they said, rather than what he expected them to say. Second, he was genuinely interested. Third, he had attentiveness to spare for the friends of his beloved. Fourth, the friends were all, in their different ways, beautiful. Fifth, the monk had travelled widely and kept his ears open always for information that boys might find fascinating, useful or amusing. Last, he was only a bit less shy than a boy himself, and tended to treat even the raggedest street urchin as a prince.

His head — after three (or four?) days of sleeplessness — seemed light as the slab of anagravite which buoys up an airship. He might drift away entirely, if only Jethael were not smiling and laughing so happily. But the drunken feeling only sharpened the monk's wit. Besides, the boys were innocent, unspoiled, a strange result of the most exotic and also the most unsophisticated of lives. They are far from stupid — but somehow everything pleases them, Valamiel thought. He felt almost guilty about the ease with which he charmed them.

Peppered with more questions than he could ever answer in a volume of words, the monk was prevented from speaking directly with Jethael. But now, instead, their eyes met often, so much so that no observer could fail to notice the secret quick smiles, the glances, or

Jethael's occasional blush. No one, not even Daevaen and Venyamin, could fail to see how flushed and exultant Jethi seemed, as if coming down with a fever. By the end of the afternoon, the man and boy were touching frequently, fingers to fingers perhaps, or the monk's hand briefly, feather-light on the Chorister's shoulder.

After supper, by unanimous demand, Valamiel read aloud to them from the book, *Legends of the Ring*. On his right, Jethael, decorously just touching bare knee to his knee. On his left, blond Ravinan. The rest clustered behind or before the marble bench, leaning forward to study the pictures in the fading light, so that the reader was enveloped in a cloud of multiple sweet boybreath, and the unmistakable clean and erotic scent of boys' hair. As he read, Jethi leaned closer, tousled head finally resting on his shoulder, bare leg pressed firmly against his thigh.

"Another story! Another!" they demanded.

"Once, on the frozen Moon of Dlanglir, there lived a poor fisherman whose livelihood was gained by drilling holes in ice, and letting down baited lines into the gelid sea. One day..."

But a bell rang. A signal for boys to retire to their towers for the night. Across the lawn, a fussy sub-deacon could be heard, chivvying the Choristers, "Inside! Inside," herding songbirds into cages till they were needed again.

Jethael asked, "Will you be here tomorrow?"

"No, I have outside business. But the next day I shall return."

"Oh, but that's Fifthday," said Ravinan. "We'll be busy the whole time."

"I shall watch you dance. And Firstday I'll spend all day with you."

THAT MIDNIGHT, AGAIN vibrating with emotion and still sleepless, Valamiel wandered out into the Court again, and again found old Poron at his sewing. Fixing the ancient dandy with a slightly mad gaze, the monk said, "Did you not tell me that the boys of Blue Rain are neglected, and lack favor? Explain this crime to me!"

"My dear Valamiel," said the relic in his dry effeminate and kindly wheeze, "I did say so. Little Jethael in particular, whose form you studied so keenly this morning, is capable of solo work. So is Kael, if he'd only behave. Ravinan and Michchaeris could also be

doing more. But you see, the other towers are sponsored, however indirectly, by various Clans, families or religious foundations. They are administered by Praeceptors. Blue Rain is a catch-all for the foundlings and slaves, the odd ones without family connections. Tharactus understands nothing of the true aesthetic of the Transformation. But long ago he managed to silence me, and see to it that nothing I say or do will change the governance of Perpetual Benefice. I would rather eat and sing and say nothing, than speak up and go without food or work. I'm too old. *You* do something."

"With pleasure. Have you any suggestions?"

"That depends. How much influence can you wield with Tharactus?"

"I could break his neck. Would that move him, I wonder?"

Poron cackled. "Fine talk for a scrivener monk. You almost sound as if... yes, as if you were in love!"

"Let us take it that I wish, discreetly but unswervingly, to... further the interests... of certain..."

"Of course. Well, the thing to do is convince that nincompoop to give the boys the work they deserve. Don't tell him I said so. You'll have to come up with your own means of persuasion."

"I think I can manage that." Valamiel unsteadily laughed.

"My, my. Are you perhaps a dangerous man, sir?"

"Everything is about to *change*, Poron."

"That would be amusing," said the old man, biting off a length of thread. "That would be very amusing."

5.

A Falling Mountain Of Light

ZAEK:

“...And that’s all I can remember. Except for the oceanic visions, and I’ll spare you the recounting of those. Xiri saved me twice: first when he made love to me, bringing me back from bodilessness to reality — or at least to *this* reality. I won’t quibble over metaphysics. Second when he attacked that exorcist or shaman, allowing me to escape. But as for me... I failed.”

The barbarian spoke from a bed in a peaceful room at the top of Sorolon’s tower. The ugly sorcerer sat in one chair, the scrivener monk in another. Aside from that, the room held no furniture but a rug of subtle design, and a table — now littered with medical paraphernalia, and the remains of a gargantuan meal. Zaek’s body was crisscrossed and patched with bandages, his face haggard, his eyes circled by bruises. He spoke in a tight calm voice. “How long was I unconscious?”

“All yesterday. Most of this night. Now morning is near again.”

“I’m not cut out for magic, Sorolon, that’s clear. I do not blame you. It was my own foolish idea. I must make use of my own poor skills, and no one else’s.” Managing not to wince with pain, he began to climb out of bed.

Sorolon lept up and gently pressed the man back against the pillows. “In that case,” he said, “try to think like a professional. What can you accomplish in such a state of exhaustion?”

Zaek opened his mouth, but could think of nothing to say.

“Were you planning to raise a mercenary force and raid the Water Fly Café?” asked Sorolon.

“Probably.” The barbarian closed his eyes. He was pale and sweating from the effort of sitting up. “My hand burst into flames... Now it’s healed. How...?”

“Magical wounds I can cure. The jabs of daggers and slices of swords take longer.”

Zaek opened his eyes again. “But every moment I waste away here, Xiri is being punished for my stupidity. He may think me dead. I must go at once. Give me something to keep me on my feet.”

“Listen: what you propose is futile. Everything has changed. Xiri is no longer to be found at that place.”

Zaek sprang up, clutched the sorcerer’s sleeve. “What? Did they...? Is he...?”

“He’s alive and well, as far as we know. But... He’s been sold. Valamiel, please explain your discoveries.”

The monk stirred uneasily. He too appeared gaunt and pale. “Zaek... when I’d seen you carried safely here to Manticore’s Tongue, I turned the boat back again to Spiridon Gates. On the way I exchanged clothes with one of the watermen. Perhaps you’ll remember a little tea-stall across the street from the cafe, just within view of its front door. I stationed myself there, hoping to see Quelleron emerge. I intended... well, I don’t know what. In any case, I never saw him. But I heard much gossip from the tea-man, and later from a bottle-washer employed at the cafe. By the time I realized what had happened, it was obviously too late for any action on my part.

“It seems that an invisible daemon had attacked one of the slave-boys and his customer. Luckily, an exorcist happened to be drowsing in the main hall. When the guards refused to go to the boy’s rescue, this man fought an epic battle with the incubus, and at last succeeded in banishing it. So much the whole quarter knows, and by now, no doubt, the entire city as well.

“The bottle-washer had further news, with which he held the little tea-shop spellbound. All morning the afflicted boy wailed and raged, as if still possessed. The exorcist — who had hoped to be paid for his work by a chance to enjoy Xiri’s favours — finally departed in a rage, saying he would return when the brat had recovered his senses.

“At noon, two men dressed in voluminous robes with hoods that hid their features, showed up in a coach-and-four. They closeted themselves with Quelleron for half a hour. Then they left, taking Xiri, bound and gagged and struggling wildly, into the coach and away. The bottle-washer heard one of the boys ask Quelleron if Xiri would be coming back after he’d been cured. Quelleron laughed. ‘If men exist who fancy the idea of a daemon-ridden insolent barbarian catamite, and are willing to pay me twice what I could get in the market for such damaged goods, thus ridding my house of an embarrassment, then all’s well. No, he won’t be back — thank the goddess!’

“Later I took the bottle-washer aside and fed him a few coins. But he’d witnessed nothing himself, having been immersed in grease and soapsuds during the visit of the dark-hooded ones. I asked him who might know more. No one but Quelleron, really, he supposed. Who else? I insisted. Well, perhaps Xiri’s best friend, Dragon. Who is this ‘Dragon’? One of the boys, the man grinned. You’ll know him when you see him. And that was all I could glean.

“I felt my disguise inadequate for a penetration of the cafe itself. And even if Quelleron should emerge, I could scarcely force him to speak to me. Nor would any of the slaveboys be allowed outside without a chaperone. So at last I determined to return here and consult with you and Sorolon.”

Zaek’s face was carefully drained of all expression. “I suppose I’d better speak with this Dragon first. If that leads nowhere, I shall have to threaten or coerce Quelleron. Actually, I’d enjoy that, I think.”

“I have an idea,” said the ugly mage. “Near the cafe I know of a discreet hostelry. From time to time rooms are taken there by Suvyamaran aristocrats looking for pleasure but too grand to be seen in a brothel. Boys are sent to them in their suites. Zaek, while you rest and eat again, I’ll order someone to Spiridon Gates to arrange a room for you at that inn. Tonight, you’ll send one of your ‘servants’ to the Water Fly to fetch a boy named Dragon for his wealthy but reclusive master. Quelleron will send him with a chaperone, but if you go disguised you’ll be safe enough.”

Zaek thought a moment, then sighed and lay back again in the pillows. “All right. I can’t come up with anything better, not while my head throbs like this. Give me something to make me sleep.”

“Is there a rôle for me in this operation?” asked Valamiel, while the sorcerer busied himself pouring out a glassful of thick green syrup.

“I suppose not,” said the barbarian. A wedge of early light fell through a crack in the curtain. A bird sang somewhere.

“Then send word to me at Noon Tower when you need me. I’m late for an appointment.”

“Right. And, Valamiel... thanks.”

The monk turned at the door and smiled. Then he was gone. Sorolon handed Zaek the sleeping potion, and he drank it.

THAT EVENING, AT THE hour when merrymakers begin their rounds, the Northern barbarian sat in his expensive chambers, hooded like a ghost, waiting. He felt very nearly restored, thanks to Sorolon’s huge meals and phials of herbal extracts and metallic distillations. The wounds ached, but far away, where they could be ignored. His head was swept of all but the last shreds of fear... the terror of the Void, of invisibility. Zaek shuddered. No more sorcery, he prayed (knowing it a futile wish).

The furniture of his rented room afforded him a mildly ironic grimace. Such an obvious chamber of pleasure, grander by far than the odoriferous curtained alcoves of the Water Fly. Pink and grey plush, mirrors, a table inlaid with amethyst, sporrin-wood and pearls — on which someone had set out the accoutrements of the devotees of vhang. Big enough for two spar-whales to copulate and frolic upon, the bed sprawled, dovegrey sheets drawn back and crisp.

Footsteps in the hall. A loud knock at the door, Zaek plucked his hood closer around his face and leaned back into a shadow. “Enter!”

A boy came in, shut the door and stood looking haughtily around the room. Zaek saw before him an obvious child of the Chromatic Waste, a nomad’s boy, undoubtedly seized into slavery and sold. Like all tribespeople of the Waste, his black hair was oiled with perfumes till it coiled like snakes. His skin was pale, for the tribespeople go veiled against the sun. In fact, the boy wore the shapeless but vivid robe of the desert, mottled and swirling with the tints of that mirage-ridden land. Each ear was pierced with five tiny gold rings, and around his neck he’d hung five or six strings of bright crude beads. Like all his people, he possessed a certain ferocity — expressed in black arching eyebrows and hooked nose — mingled with paradoxical

softness of great liquid brown eyes, heavily lashed (and by custom darkened with antimony). Not a beautiful face — but a radiant one.

Without any preamble or greeting, the boy spoke: “I am called Dragon... and this is *why* I am called Dragon!” With one theatrical gesture he tore open his robe and let it fall to his feet.

He stood naked, arms akimbo, chin up, cocky as a mad duellist offering a challenge. Zaek saw at once that the boy had been lavishly decorated: tattoo’d with the figure of a chameleonic dragon of the Chromatic Waste. The head of the beast, done in many colors, occupied the boy’s belly. Its fanged jaws opened downward, its tongue curled and its whiskers hung decoratively over the hairless groin. Its green forelegs reached as if to embrace the boy’s hips, and the blue claws curled over his thighs. The coiling body of the beast swerved down one flank and disappeared around the waist, corruscating with reds, blues and greens. Purple wings rose from its scaly back and touched the ribcage. (Zaek noted that his nipples were also pierced, and sported little gold rings.)

All this art, remarkable enough in itself, served largely to accentuate the little adolescent’s other truly remarkable feature: his genitals. Zaek had never before seen such a small boy carrying such an enormous weapon: at least half a foot long and obviously only semi-erect, the penis was thick, darkly veined, shaped into a blunt wedge by the pulp-purple foreskin. The testicles hung in a long loose scrotum, smooth and fat.

In a husky and dramatic alto, the boy spoke. “This is the sacred beast of my tribe: my totem. But even here, among the infidels of the marshland, it has its worshippers. And this,” he added, brandishing his rubbery organ, “is the Tongue of the Dragon. A crazy poet has founded a cult, of which I am the living icon. The ritual of initiation is simple, but not everyone has the strength of devotion to undergo it. Shall I tell you?”

The hooded figure nodded.

“He who wishes to adore the Dragon must drink the milk of the Dragon... and also the Water of the Dragon. Having consumed these two sacred substances, he is allowed to worship between the tail of the Dragon!” With this he spun around and presented a view of his slender buttocks. The tattoo-Dragon’s pointy bifurcated tail twisted down over the twin globes of flesh. The boy whirled gracefully around

again. His cock by now had sprung to full attention, and he rubbed himself enticingly. “Well, what about it?” he asked. “Are *you* a religious man?”

Ordinarily, Zaek thought, he’d be laughing out loud by now. He found the boy diverting — despite his outrageous demands. Obviously, slavery and whoring had not killed his barbaric spirit. No wonder Xiri liked him.

“Tell me,” the man asked, “do you find many postulants bold enough to sample the second sacred substance?”

Dragon sauntered — no, he strutted — to the bed and plopped himself down. “More than you might expect,” he grinned. “Can I smoke some vhang?”

“Help yourself.”

Dragon lit the lamp and began sorting through the little silver box of pastilles. “Men make a religion of me, but I believe in Vhang,” he declared. Indeed, he seemed an expert devotee of the little green god. Zaek watched him fill the pipe, light it, puff clouds of acrid smoke through his nostrils — like one of the firebreathing dragons of ancient legend.

“Don’t you worship your tribal totem anymore?” asked the barbarian.

“Of course. But the beast’s real purpose is to be killed by the one-who-must-be-chief. This tattoo — I got it here in Suvyamara, last year. A month of pain! I told the artist, real dragons don’t have whiskers and wings — but he insisted on plucking out my fuzz and carving this mustache on my groin!”

Now Zaek laughed despite himself. “Your aspiring chieftain, how does he manage to kill one of those scaly things?”

“Well... first he must perform the meditation of Long Sight. Then...”

“No, I mean what weapons would he use? What actual strategy?”

“Oh.” Dragon exhaled a plume of smoke. “A long pike studded with flint knifeheads, and a very long spear. Have to get it in the eye, or the open mouth. Have to be damned quick. This is good vhang. Aren’t you having any?” The boy lay back on the bed and masturbated.

“No thank you.”

“You can make up your mind about the second sacred substance later, but you’ll have to hurry if you want the Dragon’s Milk.”

“Listen, child. I didn’t send for you to enjoy you. I need information.”

Dragon sat up, scowling with sudden angry suspicion. “What information. Who are you? Take that hood off!”

Zaek did so. The boy’s mouth flew open in surprise.

“You!” he said. “The one who fought for Xiri! Zaek! He told me you’d come for him. I didn’t believe him. But... now it’s too late. Xiri... a daemon... Quelleron *sold* him!”

“I know, Dragon. I know all that. But... I’m told you are Xiri’s friend. I intend to find him. I need to know anything you can tell me that might help.”

“He *is* my friend. Or he was. Now he’s gone.” Dragon seemed suddenly heartbroken (though his penis remained quite rigid; presumably once it arose, only the proper ritual would lower it again). “You look awful,” the boy added snuffling loudly and wiping his nose on the silk sheet. “Have you been in another fight?”

“Yes. Listen: tell me everything you can about the two men who came and took Xiri away.”

“All right. Quelleron had him locked up in a room, because he was still crying and screaming. I couldn’t get in to see him, so I know nothing about the daemon. But I was hanging around outside the room when the two men showed up, with Quelleron. They wore hoods, like yours. Both were tall, I guess.

“They went inside the room and came out with Xiri all tied up and gagged. He looked terrified. I jumped out in front of them and said, ‘Where are you taking him?’ One of the men turned toward me. I looked at his face and saw nothing. Even with the hood, I still should have seen the tip of a nose, or an eye. But... nothing. Blackness. It reminded me of something terrible... something from my childhood... I couldn’t remember... Suddenly I was frightened. Quelleron slapped me out of the way. They left. That’s all I know.”

“Think hard, Dragon. Didn’t you notice more, anything at all, about either of the men?”

The boy frowned with concentration. Unconsciously he’d begun stroking himself again.

“Oh yes. One of them, the other one, the one who actually carried Xiri, I saw his hand. His little finger was missing. His... left hand.”

“Anything else?” Again the boy scowled with effort.

“No. But Zaek, perhaps I can spy around and find out more. I never thought you were telling the truth, that you’d really come back for Xiri. But you did. So I’ll help you all I can. All right?”

“Good.”

“But listen... Zaek...?”

“Yes?”

“Once I start this I can’t stop. Are you sure you don’t want me?” He smiled invitingly and held up his magnificent member for inspection.

Zaek shook his head. “You don’t make it easy to refuse, Dragon. If I weren’t sworn to Xiri, I might join your cult. But...”

“I understand. You’re faithful to him. It’s all right. I love him too. Watch *this!*” he ordered.

The Dragon’s Tongue had grown even larger, the veins stood out like intaglio, the blunt purple tip poked out of its hood of skin like a turtle’s head from a soft shell. Dragon’s hands squeezed and yanked. He grunted noisily, grinned happily, gritted his teeth, closed his eyes. “Here comes the Dragon’s Milk,” he shouted, and suddenly sprayed a sticky arc of jissom over the bed, the silk sheets, the expensive carpet, his own hands and the exquisite tattoo on his body. He fell back, gasping with pleasure, and then beamed at Zaek. “If you’re sure you don’t want any of the other sacred stuff... would you mind handing me that flowerpot?”

VALAMIEL HAD PROMISED to return to Perpetual Benefice on Fifthday. By now, however, Firstday was more than half gone. A brief rehearsal at the pavilion already finished, the boys had scattered. Among the beautiful swimmers at the fountain, the monk found neither Jethael nor Ravinan. But Kael, red hair plastered wetly to freckled shoulders, told him, “They’re in their room.”

Unmindful of possible scandal, he made his way rapidly to Blue Rain Tower, burst in, threw back the curtains of every room. On the third landing he found them.

Ravinan sat by the window, bare feet propped on a battered wooden desk, a book open on his lap. He gaped at the monk.

Jethael lay fully clothed (faded grey silk pantaloons, a scarlet vest torn at one seam, revealing a bit of naked back) face down on his bed, head buried in the pillow, hair spread out in dark amber tendrils on the white linen.

The monk spoke his name, As if stung, he looked up. His cheeks were wet and his eyes red with weeping. A wonderful smile changed all this despair into fire. "Val!" he cried, and leapt up like a gazelle, burst across the room (seemingly without touching the floor), launched himself into the air, hurled his arms around the astonished man's neck and clutched as hard as he could, buried his face in the rough monkrobe and started sobbing:

"I thought... you were never coming back... you said... but..."

Gently Valamiel stroked his shoulders, then detached the boy enough so that he could tip back the curly head and look into Jethael's eyes, which were streaming with tears. The man felt as if he might explode with happiness, although perhaps the tears should have distressed rather than intoxicated him. He thought each drop precious enough to save corked in a crystal vial. The slender body trembled in his arms.

"Jethael," he said gravely, "remember this: I'm not going away from you."

"Never?"

Valamiel laughed drunkenly.

"Never leave me, says my friend.

Indeed, how could I?

Other than this moment

No other refuge can exist for me.

When is Eternity

If not now?"

Jethael slid gracefully out of his arms and wiped wet eyes on bare wrist. He smiled again.

"Can you come outside and take a walk with me?" asked Valamiel.

"Oh yes!"

"Goodbye, Ravinan," said the monk, taking Jethael's hand.

"See you later."

They left. Just like that. Ravinan: flabbergasted.

After a minute, he remembered to lean over and peer out the window and watch them emerge (still hand in hand) from the door, turn left, and left again, vanishing through the canal gate. Out of bounds!

For a wicked moment Ravinan considered sneaking after them to see what happened. Then he restrained himself. Let them be alone, he thought grandly, the *first* time. Then, the second time. I'll spy on them!

A NARROW STRIP OF LAWN lay between the high wall of Perpetual Benefice and the shallow water of the canal. Here a collapsing tower blocked the way with fallen stones (but still you could scramble over them). There, a willow dipped its blue hair across the narrow path (but still you could edge around and under it).

At some points the strip of lawn narrowed to single-file, at other points it broadened into little peninsulas that jutted into the lily-grown water. Drowsy insects buzzed up and down this intimate littoral like mechanized jewels.

In a hidden coign between trees and stones, overlooked only by vacant windows of an uninhabited tower, on a hummock of warm grass, the man and boy sat together. Jethael's shyness had returned. He was tossing pebbles at lotuspads. Valamiel, infinitely patient, caressed him only with glances.

"That poem," said the child at last. "Did you make it up?"

"No, it's a quotation."

"But... does it mean... Did you mean that... you and I...?"

"That you and I might be friends? Yes."

Jethael smiled happily.

VALAMIEL QUESTIONED THE BOY about other matters. He discovered that Jethael had been born twelve and a half years ago to a Suvyamaran family of some aristocratic pretensions but no wealth. His father died before his birth, his mother (whom he remembered vividly) when he was six. Till he was nine he'd lived with various relatives, but they, too, seemed cursed to die, till at last only distant uncaring cousins remained. They put him in an orphanage.

He didn't want to talk about the orphanage. Cruelty to children (other than slaves) scarcely exists on Qamar. But neglect can be worse than many forms of viciousness. For a year Jethael lived convinced that no one would ever care if he lived or died.

Shortly after his tenth birthday a man had visited the orphanage to recruit Choristers for Perpetual Benefice. He'd chosen only Jethael of all the children.

At first the life of a Temple dancer seemed paradise to Jethael, after the gloom of the orphanage. He had friends, he had work, plenty to eat. He learned to read. He slaved at the Transformations, hoping for praise and attention. But... something was wrong. The boys in his Tower were neglected also, he came to realize. Others were given the biggest roles because Tharactus favored them. Because their Praeceptors donated Clan funds to Perpetual Benefice, and thus had to be placated by seeing their boys play the parts of prince and princess, priestess and monster, warrior and magician.

Moreover, the great House began to close round him like a prison. From month to month the children never set foot outside its walls. Nothing ever happened... "Until *you* came," Jethael finished his complaint triumphantly. "Now it all seems different."

"Indeed. All has changed for me as well. What appears a prison to you seems to me a magical garden."

"Why?" he laughed.

"Because of you."

Jethael blushed and frowned. "You... you've travelled round the Ring. You have a sword, you've had real adventures, I can tell. I'm only a child. Why have you sought me out?"

The monk was disconcerted by this blunt questioning. Was the boy so innocent? How could he answer? Oh, well, he decided — I might as well be honest, and pray to Varon I don't frighten the child to hysteria.

"Jethael... If I'd known you were here I wouldn't have wasted all that time in the Ring of Moons. Now that I've found you I don't intend to lose you. I promise never knowingly to hurt you. I love you."

There, he thought. The bolt is loosed, no calling it back. He waited for some response, hardly daring to look at the boy's face. Jethael said nothing.

The monk glanced at him. Tears were streaming down the child's cheeks again. Damn! the monk thought. I've blundered again — this time I've ruined it!

"Oh Val..." the boy sniffled at last. "Is that really true?"

"Jethael, it is. Name an oath, I'll swear it."

The boy laughed. He reached out a tentative hand, and Valamiel seized it... gently, gently, he told himself.

"I wasn't sure. Ravinan told me, he said you were."

They smiled at each other dementedly.

"Would you... would you like to kiss me?" asked timid Jethael.

FIRST HE TASTED THE TEARS. Their flavor matched his earlier imagination — and how much better to savor them now than hoard them in flasks. Gently as if taming a young falcon he touched the boy, held him and kissed his cheeks, where the tear-ducts had shed their faintly sea-flavored moisture; an uncanny taste, an occult taste, like the idea of bitter/sweet or sad/happy or inside/out.

Then he touched his lips, only touched them, to Jethael's. The boy's mouth was cool, moist with the same moistness that pervades the inside of the body; for the lips are an outpost of that hidden interior. But Jethael's tongue slipped out, just the tip of it, licked the monk's dry lips and darted a fraction of a fraction of an inch between them, rested there an instant, and was gone, leaving the echo of a deeper taste.

Who the devil taught him that? wondered Valamiel, but decided he'd rather not ask just now. He doubted if he could speak coherently anyway.

They gazed into each other's eyes. Whatever anatomists may say, eyes are lit with more than reflected light. One needs light to see their light, true. But the occult beams cast by the eye (which oculists long ago gave up believing in) are real enough, and quite visible under certain conditions. After all, who ever gazed into an ophthalmologist's eyes with love?

Jethael first broke the contact, looked out at the canal, sighed, asked, "What does it mean... that you love me?"

Valamiel tried to come up with another clever quotation; failed; stuttered: "It means... that I cherish you, that I want what you want. Your happiness, your... pleasure. I want to give you presents..."

“Is that all?”

“You’re teasing me.”

“You want to kiss me a lot, don’t you?”

They kissed again. This time Valamiel caught the boy’s tongue between his lips and sucked gently but insistently till he felt it relax and slide like a fish deeper into his mouth. There he held it, licking the pointed tip with his own tongue. He gathered the whole slender body into his arms and allowed his hands to clasp all the fragile softness. He could feel Jethael’s heart beating wildly as a trapped bird fluttering against its cage of ribs.

As they relaxed the embrace, he noticed that Jethael’s tattered grey pantaloons were violently tented between his legs by an arrow-shaped peg. It looked as if the boy had neglected to wear a loincloth. Blushing furiously, Jethael covered himself with both hands. He was trembling.

“Don’t be frightened, little sorcerer.”

“I’m not... well, I *am*... but... I want you to... Val...”

The monk caressed the astonishing ringlets and tresses of hair, now blackblazing in the afternoon sunlight. He touched the ears, china-thin, pointed like a beast-child’s: a changeling’s ears. He traced the line of the cheek, the throat so delicate it seemed only partly material, as if made half of pure light, powderwhite, mapped with elegant veins like warm blue streams beneath warm living ice.

Jethael shuddered and bent forward to bury his face again in the monk’s grey robe: the gesture of an even younger child. (It would be wrong to say that such signs of innocence gave the monk pause or made him renounce his wolfish intentions. On the contrary, although he strained himself not to terrify the child with any sudden lusts, Jethi’s display of purity and vulnerable inexperience only heightened the already almost unbearably erotic combustion that crackled through the monk in cascades and melting waves.)

Jethael muttered something into the cloth.

“What?” whispered Valamiel.

“I said... would you like...” The boy avoided his gaze shyly. “That is, do you want me to be naked?”

Again Jethi trembled violently. His ten fingers still hid the bulge in his loose silken girl’s trousers. The monk slowly ran an uncertain hand along the boy’s bare legs, up one slender but muscular calf, to

smooth knee and the tender tendon-stretched space behind the axis of the knee, the long smooth white thigh: a substance the gods might envy, having nothing so intensely real in all their highflown archetypal realm. At last the monk's hand reached Jethael's modest cupping fingers and rested there.

With the other hand he raised Jethael's head till they could kiss again. This time the boy's mouth opened, the man's tongue explored sharp little teeth, soft uvula, warm flexible tongue. Valamiel drank a drop of saliva; they kissed again; he bit the boy's lips and felt his own lips bitten in response.

Now Jethael lay back in the grass. Still protecting his virginity, breathing as if he'd run a race, hair dishevelled, eyes closed. The monk with shaky fingers,, using both hands, began to unbutton the red sleeveless tunic. Twenty-one buttons. An aeon-consuming task. After fifteen or sixteen, he parted the rose-red waves of cloth to see Jethael's nipples.

Much larger than he'd expected. The aureoles bulging as if slightly swollen. Like the Smaragdite androgynes whose breasts (so people say) begin to grow at puberty. Dark red and granular against the pale veined smooth breast. He touched one, and the nipple itself began to erect, till it stood up like a tiny penis. He touched the other one, bringing it also to this delicious state. Jethael moaned softly, breathed a ragged sigh, clutched his groin.

The monk kissed the Chorister's throat and breast, all the while gently twisting one nipple between thumb and forefinger. Jethael arched his back. His hands at last left their protective duty, flew around the man's neck and hugged tight, as if to keep them both from falling.

Finding his mouth thus pressed close to the child's breast, Valamiel took the nipple between his lips, squeezed, licked, sucked... as one might slowly suck a strawberry into one's mouth.

The boy cried out incoherently. His fingers clenched in the man's hair like an epileptic in a fit. His bird-slender hips ground and pressed against the man's body. He convulsed. He screamed a delicate scream close to the man's ear.

He fell back. Valamiel held the heart-thudding gasping-lunged body in his arms. Jethael's right nipple was slick with saliva.

Jethael opened his eyes. He smiled. "I had an orgasm," he boasted, "without even being touched. Just from you kissing me *there...*"

"Does that happen very often?" asked the incredulous monk.

"Sometimes... when I'm dreaming-awake... or lying under the shower... but never so strong. Usually I have to play with it." He giggled. His lover was dumbfounded.

"Can we do it again? And this time can I be naked?"

THE BUTTONS FINALLY CAME to an end. Jethael sat up, and Valamiel eased the red vest down over his naked arms. The childish shoulders were thin and whitely rounded, the ribs made a faint pattern beneath the skin. The stiff little nipples.

Jethael lay back again, eyes closed. Valamiel shifted himself down the lawn, inchworm style, till he could take off the boy's black velvet slippers.

The bare feet proved too much for him. White as ivory, perfectly arched, the toes pink-plump but evenly spaced, the texture of the foot soft as the rest of the body, the ankles like fairy sculpture. He kissed the top of one foot, and almost... before he could stop himself... almost he made to take those perfect toes in his mouth... but...

Jethael opened his eyes to see the monk staring at him as if in shock. "What's the matter?" he asked, wondering if Valamiel were about to have a mad spell again.

The monk lay down beside him carefully, resting on one elbow. "You are much too beautiful for me, Jethael," he confessed. "You'll have to forgive me if sometimes I seem a bemused, speechless, crazy, lackwit bumpkin. Don't smile. No, of course, do smile. But I've never... I would never have believed..."

Smiling now (a taste of power) Jethael untied the bow of his pantaloons-string with a single yank. The loose trousers relaxed and slipped a few inches down his belly, exposing his navel. Underneath the grey silk the arrow-snake of his hidden penis stood up like a proud tryptarch's standard (veiled before battle), not a bit softer for its one feat of prowess.

His navel protruded out of the soft thin and white-curved belly. Like his nipples, unexpectedly large, again somehow penisshaped, pink and erect, as if the umbilical cord had been left long on purpose.

Valamiel was dazed. There was too much here to love all at once. That navel alone would take a week. How could he dare to uncover... that which he most desired?

Suddenly Jethael sat up, pushed the man onto his back in the grass and kissed him fiercely, stuck his tongue out, probed aggressively into Valamiel's mouth, demonstrating to the startled monk all the tongue's length and pointedness. It reached the back of Val's throat, and felt as if it could go even deeper.

Simultaneously, Jethael shoved his knee into the man's crotch. Needless to say, Valamiel was erect. It seemed he'd been so for days and days. The boy was playing seducer now, and the monk nearly swooned.

Jethael broke away, leaned back on his elbows and grinned. His legs were spread in a V, and his penis stood straight up under the silk — which was almost ready to slip and fall. Eyes sparkling. Cheeks flushed.

Valamiel reached out and hesitantly caressed the stiffened silk. Jethael sucked in quick breath, eyes shut tight. Now the man moved the silk up and down slightly, feeling beneath it the cock-shape. Now he lifted it and let it go, and exposed Jethael's penis.

Jethael's penis. In a sense the pivot of the entire Chronicle.

Like his nipples and navel, it stands up, definite, sensual, bright. Like those other protuberances, it is also slightly odd.

Larger and thicker than one might expect, perhaps, though not abnormally so. Four and a half or five inches long. Gently curved. So far, nothing unusual. But: the shaft of the penis is white, almost as pale as the rest of the body. The veins under its magical hide are blue, blue. A thin translucent membrane of skin attached to the underside of the shaft holds up the little testicles in a tight double-rounded sac, sharply separate, tiny bird's eggs in a strange flesh-nest, slightly pinker than the surrounding milky (almost illuminated) skin of groin, hairless pubes, soft thighs and belly.

The foreskin... thin, membranous, a cool violet color shading at the top toward brown, adds nearly a quarter-inch to the length of the penis. This extra nib of flesh points straight up, like the teat of a pomegranate. It quivers sensitively with the pulse of blood through the engorged organ. The tip of it is slightly fluted or serrated, like a bizarre undersea creature. It opens slightly, just enough to show a bit

of mucous pink inside it, the tint of living coral. Around the corona, just under the head where the central nerve of pleasure is located, the foreskin seems slightly malformed or stretched out of shape; perhaps this has something to do with Jethael's precocious ithyphallism, and his ability to climax simply from the sensation of erection. Certainly it is true that Jethi has been addicted to masturbation from infancy, and has never lived a day without bringing himself to orgasm, at least a few times. His penis somehow reflects this talent: it looks even more sensitive than most boys' organs, more complex, something like a cross between the genitals of a human and those of some sentient orchid.

Valamiel moaned like a damned soul (if anyone ever heard of such a thing on Qamar!) and reached out to touch...

With painstaking — almost medical — precision and delicacy of touch, he used thumb and forefinger (the very mark of his humanness, that marvelous opposable thumb) to slowly... slowly... pull back this peculiarly decorative prepuce. It moved under his fingers quite easily, like quicksilver. Gradually the little corona or snout was exposed... pink and wet as a dog's... deeply-cleft at the urethra, which almost seemed to gape open like a tiny mouth. The meatus was sharply carved, pointed, reptilian, flared like a cobra's hood. The membrane of the foreskin stretched from the bulbous nerve-of-pleasure in an unnatural way, so that the prepuce looked inside-out, like the open throat of a baby bird, almost translucent, slick and wet...

...Valamiel squeezed the organ gently between his fingers, as if to choke it. Jethael gasped... his hands flew back, fists clenched tight. His head thrashed from side to side, exquisite face transfixed with pain/pleasure. The monk squeezed again, and again Jethael uttered a high-pitched scream... his body snapped like a bowstring — but the arrows of his orgasm were invisible. He possessed the paradoxical virility (or puerility) of the unripe boy — but to an excess the monk had never before witnessed. The little penis wilted not a fraction of an inch, but throbbed with light, and remained as hard as ever. "Again... oh, please, again!" he gasped.

They kissed. This time, no trace of resistance on the boy's part... his mouth wide open, saliva flowing copiously from under his tongue, a passionate suckling kiss. Meanwhile Valamiel began gently to

masturbate him, now letting his fingers explore the whole structure, the tight-swollen testicles, nearly as resilient as toy rubber-balls.

Suddenly, to his surprise, Valamiel felt delicate beast-fingers fluttering at his groin. Jethael looked at him with hot eyes and childishly uncertain grin.

The monk encouraged and pressed the slender hand tighter against himself, and the boy felt and groped almost roughly. “Can I see it, please, Val?”

Clumsily they tore apart the robe, the kilt. Jethael hesitated when he beheld the swollen loincloth, already half-soaked with seminal fluid. With an expression of awe (or fear) he watched while Valamiel uncovered himself, his man’s self, angry, red, bearded, tremendous compared to the boy’s fluted wand, crude and heavy with its sac of seeded plums, dribbling clear lubricant, smelling of uncut musk. Jethael was trembling again... but boldly he reached out... ran his forefinger lightly over the shaft... like feathers brushing against a burning pistol. He played with the heavy foreskin. He hefted the testicles in the palm of his hand — a ponderous load. He combed his fingers through pubic brush. At last he grasped the rigid shaft in his tapered fingers (which scarcely met around the circumference) and began gently frigging it. He smiled “If I keep doing this, will it shoot at me?”

Valamiel kissed him and reached out with his free hand to play with the boy’s still-stiff dagger. Jethael coo’d like a dove, hissed like a serpent, moaned like a bitch-fox, giggled like a six-year-old — and kept rubbing the man’s penis.

For a third time now, the child spasmed and keened with an orgasm, even more intense than the first two. Hips thrashing. Sweat on his forehead and upper lip. But still his little cock stayed hard. Valamiel wondered (in the midst of madness) if there were any limit to the boy’s sensuality.

“I want to see it come now,” the Chorister whispered in the man’s ear.

Somewhere above them, poised in the liquid afternoon air, a huge mountain of light was falling. In a very short time it would hit Valamiel and explode in a million lightning-white pieces. Jethael’s face... pure angel, thirsty little vampire. Beauty never before seen in

this or any other world. “Then my love, don’t be afraid to hurt me. Pull... squeeze...”

Valamiel had not ejaculated in a week. And now the white hand of this godling moved in a blur... the child’s wide-set hazel eyes opened round in fascination at the man whom he was loving, the man who was (it seemed) going mad with his love, as if he might well die of it. The power of love. An unsuspected magnitude of welling passion, a monolith cracking, terrifying, amazing.

The mountain of light hit with the resounding silent crash of shattering asteroids. As if wounded — as if engulfed in light like blood — Valamiel shouted. Sperm exploded from his enormous cock, and shot out over the canal, landed with an audible splash. It shot again, over his robe, over the boy’s hand (still jerking), over the steaming black belly and groin.

Jethael rubbed his fingers in the swamp of hot hair and thick clotted cream. He stared, mouth open in disbelief, at the ravages he’d caused.

Valamiel pulled Jethael on top of his body and the boy kissed him, eagerly, happily. They lay there, glued together with sperm, gasping, the beached fish of love. Blacked out with bliss.

ZAEK’S PLUSH HOTEL ROOM enjoyed a view of the Water Fly Cafe’s front door, and the bill had already been paid. So he decided to spend the rest of the night there. He still felt wretched (in fact, more so as Sorolon’s drugs wore off) and he desperately needed sleep.

Even so, dreams woke him sweating at dawn. Idly he sat in the window, staring out at the street as it came awake. He wondered if he should bother to keep the cafe under surveillance. If Quelleron were to venture forth he might be able to follow and waylay the pimp, force him to divulge whatever he knew... the name of Xiri’s new “master”? The price?

Much as he might have enjoyed this, he wondered if the greasy emaciated mackerel really knew much more than little Dragon. The trick of the black hoods reeked of sorcery — unless the boy had imagined it, which seemed likely enough. Zaek’s tired bruised mind shunned the idea of magic. He dozed off...

...snapped awake again to the morning bustle on the street below. No one came or went at the cafe. Within, no doubt, everyone still

slept. Quelleron, after all, seemed his best hope. I wonder, he thought, if the villain ever emerges from his lair. Perhaps I can lure him out. Money would do the trick — but I’ve already run through most of my “advance” from Marbreuse. The promise of money, then... But how to arrange this fraud, cleverly enough to fool that suspicious bastard? Again Zaek’s mind felt numb; again he dozed.

He dreamed of breaking and entering the cafe, creeping to Quelleron’s room, plotting to threaten him with his sword. But which room was the pimp’s? He was lost in a maze of cheap perfume...

...when he woke again. Perhaps the dream, despite its atmosphere of frustration, pointed a possible way. Idly he stared out again at the cafe... and noticed a black coach-and-four pulled up in front of the door. Great Chaos! How long had he been sleeping? How long had the coach been parked there already?

In a flash he was up, buckling his sword belt, hurling the cloak about himself, arranging the hood as he clattered down the stairs.

As he dashed out of his rented lodgings, he saw several figures emerge from the cafe. Two tall men in dark robes and hoods. Between them, hands chained behind his back... Dragon.

Quelleron stood in the doorway as if to see them off, looking mildly puzzled, as if trying to find a flaw in the deal he’d just made.

Dragon’s face was drained of all color. The child’s heart obviously clenched with fear, yet he managed to keep his head up, a strut in his step, a look of proud defiance. As Zaek drew cautiously but quickly nearer the scene, he noticed one of the hooded men reach out to push Dragon toward the coach. The man’s little finger was missing.

What to do? thought Zaek frantically. Attack them here in the street, in broad daylight, with Quelleron’s hired thugs nearby?

He glanced quickly about the street. Not far away a traveller was adjusting the stirrups of a tired-looking horse. He wore the wide-brimmed hat and carried the leather pouch of the Messenger’s Guild.

Suddenly Zaek gave up all interest in the black coach. Casually but swiftly he walked over to the messenger. Behind him he heard the coach-door click closed, a whip cracked, four horses began to clipclip down the street, gathering speed. The messenger was just about to mount his nag and be off as well.

“Say friend! Look at that!” said Zaek in a friendly bumpkin’s drawl. He pointed at the street directly under the messenger’s horse.

“Eh?” said the young man, pausing with hands on reins.

“Did you drop that? Or can I have it?”

“Drop what, damn you?” The messenger let go of the reins and peered where Zaek’s finger pointed.

“Just there... can you see it?”

“All I see is...”

...but the messenger never shared his vision. Zaek’s hand struck him in his larynx. His eyes bulged. He choked. He fell to his knees. He collapsed face down in the sandy dust of the street.

“Sorry,” said Zaek, and stole the horse.

ZAEK FOLLOWED THE COACH at a safe distance, just keeping it in sight ahead of him as he spurred the bony steed along the road south toward Hierophantis.

But his sensible action betrayed him. He’d failed to anticipate how neatly the abductors planned their journey. By the time he’d realized his mistake, and galloped up to the ferry quay on the Lagoon, the flat barge was just pulling out, the great coach weighing it down till waves spilled over its blunt bow.

Nowhere could Zaek see a boat large enough to carry his horse (which was frothing at the mouth and shaking with fatigue) — much less a free water-taxi. He dismounted, and ran to the dock.

Perhaps if he could beat the ferry to the far side of Hierophantis Lagoon... but there he’d find no second horse to steal. Very well, then, he’d have to attack there. Hijack the coach.

Easier dreamed than done. All he could find was a fisherman’s skiff. He had to offer an outrageous bribe to convince its foolish owner to race the ferry.

The winds were against him. He lost.

As the skiff pulled up at last, the coach was vanishing down the road toward the Viridine Peninsula.

For half a penny he would have killed anyone in sight. But he was alone.

Part Two

6. The Opening

A RECEDING THUNDERSTORM'S tail end drizzled over the egg-shaped roof of the houseboat. Barbarian and monk sat once again companionably under the eave of its deck-porch, sharing dreamwine in the night.

A week had passed since Zaek lost Dragon's trail on the road from Hierophantis. Sorolon had sent out spies. Zaek had tried several schemes to isolate and question Quelleron... but to no effect. He was close to despair.

Sorolon told him of an oracle made by the impish apprentice sorcerer, little Varonael, which seemed to promise that the barbarian would soon be reunited with his dancing boy. Zaek said nothing to this. He wanted to believe it, yet feared that the prophecy was again but a magical cheat...

..."So you see," he told the scrivening monk, "I've little news to share with you. If I speak too much I will become poor company. Instead I would rather hear more of your idyll at Perpetual Benefice. Let me see... you'd gotten as far as telling me you'd arranged for Jethael to dance a solo..."

"Yes, and he'll do it tomorrow at the Temple. I trust you'll attend."

"Of course. But you never explained *how* you managed this interference in the liturgy of the goddess."

“Ah. The morning after the day when Jethael and I first made love I rose early. In fact, I rather think I’d spent another sleepless night.

The children — Valamiel continued — began to rehearse under the Pavilion. I noticed that Tharactus was missing. On an impulse I sought him in his office, and found him there, apparently unoccupied. I barged in.

He was damply polite, as always.

“I trust you are finding the Benefice a pleasant place to live. Settling in nicely?”

“Very nicely, thanks. In some respects this is an excellent institution. In other ways, not so excellent.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. I have noticed that certain talented boys here are neglected unfairly and prevented from performing the roles for which their abilities suit them.”

“My dear sir, apparently you are a connoisseur of the Transformations. I myself have failed to notice such subtle shortcomings in the administration of the Epodal Deaconate.”

“Just so. Therefore I make bold to assume that you would appreciate a word of advice, a helpful suggestion.”

“I scarcely think...”

“First, the Blue Rain boys are capable of much more than is required of them. Jethael and Kael in particular should be given solos at once. Then...”

“Surely you realize...”

“...then you must make better use of old Poron. Why relegate him to chanting only, when he could be training children to understand and interpret the cycles? I recommend you second him especially to Blue Rain, so that he can help the boys make up for the neglect of their other masters.”

“Really, Sir!” Tharactus spluttered. He gained control of his indignation and said coldly, “I will take your suggestions under advisement. Good day, Sir.”

“Ah, I beg your pardon. I’ve failed to make myself clear, and misled you by speaking of ‘suggestions’. Do forgive my inarticulateness. In reality, I made no suggestions.”

“Eh?”

“I made *demands*, Tharactus.”

“But... now see here...!”

“No, no, Tharactus. You are the one who must see. You and I are bound by a common interest. Neither of us wishes it widely known that we are... employed... by someone outside the hierarchy of the Temple.”

“How dare you...?”

“I suppose Marbreuse is merely a friend of your family? Perhaps you too hail originally from Chaeth?”

“No! That is... I...”

“As I was saying: I stand a good deal less to lose than you were this connection more widely known. Mine is a nomadic life, this theological appointment but a pleasant holiday — which I would be loath to upset. You, however...”

“This is an outrage, Sir. I have no connection with... Chaethian elements... merely a matter of...

“Bribery? Surely I was not given this Living with the full and compliant understanding of the Deaconate? Could you escape an inquiry unscathed?”

“Blackmailer!”

“But in a good cause, Tharactus. Our mutual employer wishes to keep me happy. Perhaps you know why... or perhaps not. It makes no difference. Ask his permission, if you like.”

“I... That is... I have no way...” Tharactus fell silent.

“Come now. Is what I require so outrageous? My judgement of the situation here is in fact correct: you are betraying the ritual by ignoring those best suited to its performance. My plan can only add luster to your reputation. No scandal or danger is involved. Merely a few changes in procedure.”

“Well...”

“I can expect you to post these new appointments today, then?”

“Very well.” Tharactus had caved in.

“Don’t look so despondent. Soon worshippers will flock to Temple singing your praises. I’ll take no credit for the miracle, and you will thank me. Good day, Sir.”

JETHAEL WAITED FOR him near the pool, by himself, half-hidden beneath a tree. As the monk passed he whispered, “Val!” and beckoned the man to a hiding-place (not very secure) between two

bushes. There a cracked marble bench sported an upholstery of tangled vine. The man perched on one arm of it, and held Jethael on his knee: face to face. They kissed, while he softly caressed the boy's crotch and felt the pouched weapon there. Does the child never lose his erection?

"I'm covered with sweat from dancing in this heat. Don't you want to wait till I've showered?"

"Perhaps I'd like to taste that sweat." He licked drops of it from Jethael's brow and lip. Indeed, the threadbare costume of thin yellow cotton was stained and soaked with hot perspiration. Valamiel inhaled the sweet-sour odor of the boy's armpits, made Jethael raise his arms till he could kiss and lick the wet white concavities. Jethael giggled ticklishly. "Do you like the taste?"

"I like everything about you, Jethi. Your sweat's as delicious as your tears."

"Let me try," said the boy, and kissed him wetly again. "Just salt... that's all," he murmured. "Can we go hide somewhere better now, so I can be naked?"

"I have an idea. The water in Noon Tower still runs. The servants have cleaned up part of the washrooms for me. Would you like me to bathe you?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then run to your room and find fresh clothes. Then meet me there. Quick, run, or I don't know what I'll do."

RAVINAN SHADOWED JETHAEL to the door of Noon Tower, but lacked the boldness to go further. Foiled! Curses! What were they up to in there? Of course the general idea was clear enough. But Ravinan wanted details. He wanted to see.

WATER HAD FLOWED into Perpetual Benefice through the same aqueducts, runnels and pipes for the last nine hundred years. Very few of the original stones might now remain, perhaps, but the system had never been changed. Cold water came up direct from wells. A network of exposed stone pipes soaked up sunlight and delivered hot showers — unless the skies clouded for more than three days together, in which case the pipes flowed at atmospheric temperature.

Some mere hundred years or so ago the baths of Noon Tower had been “modernized”: white tile was laid over bare stone and fired porcelain pipes and fixtures installed. The work was good. Except for a few fallen tiles and a smell of age (not unpleasant), the bathchambers in the tower basement needed only a thorough scrubbing — and had been given one the day before, leaving an over-odor or aura of fresh crude soap.

As in the baths of the other towers, here the ceiling arched high toward clerestory windows that sent cathedral-like columns of light angling parallel through the damp showers. The echo of water falling, trickling somewhere in the cave-like empty space, aurally cocooned the bathstalls from any outside noise.

Each of the twenty stalls contained a shower, a basin and a bench of tile built into the wall. Water drained down to a hole in the center of each stall, so that the floors were subtly slanted. No one had thought to curtain off any of these little white chambers — but then no one lived in Noon Tower except Valamiel...

...who was now helping an extremely contented boy to undress: Jethael, sitting beside him on the tile bench, smiling with paradoxical mingling of sensual and innocent airs, allowing himself to be caressed without restraint, without scruple. Valamiel realized that the chorister had almost no conception of shame. (A precise translation of the word into any ancient Qamarian dialect would be impossible.) Only shyness and inexperience inhibited him. The shyness was now evaporating. With the brushfire emotion of his age he had already placed his soul and body almost entirely in Valamiel’s keeping. The boy believed in Love and that belief erased most of his hesitation.

The monk could proceed only slowly with undressing him, for periodically boy would embrace man with childish fervor, kissing with such ferocity that Valamiel nearly fell off his seat. Or hugged the monk around the neck, whispering “I love you” hotly into his astonished ear. Whereupon Valamiel replied with more flattery and nonsense than would serve to amuse the reader of this Chronicle. Everyone who has loved a child knows this species of talk: a poetry that cannot be understood except by those who utter it, lover and beloved.

The sweatstained and scented tunic came off during this wordplay, then incrementally and slowly the pantaloons made their

way down Jethael's long legs to his ankles and finally into the corner with a kick. Holding both Jethael's feet in his lap to remove the velvet slippers, he found that the dancing-boy enjoyed having his feet massaged and rubbed with scented oil. Somewhat abashed, Valamiel discovered that this game excited him, as if he were playing with the boy's penis. The slick shape of the ankle and tendons and soft toes in his hands aroused him till Jethael could not help but notice it, and playfully pressed his shining feet against the coarse grey cloth of the scrivener's robe... till Valamiel, fearing a premature end to his pleasure, pushed them reluctantly away.

The boy stood up, and with a wriggling motion helped the still-seated man to peel his sweaty loincloth over his hips till his penis flipped out, moving with its own muscles, the balls tight.

Valamiel caressed the elegant curve of the spine, down to the coccyx and small sweet bottom, the smooth curve of the buttocks. He thought of telling the child, "You have the most perfect ass I've ever seen," but felt it sounded crude and coarse. Instead, he turned the boy around, leaned over and kissed the smooth milky rounds, again and again, till Jethael laughed, broke away and ran under the shower.

While the monk undressed Jethael quickly began soaping himself; then gleefully attacked the naked man, wrestling him under the cascading lukewarm water, clearly enjoying the sensation of flesh against soapy flesh, laughing. When both of them were thoroughly slippery-wet they left the cascade and lay down again on the bench, the boy atop the man, kissing.

Valamiel caressed the small soap-streaked buttocks, and their cocks fought a bubbly-squelching cockfight. Gradually Jethael's legs opened wider and wider, till the monk found his slick fingers coming closer and closer to the epicenter, the anterior omphalos, the tiny rounded imploded bud... Jethael giggled, the sphincter clamped closed on the tip of the exploring finger, his little cock stabbed almost painfully against the man's groin. More urgently the finger probed and tickled, caressed and begged almost audibly for permission to be more bold. Gradually the tiny ring relented, relaxed just enough to admit the tip again. Now freely and rhythmically the digit moved in and out. up to the first knuckle in soap bubbles and flesh. Suddenly Jethael spasmed and juttet himself sharply against the man's well-soaped

belly. The finger slipped in a notch deeper, and Jethael spasmed again, violently, almost terrified by an excess of pleasure.

When the chorister had regained his breath (while his organ lost none of its adamantine rigor), they stepped under the shower again and washed off the soap. Jethael wanted to play with the man's penis, but Valamiel explained gently the theory of prolonged pleasure and the delayed orgasm — an alien concept to a boy who could bring himself to five orgasms in a row, or climax with a daydream.

"Well, all right," Jethi agreed at last, and allowed himself to be led back to the bench, where a dozen towels were spread put in a makeshift bed.

Now Valamiel began to kiss him, glancingly and quickly, all over his still-dripping body, drinking the bathwater drop by drop. Face and ears, eyelashes, tips of his tresses; his throat, shoulders, breasts and nipples... and to the boy's amusement, Valamiel sucked the protruding navel, relishing the odd convolutions of its flexible nub between his lips and gentle teeth. "And now," he said, sliding to his knees before the sprawling child, "this is the way I'll worship you."

He kissed the white belly, the smooth groin, the soft thighs. He feather-kissed the scrotum. Gently taking the base of Jethael's cock between thumb and forefinger, he kissed the peculiar tip of the foreskin. With the point of his tongue he probed into the membranous prepuce till he felt the strange, almost cleft top of the crown. Jethael sighed, his legs opened wider, his fingers grasped and worked at the man's wet hair.

Valamiel nibbled on the rubbery nipple of the dark-violet foreskin with his lips, and the boy moaned, a soprano warbling. Rimming the foreskin constantly with his tongue, the monk gradually peeled it down over the pink snakehead till it was fully retracted. Jethael's slender legs pressed tightly against him. He shifted his attention to the scrotum now, licking the thin fold of flesh under the shaft of the penis, kissing the tiny separate eggs, pressing the swollen purse between his lips, sucking it into his mouth, tonguing it wetly, rolling the testicles around on his tongue... meanwhile rubbing the whole length of penis lightly with his fingers and sliding the prepuce up and down over the open arrowhead of the corona.

Now he returned his kisses to the silky penis itself, and tenderly took inch by inch of it into his mouth, covering it thoroughly with saliva as he did so, till at last the whole thing rested on his tongue.

All at once, and seemingly unable to control his actions, Jethael began thrusting his pelvis in the motions of intercourse, so that his cock jammed roughly toward the back of Valamiel's throat... and once again the boy reached orgasm.

Valamiel almost felt a sort of spiritual energy spurt from the swollen penis, an invisible, tasteless, substanceless light that flowed into him like a potent but subtle visionary drug.

Again, though the child had quite obviously climaxed, his organ remained nearly totally erect, and the monk continued (as gently as he could) to suck it and cover it with kisses. At last, however, he managed to pull himself away, rose to his feet and collapsed beside the boy — who at once hugged him down into an embrace, a long deep kiss.

After some moments Jethael broke the kiss and lay back in the man's arms. "Oh, thank you!" he said sincerely. Then, "Val... if I were old enough to make milk, would you...?"

"Would I drink it? Of course. But don't be in a hurry to grow up."

He smiled. "All right." In a polite littleboy voice he asked, "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Why?"

The child slipped out of his embrace and stood up, but Valamiel held him by the hand and would not let him go.

"I have to urinate, please. It would be rude if..."

"Wait, my love. Come here." The monk embraced him. Anxiously Jethael squeezed his still-erect penis with unmistakable urgency, but allowed himself to be held. "As I told you, I like everything about you... everything. Nothing you do displeases me, everything you do is beautiful to me."

Jethael giggled. "Not *everything*, Val."

"Well... perhaps, and perhaps not. But this is different: there's nothing dirty or unpleasant about it. I want to hold you, embrace you while you do it."

The boy grinned, not at all displeased by the strange request. "All right," he said, "but I can't wait another second!"

Valamiel turned the boy around till he faced away toward the center of the cubicle. With one arm he held the slender body close, with his other hand he reached for the cock and held it loosely in his hand. It seemed too stiff to emit any urine. Jethael relaxed and leaned back lazily against him, sprawled out half in his lap, buttocks pressed against his erection.

With a great sigh, the boy spurted a few yellow drops. "Wait..." he whispered, then let fly a powerful jet of nearly colorless water which burst into a loose spray, till Valamiel pulled back the foreskin; then water shot in a clean arc and splashed against the opposite wall of the bathchamber. Valamiel milked the shaft of the organ so that each succeeding jet burst out with maximum force. The flow seemed to reach no end, but kept pouring out in a series of diminishing spurts. Jethael shuddered with pleasure, and the last stream splashed wildly out of control, spraying wetly over the boy's legs and Valamiel's hand. Jethael laughed, and while the monk squeezed out the last few drops from the little erection he kissed Jethael's neck and bit it lovingly.

While the boy took a damp towel and wiped his legs and Val's hand, smiling broadly, the monk reflected with a flush of guilty pleasure that boy-love was indeed an "infantile and dirty" business. Thank the gods then that boys themselves are so childish, and so inventively dirty-minded.

Now Jethael, it seemed, decided to play the part of the lover. With innocent aggression he pushed the man down onto the towels and kissed him again and again. When the monk felt soft fingers close about his erection he could no longer protest, or indeed scarcely think. With impish glee Jethael bent down and kissed one of the man's nipples. The result of this tactic was impressive, and Jethael was so pleased by his own magical ability to reduce a grown man to such moaning and pleading that he persisted in his nuzzling and licking... then shifted to the other nipple (wet tresses trailing across feverish skin) and bit it. Valamiel could not disguise the intense delight this produced in him. And so, encouraged to even bolder torment, Jethi began to chew the erect teat with his molars and nip it with his canines till it stretched like rubber. All the while he kept up his manual ministrations. The seminal fluid or lubricant that streamed Copiously

now from the man's organ he rubbed back onto the shaft till it glistened and made soapy sounds.

Jethael realized, by the sighs and sounds he heard, that Valamiel could not restrain his ejaculation much longer. Excited now, he pulled the man even closer to himself (but not so close as to spoil his own view of the impending climax) and began yanking even harder at his lover's cock. He wanted to see and feel that explosion of cream against his own flesh, and although the man could no longer control himself, Jethael so arranged the affair that the sperm, when it burst forth, splattered against his own stomach, groin and genitals.

With one hand he continued rubbing the semen-slick cock, but with his other hand he scooped up from his own belly a large smear of white syrup, raised it to his lips, touched the tip of his tongue to his fingers, savored the aroma, then slowly licked his hand and pondered, like a wine-taster.

"A very strange flavor," he concluded. The monk watched him in awe... then pulled him into a warm embrace and kissed him, sucked the boy's probing and musk-scented tongue deep into his throat.

The sound of echoing water laced itself into the tapestry of white perfumy silence, and the odors of soap and jissom and boypiss mingled in the slanting light of a distant afternoon.

WHILE THE DAY FADED, they sat on a wicker-work couch which Valamiel dragged out onto his balcony over the canal. Holding Jethael, cuddling with him (in some ways the deepest and most intimate of all acts of love), the monk spoke at length about the events that brought him to Perpetual Benefice.

Thus, to his fascination, the cloistered child heard of pacts with sorcerers, plots to free a slave-boy from durance vile, midnight rides and duels with pirates. He believed every word of it, including a few diplomatic lies and evasions. Instantly he was swept into a world of fantasy not very different from stories he'd spun for himself on rainy days or read in books of adventure. With a giddy mental stagger, he wondered for an instant if he were dreaming. If so, he intended to remain soundly asleep forever.

"But Val... if the wicked sorcerer really betrays you, and the good sorcerer and your comrade the swordsman... I mean, if they rescue

Xiri... but then... the Crowstone... Well, you might have to escape from Suvyamara, wouldn't you?"

"Who knows what may happen? Sorolon claims to see wondrous things looming vaguely in the future. I am content to live today, here with you. But tell me... are you so happy at Perpetual Benefice that you wish to remain here forever?"

"Never! I'll be free when I'm eighteen, then I'll leave and go to Far Thuren (where Zaek is from) because the best Transformationists live there. Poron told me. Or... at least, that's what I planned till you became my lover. Now I'll go wherever you go."

(Simple as that.)

"Of course, Jethael. You are my very soul, I think. To part from you would be a sort of death."

"But Val, what about the Crowstone? Will you let Marbreuse take it? Or stop him? Or what?"

The monk shrugged profoundly. "What do you think? I would value your opinion, and pass it on to my friends."

Jethael took his time replying. The monk could feel the boy's heart beating excitedly, and his own pulse began to quicken as well. Without warning he felt flow through him a wave of that strange sorcerous *glow* that he'd experienced when first touching Jethael's hand. As if the slender body generated some sort of excess of psychic overflow at certain moments — different from the overwhelming aura of pleasure that illuminated Jethael's lovemaking, but still intensely erotic. The first time Valamiel thought it might have been the product of his own fevered brain. This second time, however, felt distinctly and uncannily like an *emanation*. The hair of his scalp tingled eerily, and his penis sprang to full erection: a curious combination of physiological symptoms, indeed.

"I think," said Jethael at last, "that you and Zaek and Sorolon should have the Crowstone. Here they only use it to lure pilgrims, and to keep people in slavery. Marbreuse will use it for evil. But you..." He faltered.

"But what would we *do* with it if we had it?"

"I don't know," the child admitted, losing his momentary (but utter) certainty. "Sorolon might have some idea."

"Perhaps so. I'm sure he hasn't told us everything he suspects about the future. Quite right, too. No point in letting the mind fall into

hopes or despairs based on mere premonition or the babbling of an oracle. But listen: there's the bell for supper. Are you hungry?"

"Totally empty!"

SUPPER CONSISTED OF a bowl of porridge mixed with pieces of fish and other sea-creatures and topped with a lump of butter. A glass of milk. A piece of stale cake with seaplum jelly. Boys' food. Valamiel wolfed his portion with more pleasure than the children, who were used to it and bored by it.

After the meal he asked the six favored choristers of Blue Rain Tower, along with old Poron, to sit with him in the park near the pool of seamonsters. There he outlined to them his success in softening the heart of Tharactus toward them, and explained the concessions granted by that august person...

"August ape-fish!" muttered Kael rudely.

... namely, that Jethael and Kael would be given solos immediately, or as soon as Poron judged them prepared; and that the others could expect the same, if they worked hard and opened their hearts to the work.

The little group stood or sat as if stunned for a moment. Then Jethael hugged the monk roughly, cheered, jumped up and danced a jig across the lawn, whirled back to the bench like a top, fell into Valamiel's arms and kissed him.

Every one of the boys followed suit, capering gleefully and kissing the monk, pushing each other aside and covering him, drowning him in kisses. Then, when old Poron clasped Vala-miel's hand, they all laughed uncontrollably.

Kael especially wished to show his unbearable excitement and gratitude, till Valamiel had to restrain him forcibly and control his wild enthusiasm. Jethael had a knee in his crotch, Kael a hand on his thigh, and a chaos of hair and body sweetness engulfed him in roseate amplitude. How devoutly he prayed that nothing would go wrong with what he felt to be a precarious scheme.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING he assured himself that Tharactus had not changed any postings. The next Epode to be performed was called *The Faring of Emraeth*. In this ritual a prince and princess were depicted in three different stages of a Transformation: *Discovery* —

Sorrow — Death. Not a very cheerful ceremony, it seemed. But in each stage the royal pair were to be acted by different sets of dancers. Kael and Jethael were marked for the first movement, *Discovery*.

Old Poron shoo'd Valamiel away from the Pavilion, saying, "I don't want Jethael... or any of the others... distracted by a spectator. We have much to accomplish..." He added in a whisper: "...and try not to *exhaust* the lad."

"Tell him to curb himself? I doubt if he could."

"Well... he has energy to spare, I suppose. Now, please..."

"All right. I'll vanish."

THAT AFTERNOON, VALAMIEL joined his now-thorough-ly-converted loyal and affectionate troupe of boys at the pool. The last vestiges of shyness had lifted from them all, leaving only the sunny weather of trust and high spirits. They swam and splashed and played water-tag, raced and dived and pushed each other in. Bodies slippery as seal-cubs brushed against him in the pool, and since they wore only loincloths, he soon found his hands full of Jethael's slenderness, Kael's leanness, Ravinan's almost plump softness; the dark intensity of Michchaeris, the ivory coolness of Anathael, and the miniature delicate limbs of little Daevaen and Venyamin.

As the center of the pool exploded into a lash and storm of diamondbright drops and wrestling bodies, Jethael pulled the monk aside. Beneath the water he found the man's hand and pressed it against his crotch. Jethi's penis stood straight out under the thin loincloth. "Let's go hide in the bushes... *now*," he commanded.

"What, here in the park? Not very private..."

"Only boys go into the bushes, Val. None of the prefects or praeceptors know the secret paths. Come on, let's sneak away. No one will see us, I promise."

They left the pool — Jethael with a towel modestly before his loins — and casually drifted away toward an overgrown path between two hedges.

But Ravinan the spy detected them. Cautiously he followed, shadowed them, careful not to breathe loudly or step on twigs. At last he found them seated side by side on one of the hidden ruined benches of the park, surrounded by a thicket of rank laurel. Adroitly, silently,

he slipped behind a bush and parted the leaves to peer out at them. At last!

ALREADY THEY WERE naked. Ravinan had often beheld his roommate in the nude, and seen grown men unclothed once or twice — but never with their organs so terrifyingly stiff and big. He shuddered, and closed his hand over his wet loincloth and squeezed.

The man slid to his knees in the grass before the bench. Jethi leaned back, propped his heels on the edge of the seat and spread his legs wide till the knees pointed out and his cock protruded toward the man's face.

Valamiel genuflected and kissed the little organ adoringly. Lucky Jethael, thought the spy, brushing wet blond locks away from his eyes and trying to undo the damp knot in his loincloth.

Now the man pulled Jethi's ankles off the seat-edge, and Ravinan heard him say, "Wrap your legs around my neck." Ravinan nearly giggled: he could see Jethi's rectum.

So could Valamiel. It was a tiny, smooth-ridged asterisk of pink against the pale white and blue-veined flesh of open buttocks and thighs. Reverently, he kissed it. Jethi giggled. "That tickles! Don't!"

Ravinan finally got the knot undone. His prick slapped wet against his tummy, hard as a new bone. With a sigh of relief he began stroking himself. Now he could see that Valamiel was kissing and licking at Jethi's cock and masturbating himself at the same time. Jethi squeezed his thighs around the man's head and sighed noisily. His toes clenched and unclenched in the air. Now he was heaving up and down, stabbing his cock rudely into the man's mouth, but the man seemed to be in heaven. Jethi let out a shriek and practically toppled from the bench.

Jethi always comes off so quick, thought Ravinan. I hope that's not the end of it. I'm just getting started. But no, his espionage still promised further rewards.

The man stood up, then sat down next to Jethi, who hugged him and kissed him. He bit the man's neck... and Ravinan stared in amazement as he pinched the naked monk's big teats... then bent his head... and the man winced with pain but said nothing... while his red cock seemed to grow bigger and bigger. Jethi's *biting* him, the spy realized, and he *likes* it.

Jethi sat up. “Guess what I want to do now.”

“What?” said the man, looking quite dazed.

Jethi kissed Val on the mouth, and Ravinan could tell the boy was using his tongue. Jethi whispered something in Val’s ear.

The monk actually blushed.

“Are you... sure that...?” he stuttered.

“Last night after I went to bed I thought about... how it tasted. I decided I liked it. I really want to try. Please?”

Ravinan could tell that Jethi was quite nervous: he was shaking all over like a cold puppy.

“Jethael,” said the man, so quiet the spy could scarcely hear him, “nothing would make me happier... if you really...”

Now the boy slid to his knees in the grass and stationed himself between the man’s open legs. Ravinan saw his roommate’s white buttocks tense and relax, and realized that Jethi was playing with himself. The spy shifted position to get a better view.

Trembling and hesitant, Jethi craned forward, snaked out his long pink tongue and touched it to the tip of the man’s prick. A long strand of syrup dripped between tongue and penis, and Jethi licked it up. (And I always believed he was so timid! thought Ravinan).

Now Jethi began to kiss and lick, and it was obvious that the taste and texture pleased him. He was scared he wouldn’t like it, Ravinan guessed, but now he thinks it’s nice. I wonder if *I* could do such a thing? He watched in awe as Jethi opened his jaws wide and began to suck the whole great shiny weapon slowly into his mouth. First the head vanished, then bit by bit the sharp-veined shaft. When Jethi raised his head to gasp a breath the cock was dripping with saliva and lubricant — but boldly he plunged downward again, trying to take as much in his mouth as possible. His red lips were wet with spit and syrup and seemed swollen.

As for Val, the spy could see he was ecstatic. Who *wouldn't* be if Jethi was sucking his cock, he thought; and suddenly Ravi couldn’t hold back any longer...

...squeezed himself and clenched his teeth not to cry out...

...spatter, spatter against the fresh green bayleaves...

...but never closed his eyes, kept staring avidly at the lovers, saw the man go rigid all over, jackknife his body...

...saw white sperm shoot out the corners of Jethi's mouth where the lips sucked the head of the man's cock... Jethi kept at it, swallowing again, then once more... The big grown-up penis slipped out of his mouth, jerked and dripped more white stuff...

Jethi licked the last dribbles as they oozed out, swallowed again...

...wiped his chin with his fingers and licked them clean...

...and then jumped up, fell into the monk's arms and kissed him. Triumphantly! And — the spy noticed somewhat queasily — their mouths were wide open as they kissed.

Ravanan snuck away, trying not to stagger. He'd seen a great deal more than he expected and he needed to go off somewhere and think about it and masturbate again. Wouldn't Kael and Michchi be *furious* to have missed it?

ON THE MIDNIGHT HOUSEBOAT, Zaek too was amazed. After hearing his comrade describe this last adventure (without any mention of the spy, whose presence he had failed to detect), the barbarian smiled broadly and said, "An astounding creature you've discovered! An angel of the erotic, a god of the dance, an embryonic poet, potential sorcerer (or so I'd guess), and matchless beauty. Moreover — and without doubt — a natural and uninhibited lover of maleness."

"True. Apparently he feels nothing shameful in any expression of love — at least, not so far. Nothing pleasurable — however outrageous — would disturb his inner poetry. He told me that he's heard certain stories from his little friends, and I'm sure he's experimented mildly with Ravanan. He and his crew masturbate together... but nothing else. So whatever I do to him, he assumes I expect the same in return — unless I tell him otherwise. He's eager to learn every nuance, and imaginative enough to spin his own variations without prompting. I haven't found a part of his body which is not alive to pleasure — and this is the first time I've ever experienced such erotic openness in a boy. I'm so used to the idea of gaining my own satisfaction by giving rather than receiving that I scarcely know how to accept his incredible generosity. In my way I'm as virginal as Jethael — who senses his power over me and is fascinated by it.

"In any case, to resume: I spent that evening reading to the boys aloud again. Have you ever noticed that boys find storytelling an erotic art? At strange, tense or frightening moments of a tale they will

grip themselves in absentminded ecstasy. As I read I began to fear that they might all have grown so relaxed with me that if Jethael were to show off his power and begin to caress me openly the others might...”

“Rape you?”

“What a wonderful image. I wonder. Believe me, the atmosphere was dripping with ill-suppressed desires. Little Venyamin had his hand in his pants the whole time. Kael breathed down my neck, and Ravinan was rutting discreetly against Jethi’s leg. Michchaeris held his little brother Daevaen on his lap and pinched him. Anathael was sitting with his legs spread and one testicle peeping from his pants-leg. Jethi had his hand inside my robe, playing with my nipples. And still I read on, the Tale of this or that prince or dragon or lost treasure.

“In fact, I read superbly, hoping to stave off an orgy by my skill in dramatic recitation. The bedtime bell saved me — but I tremble to think what might happen if Jethael decided to share me with his crew. I believe he’s capable of anything, and I don’t think he associates jealousy with sexuality. He’d be upset if I loved another child — but I imagine he’d like nothing better than a bedful of six naked boys and a compliant man, all his to enjoy. He’s potentially voracious... When I told him I’d be away from Perpetual Benefice the following day, and that he should work overtime with Poron, he complained bitterly, and begged me not to blame him if he masturbated while I was away. ‘My bone never goes down now. You’ve made me so I can’t stop: I’ll have to do it a hundred times a day.’”

“Forgive me for keeping you away from such bliss,” said Zaek, grinning.

“I’m only sorry our day’s work proved so futile. I fear Quelleron will never allow himself to fall for any of our snares. We’ll have to flush him out. Anyway... Jethael needed the time for rehearsal. And I to recover my strength for the next epode of our romance.

“Which reminds me: we must rise early tomorrow like pious men and go to Temple to see my prodigy perform. Let’s finish this wine.”

JETHAEL AND KAEL stood side by side, in the posture of Humble Expectation, under one of the immense green arches of the Viridine Temple of Suvyamara. Kael was costumed as an ancient Prince: kilt of fire-patterned silk, sash of gold, doublet of gold chain-mail over a shirt of crimson silk, with sleeves that dangled and trailed to the floor.

On his arms and wrists, gold bands; and a gold tore around his neck. On his feet, slippers of scarlet velvet. In his scarlet-blazing hair, a circlet or coronet of gold.

Jethael's role was that of a Princess, not Kael's lover but his twin — or perhaps his female aspect, depending on one's interpretation of the ancient text (now being slowly introduced by the melodious nasal voice of old Poron and the sweet treble choir of the chorus out there on the floor of the Temple). Jethael therefore wore girl's slippers of silver mesh, pantaloons and sleeveless vest and cape, the millenia-vanished costume of an aristocratic maiden. Following the abstruse hermeneutic of some commentator, the cloth was all violet, deep enough to accentuate Jethael's pallor; and instead of jewels or metal he was adorned with flowers: a necklace of white honeyfeathers, a crown of violets in his amberblack hair, and a sash composed of wine-plush roses cinched about his waist.

Jethael was excited to the point of exaltation. He felt no fear whatsoever. He knew what was about to happen, because he'd heard about it and even witnessed it in others. He was about to be taken over by the Transformation.

The steps of his dance and the sequence of hand-sijils that accompanied it — all these were clear to him as the very light of the Goddess' Eye, the magic lamp suspended above the heads of the worshippers. But now he was no longer sure that the Transformation would allow him to perform according to the traditional choreography.

"Kael," he whispered, "after the Pass and First Return, let me dance alone for sixteen or thirty-two."

AS USUAL, THE CONGREGATION scarcely served to fill the Temple, for this was merely an ordinary Fifthday service — and a notoriously subtle and monotonous Epode of the Cycle. Valamiel, Zaek, Sorolon and little pigtailed Varonael (dressed in his fine firesilk tunic and sporting jasmine behind his ears) easily found a place where they could stand comfortably to witness the ritual. Luckily for the monk's nerves, the Discovery transpired early in the service, and in fact was about to begin at any moment. Poron's voice rose toward a cadenza, and the chorus began to step backwards in perfect unison, clearing a space in the middle of the Temple floor.

On their right, a family of gawking pilgrims, countryfolk from some grain-rich valley up the Oryx. On their left, a party of old Suvyamaran aesthetes, decked out in fantasies of lace and embroidery, eyes painted, elegant white fans dangling from their wrists on silver chains.

To the thrumming pulse of zerbals and gongs Jethael and Kael now danced slowly into the empty space in the stylized strutting step that proclaimed their characters' high birth. When they reached the center they parted and began to dance in mirror-image, left and right reversed so that one's gesture echoed the other's with startling precision. This device was common enough, but the two of them moved in such flawless symmetry they seemed in truth the twin halves of a single soul. On his right Valamiel heard one of the farmers mutter superstitiously. On his left he heard one of the aesthetes hiss with sudden interest.

They circled away from each other, their arms moving sinuously, fingers flashing from one complex sijil to another, torsos bending now to the right, now to the left, with unnatural balance. It seemed they were almost trying to catch each other with complex starts and sudden turns — yet always moving in perfect imitation of each other. Finally they approached the meeting-place, the center, and came together as if toward their own reflections in a glass.

Now Kael stepped away, knelt to one side facing Jethael, assumed the posture of Devout Attentiveness, and froze utterly as if never to move again. Jethael stood alone. A new measure of music began.

Valamiel realized at once that the boy was not dancing anything planned at any rehearsal. Something strange had come over him... For an instant the monk feared he'd forgotten the steps. But then he realized the truth (for he was indeed by now something of a connoisseur of the Qamarian Transformations). Jethael had been... Opened. The occult Meaning of the dance itself was now dictating the child's every movement.

This was no ordinary trance of self-loss or possession which the dancer cannot afterwards remember. Instead it seemed to augment and enhance the self to the point of oneness with music, body, tradition, emotion and symbolism. Such Openings, people say, have grown increasingly rare in recent centuries. The monk wondered if he and Poron alone would realize what was happening.

Jethael's inspiration, however, did not go unnoticed. One of the aesthetes whispered to a companion, "Kashael! Look at the little Princess... He's *gone in*. He's been seized!"

"I see it. Hush, fool."

"Nothing like this *for three years*. What an exquisite creature!"

"Sshh!"

"Nothing like this since the days of Poron himself!"

Jethael's arms, hands and fingers, feet and toes seemed even more than usually loosened, more flexible and able to bend into the graceful but alarmingly artificial gestures of the extreme Suvyamaran style. He created the illusion of having no bones, or hollow bones of malleable crystal.

The Meaning he had found (or been given) of *Discovery* came through his strange rhythmic undulations very clearly, though one might have found the translation of it into words an impossibility. Valamiel sensed a great deal of the erotic in it: the selfdiscovery of Jethael's own desires — but sexuality comprised only one layer of the atmosphere he was building or weaving. Poignant innocence, bold pride, mystical reverie, melancholy and memory of earliest childhood, all were somehow unfolding in a mandala of danced emotion. Not interpreted — but expressed directly, *shown forth*, exemplified.

"Oh, goodness," breathed the wordy aesthete. "My heart is breaking!"

Valamiel turned to glare at the fool — and saw that tears were in truth gushing down the old man's painted cheeks.

Suddenly he noticed that others in the congregation were also weeping openly. The farmers had begun to rock back and forth as if hypnotized. He himself choked, and stifled a sob.

Jethael seemed to sense this clenching of feeling in the hearts of those who watched him. Using a sijil signifying the Command of Perception, he began to raise himself above melancholy toward some crystalline revelation of light. . He became a messenger-angel holding out the promise of a door through sorrow and regret into some undiluted presence, gemlike and yet also flowerlike with both wonder and sensuality.

When Jethael made the sijil for Wonder a man near Valamiel in the crowd staggered, collapsed face forward and fainted delicately on the Temple floor.

When Jethael made the sijil for Transformation, a much stranger thing occurred. The Eye of the Goddess, the great levitating incandescence above their heads, began pulsing in time to the music.

The farmers gasped in terror. The old painted aesthete seemed to go dead white with some much more complex emotion. Another figure keeled over somewhere, and several voices began to moan. Priests and deacons gawked up at the Eye in stunned amazement. Most of them were too young ever to have witnessed this inexplicable phenomenon, called the “Eye-blink”. An omen, according to some.

Jethael’s dance was finished. Somehow he and Kael were no longer there. Poron’s voice tried to begin the next strophe, cracked, tried again. The musicians took up his cue. The Eye glowed evenly and serenely again, and afterwards many denied that it had ever Winked. But something had certainly happened: five or six people had passed out, and several were still weeping, keening and smiling at the same time. The old aesthete turned to his companions and said, “Well, you may stay if you like. I’m going to go home and write a poem. Nothing else will happen here now. That boy has exhausted the meaning of the ritual, and exhausted me with desires and fears I thought I’d seen the last of some decades since. Well, good day to you gentlemen,” and he minced away, fluttering his fan.

Sorolon turned to the monk. His ugly face was transformed with ill-suppressed excitement. “What have you found, my friend, what have you found? Varonael, tell me what happened. Tell us all what it means.”

The little boy plucked jasmine from his ear and sniffed it. “The dancer made the Eye change. He is a Perfect One, but does not yet know it.”

The three adults found themselves gaping dumbfounded at the diminutive oracle. Varonael grinned up at them like an imp, and made the jasmine disappear into thin air.

7.

Iconodulia; Or The Garden Unveiled

A BULBOUS PANOPLY OF MOONS and stars hung moistly over a swampy backroad somewhere on the Island of Spiridon. Parasitic vines and hunchback trees phosphoresced darkly in the lurid vagueness of marshfire and moonglow.

A two-horse phaeton, rounding a bend in the road, came suddenly upon a pair of horsemen robed in black and wearing halfmasks. One of them held with both arms outstretched a gigantic and ornate pistol; stood in the stirrups and bellowed, “Halt and deliver, or I fire!” The coachman pulled convulsively on his reins, the nags reared and whinnied in terror; the coach clanked and clattered to a full stop, the driver on his perch babbling, “Don’t shoot! I’ve nothing of value!”

Pistols and other firearms are exceedingly rare, especially on remote Qamar. In Suvyamara the mere possession of one is grounds for immediate exile. In economic terms the pistol constituted Zaek’s private fortune. It was worth nearly as much as Valamiel’s Hevvaenian sabretache (now gleaming dull blue in the night), and automatically earned him a halfcaptain’s pay in any mercenary venture. Were he to trigger it the massive cone-shaped engraved barrel might (if it fired at all) spew enough steel balls to kill or wound the coachman, horses and passengers (and possibly the pistoleer as well)

in one deafening explosion. The coachman was shaking as with ague, and had dropped the reins from paralyzed hands.

Zaek dismounted and stood beside the phaeton. "Quelleron!" he said, "come out or I'll blast the carriage full of holes."

At once the door opened, carefully and slowly, and the emaciated pimp climbed out. To give him credit, he appeared quite cynical and cool. His long-lobed earrings of onyx scarcely trembled.

"You find me in a somewhat embarrassing position, Sir," he said. "I've come away without much money, no more than two hundred. However, if you'd care to name the sum you require to release me, I shall have it sent for at once." He sounded almost bored.

"What if I were to demand your very life, Quelleron?" asked Zaek, stripping off his mask.

If he expected the pimp to show sudden fear he was disappointed. Quelleron only frowned and studied his face, as if trying to remember where he'd last seen it. But at length a slightly worried expression wormed its way into his features, and he spoke.

"Ah. You intend to demand of me that slave-boy, the devilbarbarian brat. I fear you're too late. He's already sold. I suppose it was you sent that letter yesterday, the one that tricked me into venturing outside. Bah. I shall never do so again."

"That is so. Unless you tell me who bought Xiri you will have to remain sealed in a very small room indeed. About six by two by two feet ought to do it. Forever."

"Ha ha," Quelleron said politely. "An excellent jest fate plays on me... and on you too, for that matter. Will nothing else satisfy you?"

"No."

"Sir, I stake my life you'll believe this: I do not know who bought him, or the nomad boy the next day. Of the two men who visited me, only one spoke, in a commonplace but nasty sort of voice. Both were veiled, or somehow impossible to see. Their money, however, was quite palpable. I've bought five new boys, lovely ones, with the gold paid for those two troublemakers. If I could tell you what you wished to know I should do so without hesitation. After all, why should I care?"

A long pause.

Valamiel sighed. Zaek asked, "Can you think of no clue, no hint they might have dropped?"

If Quelleron felt disposed to wrack his brains they never learned the result. From the bend in the road came a shout, interrupting all conversation. “Enforcers’ Guild! Drop your weapons and surrender!”

Around the bend suddenly appeared ten swordsmen on foot. They broke into a run toward the phaeton, silently and efficiently. With great presence of mind Quelleron scrambled back into the carriage.

Zaek swung the pistol round and fired it. The detonation nearly knocked him off his feet. The coach-nags screamed and bolted, the phaeton rattled away down the road, out of control. Zaek’s horse careened wildly into the undergrowth, never to be seen again. Only Valamiel, still in the saddle, managed to restrain his terrified mount.

When the cloud of acrid smoke had cleared two of the self-proclaimed Enforcers could be seen sprawled out in the dirt, and one more sat clutching his head and screaming.

One of the surviving seven shouted, “Bastard! No one spoke of pistols!”

“Calm yourself, coward,” answered another. “They’ve no time to re-load it now!” (True: the task consumed nearly five minutes, at best.) “We can take them easily. Forward!” The seven charged, waving their swords.

“Zaek! The odds seem unpropitious. Mount behind me and we’ll excuse ourselves. Zaek? Zaek?”

But the barbarian ignored his comrade. He faced the seven ambushers and screamed:

“CHAOS!” (A long drawn-out guttural shriek, mimicking the cosmic cry of hatred uttered by the legendary chaosawk which haunts the Void between Moons). “Chaos!” he bellowed again, and began running eagerly to meet his attackers.

Valamiel recognized the signs of the duellist’s trance or berserk rage which overtakes certain Thurenian warriors in battle. He’d heard that a berserk Chaote could remember nothing but the imperative urge to kill his enemies and protect friends. He’d also heard (and disbelieved) that the Chaote increased in size and moved with inhuman speed and precision. Looking at Zaek now, however, he was inclined to credit his informants. Suddenly he felt the odds might not be so bad after all, and spurred his horse forward, toward the impending affray.

Whether by chance or design, the Enforcers had roughly divided their charge into two prongs or wings, four to the left and slightly ahead of the three on the right. Zaek, sword in hand, met the left wing with yet another battle-cry, ran between the two foremost swordsmen, lashed out gracefully in a kind of figure-eight which gashed open one man's shoulder; the other managed to parry and spring aside.

Instead of leaving the wounded man and turning to the others, Zaek whirled around and slashed viciously at the fallen guildsman, ripping open his throat. Then he shrieked in triumph and faced the three remaining swordsmen.

One of them hurled a throwing hook at Zaek's face. He brushed it aside with a flick of his blade. He snarled.

"Take them alive!" roared one of the Enforcers.

"*You* take him alive, Captain. I'm going to slice him into dogmeat!"

MOUNTED, VALAMIEL ENJOYED an initial advantage over the three men of the right wing. He spurred his horse and tried to run them down, and as the steed crashed through them the long sabretache flicked out and swiped across an unprotected breast. The wounded one cursed, staggered, fell.

But one of the other Enforcers had managed to plunge his sword deep into the horse's side as it passed. The blade was torn from the guildsman's hand, but remained embedded in the steed's flesh. The horse ran a few paces, tripped, fell and neighed with uncomprehending horror. Valamiel sprawled, rolled over, sprang to his feet. He found himself some twenty paces away from his two remaining enemies — one of them disarmed. Not a bad beginning, he thought, trying to catch his breath.

AS QUICKLY AS HE could, the guild captain was unrolling a weighted throwing net.

But the angry Enforcer, eager to avenge his fallen fellows, bravely attacked the barbarian, holding sword in right hand and dagger in left (a southern island style, and deadly). The third Enforcer followed to the attack, but with less panache.

The brave one ran with sword high and dagger low, hoping to entice the berserker into the mistake of trying a thrust for the belly —

whereupon, of course, he could parry easily with the sword and gut the raving bastard with a sweeping parabola of the knife.

But the berserker does not forget mere swordsmanship. He is not merely a raging beast, but an- unpredictable maniac as well. Zaek feinted to the Enforcer's knife hand, leapt to the opposite side, parried the downward slash of the sword. According to the rules he ought now to disengage and leap back.

If he had done so he would have been run through easily by the second Enforcer. So, instead, he jumped up into the air, whirled about, took sword in both hands and cut a scythe-like sweep at the first guildsman's unprotected head.

In parrying this tactic the two-weapon man was forced to use both sword and dagger, and all his skill and strength (which were considerable). Now they stood for an instant face to face; the X of the crossed weapons held checked by the single blade of Zaek's sword. The other Enforcer danced futilely about, sword held out like a fishing pole.

Suddenly Zaek flipped over backwards and rolled away like one of those legendary snakes that bite their own tails and trundle along like animate wheels. He had seen something out of the corner of his eye: a throwing net, about to land on his head... And thus his peculiar method of retreat.

The weighted net landed heavily on the upraised X of dagger-and-sword, and hopelessly tangled the two weapons. The brave Enforcer howled with rage at his bumbling captain. He could see Zaek springing to his feet again. He hurled away the net-trapped weapons, turned on his heels and ran, shouting, "You take him alive, then, incompetent fool!" Clearly a professional man, he knew when to stand and when to depart and postpone any hopes of vengeance. If Zaek had been in his "right mind" he'd gladly have allowed the man to escape. But when the other two surviving enemies turned and retreated as well, he screamed with frustration and charged after them.

FOLLOWING HIS INITIAL SUCCESS, Valamiel's half of the battle had not gone so well. The horse-killer had re-armed himself with the sword of his wounded fellow. The two Enforcers proved pedestrian enough as swordsmen, and unfamiliar with many of the monk's bizarre tricks and foreign tactics. But they were doggedly competent

killers, gutter-bred to a career of steel. They knew interesting ways to combine their efforts against a single swordsman. Valamiel received a painful cut on his hip, and quite lost his breath from painful exertion. He had his scrivener's dirk in his left hand, and was looking for a chance to hurl it at one of his opponents. Nothing so distracts a man as a knife he can't pull out of his own flesh.

Thus when the monk heard a voice yelling, "Retreat! Back to the horses!" he felt only gratitude and a profound relief. As the two bonded thugs skipped away from him in ragged "windmill" style, then turned and ran like deer, he only stood his ground, nearly retching with exhaustion. He heard Zaek still shrieking in rage, voice receding, but simply could not move to follow him. He heard horses galloping away. At last he staggered forward and began stumbling, then trotting along the midnight road toward the distant tumult.

He seemed to run for hours. Soon all was silence around him. Even the night insects must have vanished in terror of the noise of the battle. He ran on, the pain of his wound lancing through his whole body with every jarring step.

Zaek was kneeling in the road, moaning and shaking — the well-known aftermath of the Chaotic Rage which strikes the berserker when his last foe has been killed... or vanished. Valamiel tore off his mask and collapsed beside him, and for some minutes they both gasped and wheezed, unable to speak.

By the time they staggered back to the scene of the ambush the wounded Enforcers had disappeared, no doubt to hide in the marsh till daylight. Only the corpses of Zaek's three victims, and the carcass of Valamiel's horse, remained. Zaek's pistol had vanished, stolen away from where he'd dropped it.

AS THEY TRUDGED OFF toward the Viridine Peninsula, seeking to hide themselves before morning, Zaek recovered his strength and wits, but Valamiel began to stagger with pain. The barbarian made him accept a helping arm, and thus they continued on their way.

"Who sent them?" asked the monk rhetorically. "Were they guarding Quelleron?"

"Unlikely. The only one who knew even vaguely what we intended was Sorolon."

"I trust him. Furthermore, he has no motive to betray us."

“Just so.” They trudged on in silence.

“I have an intuition,” Zaek said at last. “Some force prevents me from tracing Xiri and Dragon. If we could have questioned the Enforcers they’d tell us more or less what Quelleron told us. Whoever hired them for this operation was veiled in black, paid well, and left no address.”

“You believe the pimp, then?”

“I do, though it pains me to admit it.”

“But suppose you’re right. Xiri is stolen. Then Dragon, who promises to spy for you, is also removed. Then a force of assassins tries to prevent us from speaking to Quelleron. For what purpose? And how did this hypothetical sorcerer know where and when the highway robbery was planned? What possible...?”

“Wait. What did you say?” Zaek interrupted.

“I said, no one could possibly have...”

“You said, ‘hypothetical sorcerer’.”

“So I did. I thought we’d agreed to exclude Sorolon from our suspicions.”

“Valamiel, consider. What *other* sorcerers do we know?”

Valamiel considered. An answer came... but seemed to make no sense.

GIVEN A DAY TO recover, they might have puzzled it out by themselves. As it happened they were spared the need for any such intellectual activity, almost at once. Morning found them safely back at the houseboat, filthy, bloody and near collapse. In the middle of the floor of the egg-shaped cabin they found a purse and a letter.

The purse contained a generous amount of money. The letter read:

My dear colleagues:

Congratulations on your escape from the paid minions of Order. I was certain you could do it, but even so I am pleased by this evidence of your skills. I made an excellent bargain when I hired you. But by now you must be wondering what I intend, and why I have interfered so drastically in your fates.

Surely you know that sorcerers of my skill can exercise a certain remote surveillance over the thoughts and actions of others. The science is less exact than one might like, but nevertheless adequate to

this situation. I am aware that you probably intend to betray me. Therefore I have taken certain precautions to ensure your loyalty.

My dear scrivener monk, in your case the task seemed simple enough. Why should you risk losing enjoyment of Perpetual Benefice simply to annoy me? When the job is done you may take your transvestite and your share of the spoils and vanish. But still you fail to act sensibly. You hijack coaches at midnight!

But my dear barbarian, you have proven even more difficult to tame. You would not rest content to wait and buy your slaveboy with the treasure I promised you. Some incompetent fool sold you a certain garment; I suggest you refuse to pay the tailor's bill. Your slaveboy is safe and untouched. I planned to let you know this in good time, then pledge to give him to you, if you accomplished my purpose. But my science revealed your schemes to meddle in my business. The tattoo'd slaveboy was a potential threat: he knew more than he understood. He is now with the first one, and you can take him too for all I care — if you behave.

I knew very well that Quelleron had nothing of value to tell you. I arranged to 'save' the pimp for another reason. Murder and robbery are serious crimes, even in lax Suvyamara. You will both be safe from all retribution, however, so long as you obey me.

In a month a certain festival will take place in the Viridine Temple. Surely you can abide in patience till then. You will not hear from me till a few days before the ceremony. This money should keep you comfortable in the meantime.

(Signed),

Acting for the Regnant of Cheath, Marbreuse.

No sooner had the monk recited the last word than the letter burst into flames in his hand and crumpled into ash.

IF THE ADULTS EXPECTED the children to sit in the sun and quietly discuss sorcery — or perhaps love — they were disappointed. By the sound of it the four boys were chasing each other round and round the tower, laughing boisterously. From time to time a thud resounded against the walls, as if a toy ball had been kicked at it.

Despite their gloom the adults could not help smiling at this racket, which always sounds like music to men who are besotted with boys.

Valamiel put down his wineglass. “Just how much could Marbreuse — or rather Marchion — have learned by this occult spying of his?”

The ugly sorcerer puffed meditative odorless zeros and fumes from his viridine pipe. “Difficult to say. I’ve read of the technique but never learned it — the price is too high. The methods too dark. According to the grimoires detail is always vague, the mental images conjured up distorted, veiled in symbols. The sorcerer must have seen the people he will later spy upon. Thus I doubt if Marbreuse knows exactly who I am — though he may have deduced much more than the letter revealed. In any case, I have now taken certain precautions and rendered myself opaque to all invisible probing. I’ve prepared amulets for you two as well.” He handed each of them a finger-ring of black iron. “These will dampen his perception of you without alerting him to any counter-sorcery. All in all,” Sorolon continued, “I consider that we now possess certain advantages...”

Zaek grunted ironically. Valamiel said, “You are surprisingly optimistic.”

“Consider: we know that Xiri is alive. We know that Marbreuse has kidnapped him, and that he is responsible for the ambush. Now he is blackmailing you for crimes he forced you to commit, and using the power of love to force you to still further dangers. In short, where previously we only suspected him of evil, we can now convict him of it.”

“What do we gain by this?” asked the monk.

“Clarity. We now have but two choices. One: we capitulate. I retire from the action. You steal the Stone and deliver it to Marbreuse. Possibly you may escape with your lives, your loves and even some wealth.”

“Assuming that Xiri still lives. Assuming that Marbreuse does not betray us. Bad odds,” said the barbarian.

“Precisely. By the way, Xiri is alive. Either that or I have lost all my intuitive abilities. Take what comfort you can from my vagueness. To resume: our second choice is to strike boldly and seize every possible advantage for ourselves. We assume that Marbreuse will attempt to betray and cheat you, so we steal a march on him and steal

the Stone for ourselves, rescue Xiri and flee Suvyamara. If possible, we kill Marbreuse?’

“Splendid. How do you propose to accomplish this?” asked Valamiel.

“Not sure. Too many variables. But the basic idea concerns a magical project of mine, a dream of many years. Perhaps my major ambition as a sorcerer, as yet unrealized. I see your expression of distaste, Zaek — but hear me out.

“My teacher’s teacher left a tantalizing page in one of his workbooks. In it he speculated on a certain powerful symbol of love, considered from the point of view of sorcery. I recall his words exactly: ‘Surely the very essence of love-magic is unveiled in the Image of the Garden. Enclosed within its walls, Time becomes weak and imprecise, and the moment of the Beloved seems to cut aslant into the fabric of memory. Its doors are everywhere and nowhere, its beauty is heartbreaking and yet utterly serene. There I might retire with my own Witness, where our every pleasure is magically renewed. There also might I send the favored and sincere among my postulants, to enjoy their own amours.’ There follows a scrawl of numbers, names of certain herbs, references to certain texts. These were my clues. I became obsessed.”

“A beautiful image... but I fail to see its relevance to our own violent and rapacious intent.”

“I will speak bluntly. The Garden exists, or is made to exist, in a Dimension of great subtlety, somehow adjacent to our own (to put it crudely)... One might say it occupies the same space but another time, or vice versa. The work is carried out by an Imaginal ceremony of terrific complexity, in which the Garden is visualized and a door into it is created.

“For some reason the door must open through an actual physical doorway, or window, or mirror. Once within the Garden one can exit again through the same door — or through any suitably prepared door — anywhere in the world. To travel far distances takes some ‘time’... Somehow the Garden ‘moves’. But if I had a door here and another door at the Viridine Temple — for example — I could pass from one to another in a few minutes. The preparation of doors is not difficult. I have created some dozens of them already, and hidden them in various spots all over Qamar. I have not yet succeeded in actually opening one

of them yet. But all the signs point to victory now. Soon I will have access to the Garden. You as well. In fact, anyone who carries the correct amulet. So... do you begin to see my idea now, Valamiel?"

"Obviously the Garden would be of great value to a jewel thief. Nevertheless, many questions arise at once..."

"For example," said Zaek, "how to use the Garden to rescue Xiri and Dragon when we do not know the location of their prison."

"That," said Sorolon, "is indeed a question. I will do everything in my power to find that hiding place. Valamiel, pry what you can from Magister Tharactus — but gently, cunningly. He may have lied when he claimed not to be able to reach Marbreuse. But, my friends, tell me this: if all the questions are answered will we dare to go ahead? Or will we shrug, sigh and submit to Marbreuse?"

"You're right. This sounds like it could be our best chance. What do you think, Zaek?"

The barbarian brooded. "I agree," he said at last.

"Good," Sorolon smiled. "Now I can explain to you why I asked you to invite Jethael to visit me today. It was not simply to entertain my nephews!"

JETHAEL AND THE SORCERER'S three apprentices had stripped to their loincloths to play and were now covered with sweat and sandy dirt. When Sorolon leaned out an upstairs window and bellowed, "Varonael! Bring our guest to us here, as soon as you can, please," the littlest brother took the chorister's hand and said, "Come on, Jethi, let's bathe first and dress up."

Jethael followed his guide into the tower and to a crude stone bath chamber. The little one stared at him curiously while he slipped out of his loincloth. The imp said, "You're beautiful, Jethi. And you're a magician, like me. Let's be friends."

"All right," said the chorister, stepping under the water. "But I'm not so sure about the magic."

Varonael stripped and followed Jethael into the shower. "You made the Eye-Blink. I saw it. That's more than I can do — much less either of my brothers." He began soaping Jethael's back. Both of them now sported erections — Varonael's a tiny one, scarcely as long as his own little finger. His skin was nearly as pale and translucent as Jethael's and his hands were tiny, quick as moths.

“Perhaps I did... but perhaps it was the Transformation, and not my own... I mean, I’m only a dancer, not...”

“Sorolon will figure it out and tell you,” said the grave and eccentric child. Boldly he reached down and touched Jethi’s penis with his soap-bubbled fingers.

“You’re beautiful too, Varo, and I’ll be your friend. But we’d better not forget who’s waiting for us.”

“Yes, our lovers. I feel sorry for the nice barbarian, don’t you? But Sorolon says he’ll rescue the slaveboy. We need you to help us.”

“He needs *me*?”

“That’s what I told him,” said the naked sprite, grinning suddenly.

JETHAEL APPEARED ALL in black silk: very short, very loose pantaloons, a tight sleeveless vest with onyx buttons and black velvet slippers. Around his neck, a new gift from Valamiel: a tight necklace of tiny silver beads with one large central nugget of uncut purple amber. His hair uncombed, wet, in charming disorder.

Varonael’s firesilk tunic seemed to coruscate in shades of silver and black, in sympathy with Jethael’s clothes. The smaller boy went barefoot and had drenched himself with essence of some wild-flower. They bowed politely to the three men.

While the children refreshed themselves with milk and cake, Sorolon explained to Jethael — as briefly as he could — about the Garden, its history and purpose. The chorister soon became so fascinated he forgot to eat. Varonael however finished Jethi’s portion as well as his own; got up, shed crumbs on the carpet, walked over to Zaek and planted a big milky kiss on the astonished man’s cheek; then stationed himself behind Sorolon’s chair, arms around the sorcerer’s neck, tiny chin resting on his shoulder: like a cherub perched on a gargoyle.

“Do you grasp the basic idea, Jethael?” asked Sorolon at last.

“I suppose so,” the boy blushed. “But... Sir, what do *I* have to do with all this?”

Sorolon looked almost prophetic. He leaned forward to wave with his pipe, and nearly dislodged his cherub. “I saw what happened at the Temple, Jethael. I suspect that you possess a certain natural ability

which... But tell me, when you dream — awake or asleep — are your dreams not clear as life?”

“Aren’t everyone’s?”

“Tell me: sometimes you are seized with a great excitement, a wonderful feeling of power or perception, such that it seems to flow out of you like light. Correct?”

“Yes... but...”

“Tell me: in the Temple you were Opened, taken by the Transformation. What were you thinking of while you danced?”

“Well... I thought about *Discovery*. How Val discovered me, and I discovered him. About showing him... what I feel. Then I wanted to make everyone else feel it also. The dance seized me then, and I knew what to do without knowing how I knew.”

“Did you notice the Eye-Blink?”

“Yes. But... I thought it was me. I didn’t realize other people could see it. I didn’t understand it at all.”

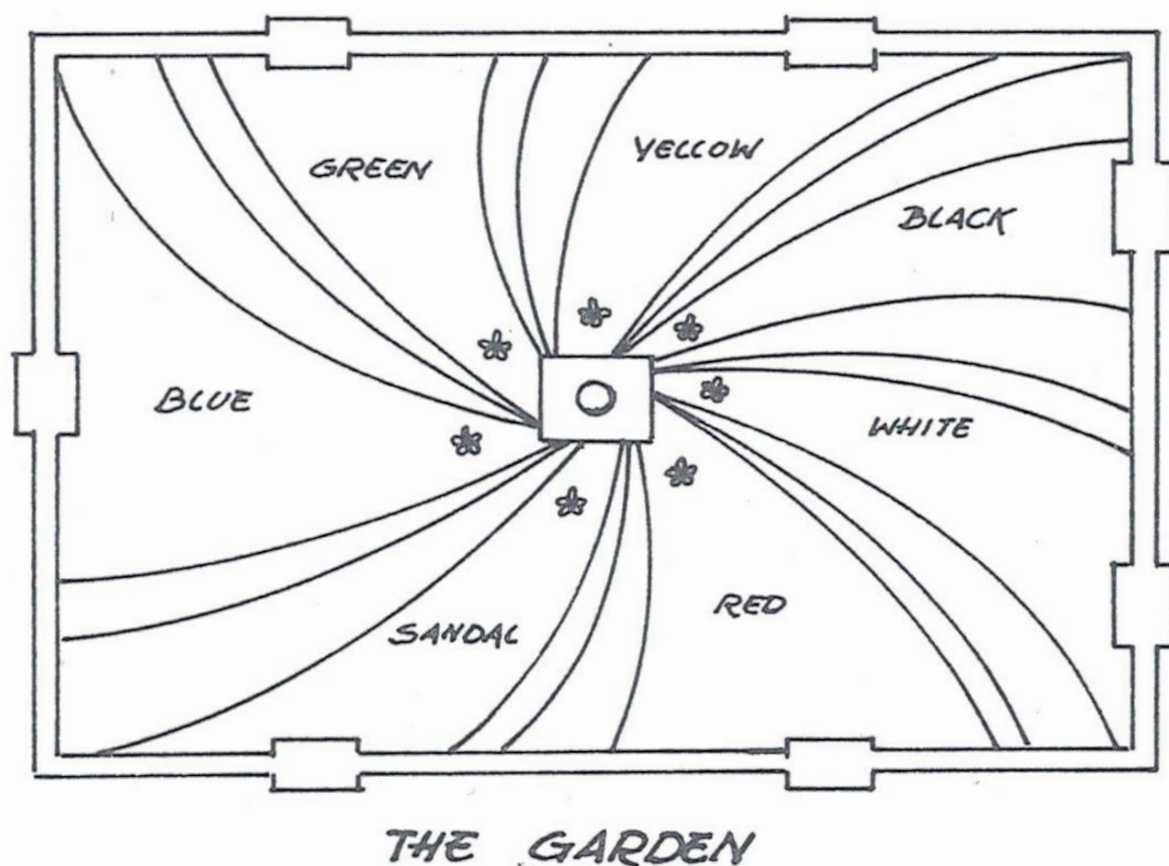
“Listen, my dear: according to legend the Eye blinks — or ‘glances’ — only when a Transformation is achieved. A major Opening. People wept and fainted, Jethi. The change you experienced changed them also. Changed *everything*, in a manner of speaking. The only difference between the ritual of the Temple and the practices of sorcery is that one is performed for spiritual well-being, the other for gain and enjoyment. The power you possess, the power of Transformation, can be directed toward the object of your will. Understand?”

“Not exactly. I don’t feel like a sorcerer. But if I can help save Zaek’s friend and defeat the evil magician, and capture the Crowstone, I’ll try to do what you ask.”

“Excellent. Gentlemen, I have high hopes! Jethael, splendid! Now, for the moment I have little enough to ask of you. I’ve drawn a diagram. I want you to take it and study it.” He reached into his robe and unfolded a small piece of heavy parchment.

Varonael craned his neck to see. “Is that *it*?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s the plan of the Garden. Simple enough, eh? The Walled Garden of the Beloved.”



THREE DAYS WITHOUT RAIN in Suvyamara is a dry spell; a week constitutes a drought. Not that the Oryx ever runs dry, nor any of its fecund mouths that disgorge so relentlessly into the calm Southern Sea. Crops never fail. But the Suvyamarans love rain. After a week of fair weather, now at last a warm faint rain was falling from an intimate grey sky — almost a heavy mist rather than real rain.

Suvyamaran children love to play outdoors in the rain. “Naked, if possible,” said Jethael, so the two of them sat out in the precipitation, in their secret coign or tiny peninsula between the canal and the mossy wall of Perpetual Benefice. Jethael went nude, Valamiel wore a kilt (and a bandage-plaster on his hip). Je-thael’s skin was pale in the grey light, and green bits of grass stuck to his legs and buttocks. They had forgotten the world outside their own Garden, and were caught up once more in the dance of pleasure.

“Val, would you be angry if you found that one of the other boys had been spying on us while we made love?”

“Are *you* angry with him?”

Jethael laughed. “No. He’s silly, but he’s my friend. He won’t tell. Not even the others. Of course, they all know! But only this one actually saw us. When I first... swallowed your jac.” He laughed.

“I suppose it’s Ravinan.”

Jethael nodded. He looked serious. “I’m afraid the others are becoming envious of me, Val. You take me outside the House. You give me things. They can see all that. Ravi, Kael and Michchi guess about our other games, too — and they’re also envious of those. They don’t show it, because they’re my friends... my brothers. But I feel bad about it.”

“Tell me your solution to this problem and I will agree to it at once. (I was sure this would happen sooner or later.)”

“Well, Ravinan says he wants to *watch* us. Kael’s too proud to say anything. I think... after all, Kael and Ravi are my blood brothers, we tasted each other’s blood. Kael is my dancing partner too. If you would... teach them some of the things you’ve taught me, then we could all play together sometimes. I want you to like them. Besides, they’re old enough to make milk. Would you enjoy that?”

“By the Great Ring, Jethi, you amaze me. You claim you can make love a hundred times a day. How can I pleasure you and the others as well?”

“I only want you to make love completely to me! But Val... if possible, I want them to come with us when we leave here in the magic Garden. If you agree. They’re also unhappy here. So we should share all our secrets with them, and not be selfish. All right?”

“I agreed before you asked, Jethael.”

BY COINCIDENCE (if such a thing exists) the very boys themselves, blond Ravinan and redheaded Kael, were hiding not many yards away, occulted by the fronds of a blue willow. The long aquamarine leaves dripped with accumulated rain — like dew — and around them the light shone dim-grey-blue. They peeked out between the shiny leaves. They both wore old-fashioned raincoats of crinkly-thin grey oilskin, and children’s rainboots of shiny black rubber. Under the coats, only wet loincloths, for they’d been swimming (out of bounds) in the canal.

“Can you hear what they’re saying?” whispered Ravi.

“Too far away. But I can see. This isn’t nice,” answered Kael.

“So what? It’s too much fun. And I told Jethi I spied on him once. He only laughed.”

“Still... it’s terribly rude.” Kael’s cape was open and he was fingering himself.

“It was your idea in the first place,” said Ravinan, untying his loincloth.

“VAL, I WANT *us* to be blood-related as well. We must taste each other’s blood. Cut me.”

“I haven’t a knife,” said the monk, blanching.

“Are you frightened? Bite me.”

“I don’t think I could.”

“But if I want you to, it’s all right.”

“There is a way... to draw blood without cutting. If I bite gently and suck your skin...” Valamiel gulped and drew a deep breath, “...the capillaries will break and the pores will exude...”

“Do it here,” said Jethael, pointing to the blue veins on his breast, “so I can see it.”

“It leaves a nasty bruise... called a love-bite.”

“Please!”

Valamiel leaned over the prostrate body and brushed aside a blade of grass. He kissed the preferred flesh, mildly at first (with a brief detour to the nipples), then began sucking, biting, sucking, biting at the same spot on the child’s soft pale breast, above the heart (which beat loudly beneath his lips).

Jethael was masturbating himself dreamily, pulling on the tip of his foreskin, caressing his own flanks and belly. The rain fell warm and delicate in the unmoving air.

“WHAT’S HE DOING?”

“Kissing Jethi’s chest. It’s not as interesting as last time. But I’m sure they’ll do other stuff.” Ravi snuggled close to Kael. “Let’s take off our capes.”

They stood under the blue birdcage of the willow, naked and wet, wearing only their boots. Kael hugged Ravi from behind and pressed his stiff wedge against the blond boy’s soft almost-plump buttocks. Ravi giggled. They peered out from their hiding place again, faces cheek-to-cheek.

JETHAEL'S FINE AND molecule-thin skin bruised almost immediately. After a few minutes, when the monk raised his head, a froth of blood had appeared where his mouth had sucked. The blood deepened the color of his dribbled saliva to pink, then to darker red. Jethi gasped, and as the man bent to lick up and swallow this crimson confection the child spasmed into his first precipitous orgasm, crying out, wounded bird, pinching and jerking at his own cock with thumb and forefinger.

Afterwards he kissed Val as deeply as he could. "Did you like *that* taste?" he asked.

"I have to confess... it seems to have driven me mad... yes, well... I feel like I've smoked vhang, or drunk dreamwine all night. Sorcerer's blood."

"When we have a knife, may I taste yours?"

"You could bite me."

Jethael laughed. "I couldn't!"

"Go ahead. Here at the neck." Jethael tried, but could not bring himself to clamp down hard enough to break the skin. Nevertheless his attempts roused the man to frenzy. He rolled the boy over onto his stomach in the grass and began kissing Jethael's back, then his buttocks, licking up rainwater and blades of grass and swallowing them, teething and sucking the very softest of all flesh. He tongued the coccyx — (a part of the anatomy which seems made for such laving attention) — and prised apart the buttocks with his thumbs. He kissed the anus and licked it.

"Do you want to taste me... *there*?" gasped Jethael, face in the grass.

"Jethi... I want to love every part of you. I need to know all your body."

The boy rolled over again onto his back. He lifted his slender legs in the air and bent his knees, then opened himself as widely as he could. "Do it like this then, so I can see," he commanded.

The monk slid down the grassy slope till his bare feet met the water of the canal. Jethael was open to him, and the boy's genitals jutted above the open thighs, the silky perineum, the miniscule pink hole. Jethael now rested his calves and feet on the monk's bare back and lifted his hips into the air, leaning back on his elbows. The monk

lowered his head toward the waiting nether lips. Both man and boy were trembling.

“I STILL CAN’T MAKE out what they’re doing. It almost looks as if... but...”

“It looks as if Val is kissing Jethi’s ass. Kael, would you let someone do *that* to you?”

“Do you want to try it?”

“Don’t be rude. Seriously.”

“If I loved someone the way Jethi loves Val, then I’d do anything,” said Kael reverently.

“Then would you let him kiss you afterwards, on the mouth?”

Kael couldn’t be bothered to answer. He was trying to push his penis between Ravi’s legs. Ravi clamped his thighs tight, but this only made pushing against them more pleasurable. At last the nose of Kael’s bulbous organ peeped out between the blond boy’s legs, pushing aside his plump scrotum and poking out like a mauve one-eyed lizard. The children stifled their giggles. They spied out into the rain. “I wish someone *did* love. me that much,” said Kael. “Jethi seems to like it a lot.”

THE BEAUTIFUL ANUS smelled mostly of soap. But he could detect other odors as well: rain and grass (but those were outside Jethael’s body — or at least they might or might not be)... and of course it smelled and tasted like the inside of a body, warm and animate, slick and flexible, velvety and mossy, salty and cool, bitter, dangerous, spiritually sweet. His tongue probed gently at the ring, which contracted and relaxed around the invading organ. He licked and kissed, then returned to the attack.

Now the sphincter opened, and a rounded hollow slit of pink appeared in the center of the little violet-brown pucker of flesh. Slowly, easily, the monk thrust his tongue deeper and deeper into this warm slot until it could go no farther. His fingers meanwhile found Jethael’s erection, rigid and jerking. Gently he massaged it, and the boy sighed contentedly.

Now Valamiel wriggled and revolved his tongue in its sheath of flesh, and the muscles of the rectum squeezed and palped his tongue and responded to its curious attentions. Now Val withdrew, sucking at

the same time, so that the anal sphincter ridged up into a little flower of moist pink flesh between his lips. Then, slowly, he thrust forward again and repeated the delirious sequence. With each thrust he seemed able to penetrate a fraction of an inch farther into Jethael's interior. The boy gradually relaxed every muscle in the anal region, and the man himself grew more and more greedy.

Jethael had lost interest in watching this new and startling game. A casual observer might have thought he was throwing a fit. The boy never imagined he could experience such sensations in *that* part of his body. The inside of his rectum felt as if it were lined with the same nerve-sensitive skin as his penis.

His legs clamped tight around the man's neck, his head thrashed from side-to side. In a confusion of tongue, mucous membrane, spit, genitals and hands, Jethael climaxed again.

As soon as he could breathe he rolled down the lawn next to Val, embraced him and kissed him passionately with his tongue. "I don't taste anything in particular," he decided. "Your breath smells like soap, though," he added, grinning.

MONK AND DANCER SAT side by side, legs dangling up to the knees in the green canal. Jethi opened Val's kilt and took out the man's big penis and played with it.

Both voyeurs-in-the-willow stared in fascination, saying nothing. Kael's penis moved between Ravi's legs. Four boyhands stroked and played with two boycocks, but neither of them could say whose was whose.

Jethi began piddling gently into the water.

WITH THE RAIN FALLING into the canal and all around them, much more heavily now, it seemed to them quite natural that sweet-smelling urine should join the downpour and mingle with the tepid stream; Val milked spurt after spurt into the frothing mud and lilypads. They kissed, and Jethael's cock jumped in the man's hand, sending out wild semaphores of spray.

When the last few drops had fallen, Valamiel bent over and kissed the now fully-erect little penis, and slowly engulfed it, and sucked the balls in as well, a mouth full of genitals, slightly redolent of boypiss.

After a while Jethael pushed his head away gently and asked for a kiss. Then he bit the man's nipples. "What if I drew blood?" he giggled.

With an expression of joy, eyes nearly rolled up behind the eyelids, Jethael kissed his lover's penis. He slid even deeper into the canal water, up to his thighs, knees in the muddy silt.

Rain-curved hair tickled cool against Valamiel's belly and groin, but he brushed aside the locks and tresses in order to see Jethael's finely swollen lips distended around the girth of his phallus.

The boy squeezed the swollen sac of testicles and ran his sharp tongue along the underside of the erection. He bit and chewed. He sucked and bobbed his head up and down, and all the while he masturbated himself, his groin nearly submerged in the canal.

UNDER THE WILLOWS, Ravi whispered, "You beast, you've creamed down my legs and all over my ass..."

Kael squeezed Ravi's cock, and the smaller boy hissed and grunted and shot into his friend's hand. "Look," Kael said, "Jethi is swallowing it."

"I told you so."

After a while the spies crept quietly away, raincoats around their naked and rather sticky young bodies.

COMPLETELY SOAKED BY RAIN and canal, man and boy clung together like symbiotes on the grass. "I understand why you like to taste me, Val," the boy whispered. "I like to taste you as well."

The rain caressed them. The afternoon turned the color of a dove's grey thoughts, the dream of an oyster secreting its liquid into a vast grey pearl the size of the sky.

WARM AND DRY NOW, wrapped in Valamiel's black silk Praeceptor's robe, with all the buttons undone and his nakedness exposed, Jethael sat crosslegged on the edge of the bed in the monk's sparsely furnished chamber in Noon Tower.

The boy's eyes were closed, his hair soft and amberdark. The purple bead glowed like a teardrop of wine at his pulsing throat. His astonishing penis still stood erect as hard candy and the texture of his

scrotum was like marzipan. Barefoot, poised, contemplative, dreaming.

He was visualizing the Garden. A great square wall of ancient yellow brick. Seven curved walkways of rough gemstones crushed into gravel, each path a different color. Seven curved streams of cool water. Seven little parks of trees, bushes, hedges, flowers, grass. Seven giant tree-flowers, each with seven giant petals, each tree a different color. In the center a square pool of water, with a statue in the shape of two golden fish chasing each other's tails. Seven horns spouting seven fountains of pure water into the pool.

Every detail of the vision seemed quite clear, even more sharp and precise than his best waking-dreams. Everything was *there*, just as Sorolon had said it would be. He had only to see, to study, to remember the details.

Outside the Garden a desert stretched forth in all directions to an endless horizon. The cobalt blue sky above seemed like a desert sky. The sun felt different somehow. Jethael wondered what the sky looked like at night. Or was it ever dark here?

The scrivener monk sat in a reed chair, watching Jethael at his occult meditation. That sorcerous emanation seemed to flow from the boy again, almost as powerfully as before, during his princess-dance in the Temple. Almost... one might begin to see it. A faint, pulsing light glowing over the radiantly beautiful face and body. (Suddenly Valamiel remembered the strange globe of light around the head of Varonael that first night on Manticore's Tongue.)

To the monk the dreaming boy appeared as nothing less than a god. After years as a mystical skeptic, a heretic and a renegade, he thought, I have found a real religion at last, completely anthromorphic. Or rather paedomorphic. One idol, who is the same as the god himself, soul and body in one, Jethael, twelve-year-old transvestite sorcerer and master of the dance, First Flower of the Inner Transformation. The rest of the church organization: attendant boy-angels. One worshipper, also serving as abject high priest, slave of the deity's whim, sometime tutor to his divine wildness, lecher and goatwolf, celebrant of saliva and other bodily fluids, of black silk against pale immature flesh, of tears and blood shed only for pleasure, of the vast green womb of Suvyamara, its boywhores and painted old men, its fish and its semen, its endless creeks, canals, marshes, dense

parks of rotting orchids; of the oneness of all this palpable reality in the oneness of lover and beloved...

Valamiel had not wept in the Temple, at Jethael's Opening. He wept now.

AND LATER HE WATCHED Jethael asleep - the first time he'd witnessed this, the boy sleeping... looking younger than his age, lashes closed on his white cheeks, hair curling darkly over the tender pillow, lips parted, breathing softly, fingers lightly curled, stretched out, utterly abandoned in sleep, not rolled into a defensive huddle but open to dreams, open to a lover who might dare to embrace a sleeping child — that most subtle form of possession: to caress a boy under his nightshirt as he lies sleeping, dreaming.

Valamiel watched, and watched. Kept watch. Witnessed. Beheld. Jethael's cock stiffened with dreams.

Valamiel was beginning to understand. The monk was mad. I'm beginning to understand, thought Valamiel. I've lost my wits to the hurling Moons, they've rattled away like great spheres of crystal, planets of frozen wine. The boy's mad, young mad, magic and sleepbeauty, spit, sweat, stained loincloth. First Flower of Magic. Dagger to my lips. Idol-worshiper.

*"So since I'm mad, not out of my senses
But enmeshed in them like a phrase of music,
I'll nocturnally secrete this manifesto:*

*You carrion priests and dessicate philosophes
Have made the world into a mask
To hide the pox of your unfulfilled desires!*

*No! By these tresses spread upon the pillow
I swear it, and by this amphibian boy
At home in every ontological sphere,*

*By this mer-boy who swims half up from sleep
To greet me with the flower of his breath
And smiles and plunges into dream again.*

*Lunatic's rhetoric! I touch the truth
With raw-nerved fingers, tracing the flow of life
Through veins and marrow, rivers of light.*

*I declare holy war on fleshless lies!
I kneel by the bed, waiting till morning
To learn once again the color of god's eyes. "*

8.

Delirium Amoris

MIDNIGHT AND CLOUDY AGAIN in this night-haunted Chronicle.

Atop the Bell Tower at Perpetual Benefice a thief ties one end of a coil of black rope to the sturdy frame of the House bell. Dressed all in black, and masked, he tosses the coil over the side of the roof, jumps to the ledge, lets himself over and lowers himself hand over hand down the rope, walking backwards down the stone wall like a spider, leaning out into space.

At a second storey window he ties the rope around his body under his arms, forming a lasso which holds him suspended. Hanging as if by levitation, he reaches into his cloak and takes out a few simple tools. In a moment... a sharp snap... the thief waits, ears cocked for any alarm. Silence.

He pushes open the window, unties himself and slides into the room. From a pocket he takes a “thief’s-eye” lamp with a fisheye lens (opening the lens automatically strikes a flint inside the tube) and clicks it on. Runs it slowly and carefully over the walls.

Bookcases. Serious ugly engravings on religious themes. A clutter of furniture in dull taste. The office of Tharactus, Master of Boys and Head Praeceptor.

Keyholes in the desk yield easily to a few odd hooks and pointed awls. The “tyrant” will never even notice he’s been burgled — unless he inspects his locks with a sunglass. The thief’s hands are agile: as if a little bit of brain tissue has migrated to each fingertip. He arranges

the lamp to throw a footwide pool of light on the desktop and begins riffling through Tharactus' private papers. He enjoys the quasi-sexual excitement of the working night-prowler. He reads on and on...

... Two hours later Valamiel was bored and still unsatisfied. Tharactus kept perfect records, obsessive, neat, rational, and utterly pure.

A quick check around the room failed to turn up hiding-places in any obvious spot. The monk yawned, returned to the desk. He opened the file labelled "House Receipts" — which seemed to deal with monies and holdings of Perpetual Benefice. It was the largest file, and Valamiel had so far merely skimmed through it.

Working back in time, he found a small scrap of paper between two pages dated over a month ago. It looked like this:



A great deal of money for rent (unless it were for1 a veritable palace) — and who was "M"? Another half hour search failed to turn up any "File T". The larcenous monk speculated: "rent" might be a euphemism for "bribe", and File T might be Tharactus' true records, hidden elsewhere than this office.

However... suppose "rent" really means "rent", he thought... and assume that "M" does stand for Marbreuse (or Marchion).

He returned to the file marked "Clan Holdings & Admin." Here indeed were papers concerning a surprising amount of valuable land and holdings — most on Viridine Peninsula — which Tharactus seemed to be administering for his own relatives. None of them

brought in rents over 2,000 annually. Most were family farms. Valamiel made a list of holdings on the peninsula.

He pocketed his list and carefully replaced the files. He snapped the lamp shut, walked to the window, slipped out, caught the rope and lowered himself to the ground.

Then he re-entered the tower through the front door (he'd picked the lock already, two hours ago, when he first went up to the roof). As he climbed the stairs on tip-toe he smiled as he passed Tharactus' office door. So many strong iron bolts and chains! The Master of Boys seemed afraid of thieves.

On the roof again, he untied the rope and re-coiled it, slung it over his shoulder, re-traced his steps, silently closed and locked the tower door behind him and melted into the darkness — back to his own rooms in Noon Tower.

SOROLON SENT FORTH his own “relatives” (former lovers, perhaps?) to spy and puzzle out the implications of Valamiel's list. But the process dragged on and on, and nothing was discovered.

Meanwhile Zaek brooded in his houseboat, or visited Manticore's Tongue under cover of darkness. He seemed able to keep his anguish under control. At night, after Jethael went to bed, the monk would sometimes walk to the boat, visit Zaek and regale him with endless and obsessive accounts of affairs at Perpetual Benefice...

IT'S A GOOD THING I have no duties to perform as a Praeceptor — said Valamiel — since by any ordinary human standard I am undoubtedly insane. All I can think of is Jethael, his desires, his thoughts, his visions, his anatomy, his friends, his kisses. When I'm with him I don't have to think at all, or not in the usual way. He exists, I exist to perceive his existence: a mirror situation, in a sense. Pupils of the eyes reflecting pupils seeing pupils, and so on, to the very edge of perception.

At Jethael's request I gave a party in my rooms for old Poron and the six favored friends. What about the other children of Blue Rain, you may ask — or for that matter, what about the children of the other towers, many of them as handsome and winning as Jethi's crew? But none so beautiful as Jethael. Moreover, what has love to do with fairness?

I served the sort of food likely to be appreciated by my guests, or at least the majority of them (Poron drank tea). Sausages and bread, pitchers of milk, pancakes with roast meat and buttered eggs, a huge cake stuffed with cream and fruit, assorted pastries and confections. No vegetables or fishy gruel. All good manners officially allowed to lapse. Food fights permitted. And all of them had come from swimming and drying themselves in the sun, so they wore only loincloths, and smelled of fresh air and light.

While Poron and I watched the seven smear their cheeks with confectioner's-cream, we talked. "In the temple on the day of Jethael's Opening," I said, "someone remarked he'd 'seen nothing like it since the time of Poron himself. Was this a reference to your past?"

"Possibly. Well, why be modest at my age? If the speaker was ancient he undoubtedly referred to me. Once — believe it or not — I looked very much as your Jethael does now. Does that upset you?"

"Certainly not."

"In those days romantic affairs were carried on more openly than now. Tharactus runs a modest and polite House. But the masters of my time *all* chose boys from the Towers. Two Prsecep-tors fought a duel over me when I was eleven. The winner became my lover, and my tutor. By the time I was thirteen I danced leading parts regularly at the Temple, and every Fifthday some few of the congregation would undergo the Transformation — attributing their ecstasy to my art. In the old language, I was *vaehhfaer*, a medium for the aesthetic perception of Qamarian spiritual teachings. Like Jethael... although he is potentially an even greater dancer than I.

"In those days — pardon the bitterness of old age — real dancers were properly rewarded. Gifts were showered on me by my admirers. My lover was poor. He allowed me to accept the jewels and clothes, to adorn my beauty — hence my dandyism, which persists even today, my last fading lust. The gifts of money we spent on pleasure, or gave away to our friends.

"When I was sixteen I looked scarcely older than Jethi does now, and my nether beard did not appear till a year later. A long career! My lover and I parted friends. But I became rather too promiscuous, taking older men and adolescents and little ones, and smoking too much vhang. I grew up and out of the First Flower. Then I sobered myself, began tutoring at the Benefice. I took boys as lovers — one at

a time — and brought them up one by one: sweet dancers, Transformationists. Many had talent.

“But whoever dropped that remark in the Temple was correct. Between Poron and Jethael, no one of such magnitude. I’m happy to have trained him, and rather sorry I’m so far beyond all but the most abstract appreciation of his beauty. You must take credit for bringing him awake. It’s nearly always love that sparks the Opening, you know, for these cloistered crossdressed boys. It’s in the very stones of the House... and Tharactus is blind to it, blind! You and I and the boy, we’ve managed to strike one more flash, and revive the tradition for a moment. But here in Suvyamara, I’m the very last. Jethi should go to Thuren, where the Transformations still move whole villages to ecstasy, ardor and tears, to warlike courage or necessary compassion. I don’t expect you to be here for long, somehow, my dear young sir. When you leave, take him. But don’t keep him from the dance.”

“Your advice meets with my own intentions... should the future prove as you picture it,” I answered. “I find myself not at all disappointed, but rather deeply pleased to learn that Jethael is not a unique incarnation, but instead my special incarnation of the universal beloved, the Suvyamaran Varon, avatar of a particular beauty. It deepens my sense of oneness with the Qamarian traditions I most admire: spiritual exaltation — and boy-love!”

THE OLD DANDY MIGHT have been impotent, but I noted his eyes roved with some appetite over the array of almost naked boys, now fully gorged, who lounged about my rooms.

Michchaeris and his little brother made a fascinating sight. They never stopped touching each other, wrestling, cuffing, biting — Daevaen squirming on the dark boy’s lap, giggling and pinching. Michchi shyly tried to hide his prodigious erection — but a loincloth is not a modest garment. Obviously they hovered on the brink of incest — if they hadn’t already toppled.

Little Venyamin with his mop of burnt-honey curls and his weird slanted tawny eyes appears to me the most beautiful of all the boys in House except Jethael. Venya is an archetypal Nine: open, trusting, sweetnatured, still involved with stuffed animals and toys, not very clean, primitively sensual. In his case, totally uninhibited, untamed by

any but the vaguest sense of propriety. He masturbates like a monkey when he feels like it, openly, almost unconsciously.

Jethael sat opposite me on the couch, his bare feet in my lap, a cape across his loins to hide his own excitement. Ravinan and Kael hovered around him, touching him, smiling.

At the last bell Poron rose and began shepherding the boys out. Reluctantly they went (but Jethael whispered something in the ears of his two bloodbrothers). Poron took little Anathael's ivory hand and led him away, smiling up at the old man from under his chestnut bangs... Who knows? Even such a doddering relic still remembers how to please a boy...

When Kael and Ravinan snuck back into the room five minutes later, Jethael had kicked open my kilt and was rubbing my cock with his bare feet. He'd flung aside his cape and torn off his loincloth. Modestly I drew my kilt together as the two entered, but one of Jethi's feet remained hidden under the cloth, and his toes flexed against my bare genitals while I spoke to the other children.

I re-greeted them with more-than-avuncular kisses and made them sit with us on the couch — which was capacious enough for three boys to cluster warmly and intimately around one prostrate thirsty mad monk. I didn't need to make a long speech, because Jethi had told them what to expect.

"You are Jethi's friends and bloodbrothers, which makes you my kin as well. He wants you to be happy, and I wish the same." With both hands I reached out and touched the swollen pouches of their loincloths. "I see you're ready to give me your milk. I'm very eager to taste it."

"Me first!" grinned Ravinan, lifting himself so I could peel away the little garment. His plump erection sprang out like the tongue of a trap. Golden fuzz made his groin glow, and his scrotum was swollen, a pink pouch of twin sugarballs which I was unable to resist.

As I rolled the pouch around in my mouth Kael said, "Aren't you angry with us for spying on you, Val?"

I raised my head to answer. "Not in the least, my dears. To tell the truth, the very thought of it... rather excites me. Anything you might have seen... Jethael says you may ask me to teach it to you as well."

"Anything?" asked the wicked Ravinan.

"Whatever Jethael allows."

“Then, Jethi... may he *please*... Val, would you?”

“Don’t be shy,” said Jethi, grinning and kicking aside my kilt again, stroking my fevered weapon with his cool toes.

“Well, then... please stick your tongue... *here*.”

Ravanan lifted his legs to display his anus, pink and plump, tiny and rosy, puckered and innocent as a baby’s. “I’m very clean.”

As you may imagine, I needed no further prompting. Tenderly I kissed, licked, probed and gently bit. “That feels lovely,” said the blond boy, leaning back and closing his eyes, spreading his haunches so I could lick even deeper while he jerked at his own little phallus.

But I had no intention of letting him spill his milk. After a few minutes I withdrew my tongue from the intestinal tunnel and inserted the middle finger of my left hand in the spit-coated fundament instead. Then I began sucking Ravi’s penis. A short-lived pleasure.

With a monstrous sigh he clenched for orgasm. His twig gained another half inch in length. I pumped my finger into his bottom. He spurted a teaspoon of lightly flavored syrup down my throat, and I swallowed it.

Much as I love Jethael, I must admit that the taste of semen hit me like a dose of ambrosia. Ravanan allowed himself to be kissed, somewhat apprehensively — but when he could detect no lingering flavor but that of his own perfumy milk, he gladly let me suck his tongue. “Thank you, Sir,” he giggled.

Kael was already stripped for his turn. Jethael embraced his auburn dancing partner and played with the red rooster, demonstrating to me its thick and peculiar appearance. I daresay some might have found it ugly: an almost unskinned texture, bulging veins, the shaft so bent it almost seems askew, heavy as a blackjack at the head, so that the whole organ has the look of a bludgeon. Fleshy pendulous foreskin, nearly purple in color. Shiny, slick redhead’s penis, surrounded by wisps of russet fur, with heavy dangling testicles. All this... and the boy’s body still so young, just barely beginning to stretch with adolescence, his voice just on the verge of breaking... and such wicked green eyes, scarlet hair, freckles...

Kael pulled away from Jethi’s arms and embraced me violently. Thrust his tongue inexpertly and clumsily into my mouth. Then, “I’m very happy that you love us too,” he said, blushing, “because we love you very much — or at least I do...”

“Me too!” said Ravinan.

“...and we love Jethi, and we want to stay with you. Always.”

Everyone kissed everyone else, quite solemnly. Then Ravinan said, “Now... what are you going to teach Kael?”

“I’ll do anything you ask, Val. You can beat me, if you like...” the redhead blushed again.

“Kael! Why should I want to do such a thing?”

“I think he *enjoys* it,” said Ravinan with leering relish. “He always gets a bone when someone spansks him — unless it’s Tharactus!”

“Kael is brave,” protested Jethael. “He sticks up for us and fights with bullies from the other towers. He’s our Tryptarch.”

“Well... he sticks up for me too, it seems,” I said, caressing the red rooster, and earning myself a round of giggles.

“Kael, listen: I have no interest in caning you...”

(Was I being entirely honest?)

“...but I’d love to try this sugar-cane... and these... and this sweet as well. Will you let me taste you as deeply as Jethi and Ravi?”

“Oh, of course!”

But Kael hated to be a copycat. Instead of imitating the others, he turned over on his hands and knees, doggy fashion, arched his thin back and pointed his slender-muscle buttocks up in the air. Spanking position, I thought, trembling with anticipation.

Kael’s buttocks were tense as I kissed them. The bud between them — like his penis — seemed somehow quintessential *redheaded*. I mean, not tiny, soft and pink, as with Jethi and Ravinan, but large, ridged with bumpy brown flesh, and centered in the midst of a sunburst-pattern of crinkly brown rays. The sphincter opened, and I could actually see into the rectum, a half-inch-deep hole of moist redness.

Again, perhaps some might have quailed at this sight. But it was clean, and smelled of Kael’s unique perfume... a bit like water-mink, cinnamon, salt, burnt sugar and soap. (Perhaps, Zaek, the boys of this city are not really human at all, and use their charming nether-holes only to exude an alien but enticing musk or glandular secretion that inflames and perverts the soul of the adult male... into a state of permanent rut.)

Sucking and reaming Kael's behind was perhaps the most agonizingly decadent experience of my life. Not angelic, like making love to Jethael... (whose feet, by the way, had to be removed from my crotch lest I lose myself entirely). No, Kael's ass upset me, almost made me queasy — but turned the queasiness into burning, so that I seemed to see stars before my eyes, as if I were about to faint. Somehow the redhead was kissing me with his... with his...

I pulled away, gasping almost in pain. When I could see clearly, Kael had rolled over onto his back and was pulling me to him. "Please kiss my lips now," he begged — and blushing furiously he probed my mouth with his tongue till I nearly blacked out again.

By the time I managed to get his penis in my mouth it was nearly too late. The almost-misshapen member was bone-rigid and angry scarlet. With a scream that might have been heard in Bell Tower he began ramming himself into me, and I very nearly choked on him. I opened my throat and the silky weapon penetrated to the larynx. My jaws were stretched, and his pendant scrotum slapped against my beard. Ten thrusts... and again I almost gagged, this time on what felt like one, two jiggers of milk... almost cream, really, much thicker than Ravi's... salty and musky, viscid ichor of adolescence. I could have swallowed it all at once, but I let half of it dribble out onto the penis and groin, so I could see it and smell it and lick it up. Kael squeezed his rubbery cock till one more gout collected in the cup of the foreskin, and I swallowed that as well.

JETHAEL APPEARED AGITATED.

"Please, Val... come and have a bath with me now."

Ravanan protested: "You promised we could watch!"

"Let Jethael alone!" snapped Kael. "He wants to be private for once. Besides..." He whispered in the blond boy's ear. Ravanan snickered and said, "All right. But you have to go first."

Outside in the hall, on the steps, we paused. I kissed Jethael and said, "What's the matter? You seem upset."

"I guess I *am* jealous," he muttered, "because they can give milk, and I can't."

"You know I love only you. If you like, I'll never touch them again."

“Oh no, I don’t mind that. I’m glad we all love each other. But I want to do something to prove I love you the most. Something the others couldn’t do for you. You haven’t loved me *completely* yet. That’s what I want.”

“Jethael... I couldn’t adore you more totally. But... what exactly do you mean?”

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“I want you to put your penis into me instead of your tongue. You know, down below.”

My knees felt weak. “Let’s go to the bath. I need to sit down,” I quavered.

“JETHAEL, YOU’RE TOO SMALL, too delicately made. I’m terrified of hurting you. We have time for that... wait a year or so...”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Well... I...”

“Kael told me it’s what real lovers do. He heard about it somewhere, and I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I don’t mind if you hurt me.”

“But I mind, very much. You have no idea how much it might...”

“I don’t care. I don’t. I *want* you to. Please?”

“Well...”

“If it’s too painful to bear I’ll tell you, I promise. Val, I have to... I have to do everything with you. I’m not afraid. Take me, ask whatever you want.”

“All right. But Jethi, you’re too nervous, too tense. Let me worship you first, let me taste you and open you slowly.”

The tile bench was strewn with towels and pillows, for the bath has become a favorite resort with us. The floor too was comfortably padded, so that I could kneel before my altar of boyflesh.

I caressed his bare feet, and with a laugh he pushed one of them into my crotch again. The other foot I raised to my lips and covered with kisses. At last I dared what I’ve dreamed of so often. As if Jethi’s slender white foot were a penis, I began sucking it. I opened my mouth and licked between his toes. I kissed each one of them and nibbled them and tried to swallow them — while he flexed and wriggled them to tickle the inside of my mouth.

You won't believe this, Zaek... I scarcely understand it myself, but... neither he nor I was touching his penis as I sucked his foot, but suddenly he climaxed. Just my mouth on his toes made him climax.

And then later, after I'd fellated and analingused him and fellated him, he climaxed again. His legs relaxed and his feet, both of them, slid against my thighs, he sprawled out as if flattened by gravity... but since he was still at least three-quarters erect, I continued rabbit-like to nibble at him. He squirmed.

"Val, will you please put your penis inside me now? I can't wait anymore."

I was by now in no condition to argue with the boy about possible damage to his fundament. He said he didn't want a shower. He said he wanted it now, and pulled up his knees again and pried open his anus with trembling fingers.

Kneeling on a folded towel, I was able to position myself between his upraised legs, so that my weapon pointed toward his target. I asked him to spit copiously into my hand, which he did with delight. I rubbed the white saliva around the ring of his anus and onto the head of my cock. I nosed the tip against his flesh, and the sphincter tightened instinctively and convulsively. Jethi was pale and trembling, but his penis was again quite rigid.

I pushed forward, and gradually, reluctantly, the tiny ring began to open. With an excruciating sensation I slipped the crown through the stretched and still very tight lip... till the head alone disappeared into the creamy incision. I paused. "It hurts..." Jethael whispered. "But don't stop."

As slowly as I could, pausing with each fraction of an inch, I moved myself deeper and deeper. Jethi raised himself on his elbows and bent himself forward to watch, as my phallus crept notch by notch into his belly, vanishing into the most secret mossy moist part of his body. At last it came to a stop, buried to the hilt. "I can feel you inside me, almost to my stomach. I'm all on fire or something... Push it in more."

His slender body shook violently. He seemed terribly small, slight, tender, virginal. I could feel myself, past the light bone-structure of the pelvis, surrounded by velvet, in a steamy trap of dark light, caught, snared by my tail.

Slowly I pulled out against the clinging suction of Jethi's rectum, till almost the whole length of me was visible again — then just as slowly pushed in again. He moaned. Tears trickled out of the corners of his eyes. He gritted his teeth till they squeaked. "Make it hurt more."

And I lost control. I plunged brutally into him. His hands Hew back, his head thrashed wildly (long tresses across his eyes), he choked and pleaded and cried and laughed.

He must have felt me explode inside him. His intestine spasmed and milked at my cock. I spurted three times. I banged forward, fell back, shuddered. My body thrust me forward again, one last grinding plunge into his bowels.

I collapsed. I slid out of him, still erect and dripping semen on his soft thighs. I stumbled, fell to the floor, annihilated...

He recovered first. He rolled over and fell down on top of me, covered me with his body, and with kisses. Cuddled himself into my arms. Tongue in my mouth, on my neck, teeth, lips and breath on my ear, biting me. Hands soothing me, small supernatural hands. I passed out.

FOR A FEW DAYS AFTER my party ripples spread out from the events which happened there and changed Perpetual Benefice in certain respects. The six attendant angels learned a great deal. Ravinan and Kael spread the gospel, and gave demonstrations. Every once in a while — well, let me be honest — nearly every day, they present themselves to me to be fellated — a special privilege — while Jethael watches, gently caressing me (or them).

Not surprisingly, Michchaeris has chosen his little brother to experiment with, or on. Daevaen adores him, as any ten-year-old might adore his big brother, and of course Michchi takes full advantage of this. Their lovemaking is astounding to witness. Looking like a larger and smaller version of the same dark radiant person, they wrestle, shriek, bite, punch, kick, pull each other's hair, call foul names and laugh uproariously. Soon they're exchanging kisses as well as slaps to the head. They tickle each other. They tear off each other's clothes. Bounce on the bed. Spit at each other. Grab, grope, goose, squeal. And then Daevaen's head is bobbing up and down between big brother's thighs. He looks up with sticky milk running out of his lips

and down his chin, grinning like a tomcat. Tries to spit it into Michchi's mouth, gets punched, kissed, spanked and rubbed off. Falls asleep in Michchi's arms, sucking his thumb; not his own thumb, his brother's thumb.

As for Anathael and Venyamin, who room together, I suppose they're a "pair" as well. Since the night of the party, however, Anathael has been dressing more neatly, tagging around after old Poron, and clinking silver pennies in his pocket. I believe the ancient pederast has corrupted the boy. Anath is silent and shy, keeps his own secrets under that mop of bangs. Heaven knows what he does to Venyamin — or vice versa — when they're alone in their room. Venya's really too young to be interested in love affairs. If he loves anyone beside his stuffed animal (species unknown), it must be Jethael. He worships Jethi with a nine-year-old's utter enthusiasm, abstract and pure. He longs to be a great dancer too, he says. And he might be.

The only one who disturbs me — in a way — is Kael. He's so excitable, moody, idealistic, wild sometimes to the point of questionable sanity. And so pubescent! His loincloth is always stained. His weird penis is always stiff. Whenever he looks at me I imagine him saying, "Immolate me. Penetrate me. Make me feel such pain and pleasure that I scream and writhe." Am I imagining these things — or is he? He's only fourteen — does he realize how his eyes betray him? Or perhaps I'm dreaming it all? I think perhaps it would be a good idea if Kael had a grown-up of his own to play with.

You see... I keep trying not to think this way... but Kael is Jethael's partner. Bloodbrother. Devoted admirer. Fierce protector. Prince to Jethi's princess. If I weren't around Kael would also without doubt have become Jethi's lover. The two of them resonate together, both as dancers and as sexual beings. As for me: I never expected to feel so strongly about Kael, until I actually made love to him that day. Now, after I've repeated the process a few times, I can't disguise these feelings from myself, or from the boys, much longer.

Yesterday I told Jethi more or less what I've just told you, since I would never dream of trying to hide these sentiments. "It's not that I love Kael as I love you," I said, "but somehow he seems to me like... an extension or prolongation of you. He seems wrapped up in our fate..."

“But that’s just what I was trying to tell you, that day in the rain. I *want* you to love them. Don’t you feel the same way about Ravi?”

“Ravinan is sweetness personified. I cherish him. But... don’t you feel it? With Kael? It’s different somehow.”

“It’s because Kael is in love with us. With you *and* me, I think. Sometimes — when he kisses me — I can feel it. And when he’s with you, he goes crazy... when you do that to him. It’s a special feeling for him. For Ravi, it’s just fun. But for Kael...”

“What should we do about this?” I asked.

“Well... I think we’d better be alone with him. Talk with him. And then; the three of us... make love together. Then everything will be clear.”

VALAMIEL’S LONG NARRATIVE came to a halt. The next day was Fifthday, and Jethael was to perform again. Therefore the monk had visited the barbarian, leaving the boys alone to work with Poron. He wanted them to catch up on their sleep, to prepare themselves for the tremendous expense of energy needed to dance with Transformational intensity. “Moreover,” Valamiel added as he yawned and stretched and prepared to leave the houseboat, “I need the time for rest myself. I can’t sleep when I’m with Jethael, or sometimes when I’m simply near him. He worries about my health and sanity, for he himself needs ten hours or more sleep every night.”

“Well, you’ve wasted your chance. It’s almost dawn and the Temple will be stirring in a few hours. And you’ve talked the night away again, scrivener.”

“I’ll manage a good nap at least. Jethael will be busy all day, but won’t dance till late afternoon. Today’s Epode, despite its enticing title — *The Marriage of Moon and Storm* — is probably one of the longest and dullest rituals ever devised — or so says old Poron. Only one good duet occurs, near the end: a dance of love between stormgod Kael and Moon-shamaness Jethael.”

“How bitterly I curse Marbreuse. Not only for his crimes against Xiri and Dragon, but now for keeping me penned up here, afraid of Enforcers and sorcerers, deprived of the chance to see Jethi change the world again.”

The monk embraced his comrade. “Scarcely three weeks remain till the ritual of the Crowstone. Then our world will change indeed —

for better or worse, to put it mildly. Be of good cheer. While away the time with some vhang. I'll be back another night soon to lecture you again."

AND SO INDEED two days passed, and Valamiel came again to the house-boat, looking more wildly exalted than before — circles under his eyes, which gleamed with an almost saintly mildness, welcoming the martyrdom of love and babbling a brilliant but febrile rhetoric of pleasure so unimaginable as to seem dangerous, possible only in dreams.

"In fact," said the mad monk, "I'm dreaming *inside out*, I think. In my few hours of sleep, perhaps I migrate to some dreary *real world* and eke out a boring existence there as a clerk. I fall asleep in that world and wake here in dreaming Qamar again. Of course this is all nonsense, because I dream only of Jethael, not of some other world. Jethael is my only world..." and so on, in this vein, for some time.

At last Zaek demanded a coherent account of recent events at Temple and afterwards. Valamiel pulled himself together with a glass of wine and launched forth once more on the stream of narrative.

I ARRIVED AT THE Viridine Temple an hour before Jethael's dance, and for the first time found it difficult to secure a vantage from which to watch the ritual. The place was crowded — not packed, as for a major festival — but crowded. My prediction to Tharactus had come true after all. My ruse has sparked a religico-aesthetic revival in Suvyamaranism!

At last I stationed myself near the musicians and Poron, and prepared to behold the ceremony. For what seemed an endless time the chorus and cantor droned on. The boys were dressed in curious dull silver costumes, the light was dim. I noticed Sorolon in the crowd, with little Varonael beside him.

At last the slow humming chant rose to an organically ponderous crescendo, and then abruptly ceased. All the instruments around me crashed into a loud skirling pulsing swirling almost cacophonous wall of sound. From one of the low side arches Kael appeared, walking in the curious stiff formal sliding motion that indicates the character of a divine manifestation. He reached the center of the Temple floor, and stopped.

He wore only black: a short silk full-sleeved tunic, bound with a belt of onyx beadwork, and a cape made of long black silk ribbands which fluttered when he moved. On his feet, curious black slippers with laces that crisscrossed up his bare legs and were bound at his thighs with black velvet cord. Over all this blackness his fiery hair blazed dramatically, almost painful to the eyes.

Now Kael launched into a strange and disturbing dance, violent with seemingly epileptic movements — which were however repeated in sequence exactly, making it clear that some pattern must emerge. Gradually it became clear that these spastic jerkings and leaps and twitches were timed to the loud pulsing rhythmic cycle of the music. And then I realized the pattern: this was the god of Storm, symbolic of the heaven of endless wind around which the Ring of Moons revolves in its Great Year. Now Kael's madcap and sinister gyrations took on an eerie beauty, the precise beauty of violent weather, turbulent, anonymous, grandiose.

Now, at the arch, Jethael appeared. His costume revealed him as a shamaness, but was stylized beyond all gender or representationalism. Over his amberblack hair a headdress of lyrebird feathers trailed down his back. Over his face a delicate half-mask of crystal prism, tiny sapphires, cut viridine and silver mesh; it scarcely disguised his features, but transformed them supernaturally into a visage of haunting artificiality. His loose short pantaloons and tight sleeveless vest were cut of the same dull silver silk the chorus wore — but the color almost matched Jethael's skin, and made him look naked. Around his waist was cinched a heavy belt of solid silver engraved with runes. Attached by links to this belt, delicate silver chains dangled in loops around his bare knees. His hands and feet were bare. This version of an ancient shamaness' costume was meant to symbolize the Moon's yearning for the god of Storm, the longing of earth for sky (and also the intercalation of the Suvyamaran tidal year with the Great Year of the Ring — but I won't go into that).

So Jethael began to orbit around Kael. He matched the redhead's stationary violence with a swooping circling undulating smoothness. His bare feet seemed almost as eloquent as his hands in describing the graceful yearning lunar emotions of an entranced soul — feminine yet inexorable as the surge of the tides.

It took Jethael about fifteen minutes to circle three times around Kael. As he did so, by imperceptible degrees his dance began to take on certain characteristics of Kael's dance, and vice versa. Jethael's movements grew more rapid, rhythmical and insistent, while losing none of their sinuosity or grace. Kael's became more graceful, less inhuman, but no less stylized and violent.

At last the Moon's baroque orbits began to coincide with the whirling maelstrom of the Storm. Jethael described narrower and narrower circuits around Kael, who turned always to face him as he revolved.

For a single moment all movement and all music ceased — then abruptly began again. The effect of this sudden stoppage and starting constituted an aesthetic shock of great potency. Several of the congregation cried out as if in pain or ecstasy. Jethael and Kael were now mirror-dancing again, in a style compounded half of lunar serpentine movements, half of blustering thundery swirls and kicks. They matched each other with such crystalline perfection that I moaned with almost superstitious awe.

On the Temple floor people began to keel over in dead faints. I wondered if the Eye would Blink again. But this time a different miracle was to occur.

As the primitive music of baroms, gongs and zerbals moved to a climax, the dancers drew closer and closer together, mimic-ing each other. The music stopped again, and on the exact beat Moon and Storm stopped as well, facing each other in a stylized pose, fingertips almost touching, eyes locked: a symbolic embrace.

At that precise moment a spherical halo of greenish sorcerous light suddenly enveloped Jethael's shoulders and head. In a split second it seemed to burst into ghostly flames and flicker out, sucked into some other Dimension.

Someone screamed in terror.

Kael had seen the halo-flame, and was visibly shaken by it. Still, he held his pose. Jethael seemed not to have noticed it.

Slowly they turned and left the floor, walking the god-walk. The music began again.

Voices buzzed. Voices wept.

I found Sorolon among the agitated crowd of worshippers. Varonael was bouncing up and down with glee. “He did it! Jethi *glowed*! Did you see?”

“Did you teach him, Varo?” I asked.

“No, he learned it by himself.”

“What does it mean?” I addressed the ugly sorcerer. His face was alive with ill-suppressed elation. “It means,” he said, “that we are nearly ready now. Jethael’s hand is on the very gate of the Garden itself.”

OLD PORON WAS SO PLEASED he wept. He kissed the two boys as we all walked back to Perpetual Benefice in a parade of deacons, masters, sub-cantors, praeceptors, chattering children in silver clothes. Jethi and Kael seemed slightly dazed, soaked with perspiration. I told them that they could have any reward they liked within my power to bestow.

“I’ve already received five gifts from people in the Temple, packages and letters. Kael got three, and there’s another one for both of us together. Ravinan’s carrying them for us. I opened one, it’s a gold chain, looks very valuable. But I have an idea...” Jethi whispered in Kael’s ear. The redhead blushed and nodded. “We want to stay up and have supper with you, Val, and sleep late tomorrow morning. All right, Poron? Please?”

“Just this once I’ll allow it,” said the old dandy, raising an ironic eyebrow at me. “But try to get some sleep before rehearsal tomorrow.”

Night had fallen by the time the three of us reached Noon Tower. While I helped them out of their costumes they tore open their gifts. The elaborate and exquisite clothes, soaked in sweat, excited my senses almost as much as the sight of their bodies becoming more naked with each garment or jewel I removed. The gifts included several gold chains, an antique gold coin, a flask of stagflower attar, a crude wooden carving of the goddess from some pious soul. Then a packet of diaphanous chartreuse loincloth material (“from some very rude person!” said Kael). And, most impressive, a pair of sashes cut from a length of fire-silk which might have cost a thousand sequins.

When they were both naked I embraced them and sent them to the bath, while I laid out a cold supper for them of milk, meat and cakes.

They returned scrubbed dry and combed, dressed only in gold chains and beads, and the firesilk scarves — which did very little for their immodesty. Jethael put the exquisite Moon-mask on his face again and admired himself in my full-length mirror. Kael touched his hands to Jethi's shoulders. "How did you do it?" he asked. "The... halo of green fire?"

The smaller boy gazed into the mirror at Kael's reflected face. "I didn't mean to do it, but somehow just as we stopped dancing, and I knew we'd been perfect, I felt a wave of that... emanation, or magical vibration... and I thought I was glowing. I didn't know anyone else could see it till you flinched."

Supper would have been over in five minutes if I hadn't told them to slow down. "Don't give yourselves tummy-aches. Great artists have civilized conversations at table, they don't gobble and spill milk on their chins."

"Dancing is hungry work," said Kael, caressing my leg with his bare foot and chewing a piece of cake.

"So is sorcery," added Jethael, smiling at me through his mask of gems.

They tried kissing me with their mouths full of food. I ate prechewed cake and drank milky sweet saliva, which I took from their lips. While they helped themselves to more, and emptied the pitchers, I opened their sashes of firesilk and rubbed their bare flesh with the scintillant and reptile-cool-smooth cloth.

Jethael took off his mask, wiped his face and licked his fingers. "Listen, Val," he said commandingly, "you promised us a treat, whatever we wanted. What we want is for you to make love with us, exactly the same. Both of us, completely. Whatever you do to me, you have to do with Kael. Just this once, anyway, Val, please? To show Kael how much we love him?"

I looked at the redhead. His green eyes pleaded, and he blushed violently. (I adore his blushes, which are not gentle and shy, like Jethi's, but ruddy and ferocious, freckled and embarrassed.) "I understand," I said. "Today Moon and Storm became one. I wish devoutly to embrace that oneness, and be possessed and ravished by it. Kael, you know how I love Jethi. Both of us love you as well. Both of us are hungry for you."

“I love both of you, too,” said Kael gravely and earnestly. “I feel like with Jethi I’m a boy, and with you I’m a girl. I don’t know what I am. But... but... let’s go to bed!”

STRIPPED OF THEIR FINERY the two children fell on my couch together hugging each other with every limb, thighs thrust together, mouths locked. As if they were indeed a single being I hovered over them and caressed them simultaneously and intimately.

They broke from their oneness and instead attacked me, tore off my clothes, kissed me. Jethael chewed on my nipples and Kael bit my neck. It would be impossible to remember and describe each three-way caress, Zaek. Sometimes two of us against one, sometimes all three in an inextricable tangle and confusion of naked flesh and laughter.

At one point Kael bit my arm so hard he nearly broke the skin, and to make him stop I pinched his buttocks. Then, without thinking, I playfully spanked them, one stinging slap. Kael laughed, delighted.

“You said you didn’t want to beat me,” he grinned. And with that he bit me again — hard. I spanked him again, but his teeth only clamped tighter. Finally I began really spanking him. His tight slender buttocks are fair with a redhead’s fairness: very quickly they became pink as blushing cheeks. I stopped, and Kael glanced up at me, grabbed me and kissed me. He rubbed himself avidly. “I wouldn’t care if *you* caned me,” he said.

“You have to spank *me*, now,” said Jethael. “That’s the rule!”

Zaek, it must be that nearly all boys like to be spanked by someone who loves them. This is not the first time I’ve noticed it. Nor is it the first time I’ve noticed that I enjoy it as well. The idea of punishing a boy fills me with disgust. But... I know within myself that when a boy strikes me or bites me in play, even very severely, I feel only pleasure. Why should I imagine that boys are different?

Jethael pinched and bit and goaded me into spanking him too — a few love pats, really. He’s so much more delicate than Kael... the marks of my hands left bright spots on his translucent white flesh, his soft curved buttocks... and his penis jerked with pleasure at each slap, pinch, tweak of the fingers against his bottom.

I fell to my knees behind him and fell to sucking and biting the twin milk-globes. He stood, one hand on his hip and the other toying

with himself, bent slightly forward, allowing me to slide my tongue between his pink nates and finally thrust it rudely into his rectum.

Then of course I had to do the same for Kael. I lay full length on the couch, head propped on a pillow. Jethi sprawled over my legs and played with my genitals. I asked Kael to straddle my shoulders, facing away from me, and gradually lower his hips and thrust them back against my face till I could spread apart his slender buttocks and expose his crinkled pink-and-brown confection. I wet it thoroughly with saliva, then pulled Kael off balance so that he suddenly sat back with his full weight on my face. I sucked the loose, flesh of the sphincter into my mouth and gently worried it with my teeth. Then I extruded my tongue into the hole, as far as it would go. Once again I felt the strange oscillatory spasms of the membrane-coated muscles within Kael's rectum. Jethi was kissing the head of the readhead's penis now, and pulling roughly at the pendulous scrotum.

"Wait... wait...," gasped Kael. "I have to jac now. Let me..." Adroitly (with an athlete's grace) he flipped himself around, still straddling my body, so that his bizarre-looking penis threatened my lips. I reached for his buttocks and pulled his slenderness forward slowly, taking the prick gradually deeper into my mouth till it wedged itself against my larynx. He leaned over me, resting his elbows on the headboard of the couch, and began using my mouth, pinning me heavily to the pillow, nearly choking me. I could feel that Jethi was embracing Kael from behind and kissing the redhead's buttocks, trying to ram his little pointed tongue up his bloodbrother's terminal bud. At length he succeeded, and Kael began moaning. Then at once I felt salty bullets of boyslime splashing into my gullet almost faster than I could gulp them down.

Jethi wanted the same treatment. He lay on his back with his legs spread open at the edge of the couch. I licked his anus, kneeling before him, and Kael kissed and blew his little penis... Then Kael and I switched roles: I sucked the rod while the god of Storm gingerly tasted the tiny open nipple of the Moonboy's ass — and finally dared to dart his raspberry tongue into its depths. Till Jethi climaxed.

Kael and I hugged and soothed him till he caught his breath, and rewarded us both with kisses.

JETHAEL NOW UNVEILED his master plan for this strange triumphal evening of love. The idea was, of course, as ancient as the hills. But Jethi believed he'd invented it himself. "If I kneel on the bed," he explained, "and Kael sticks his penis in me, then you can put yours in Kael. Then he'll be in the middle. And you can love both of us at once, completely."

I asked the redhead if he'd ever been loved from behind. No, he answered, but once when he was masturbating he poked a candle up his ass, and found it stimulating. "Of course, yours is much bigger than a candle, and probably it'll hurt. Jethi told me how it hurts. Can we do it now, please?"

So Jethael, jubilant at his success, sprawled face down in the pillows, angel-rump upraised. I wet and re-stiffened Kael's weapon with my lips and helped him insert it slowly into Jethi's sacrificial stretched-wide sphincter — a sight that excited me till I slavered like a werewolf.*

Now I positioned myself behind the redhead, and pushed him forward till he covered Jethi as an animal covers its mate. His slender buttocks opened to me, and Kael spat, spat, drooled into my hand a puddle of saliva-lubricant which I smoothed roughly into his posterior, probing with my fingers and thumb at the elastic rim of the anal tube.

Now I positioned myself ready to thrust home. I embraced both boys with widespread arms. Their sweet hair, scarlet and amberblack, mixed together like a bouquet of impossible flowers. Kael was masturbating Jethael, who was already spasming and groaning in his choirboy's astral treble. Protesting my love for these children, I stabbed into Kael's bowel.

Both of them screamed.

As I had expected, the inner muscles of Kael's rectum responded wildly to my intrusion. The strange "kissing" spasms rippled through the depth of him, and squeezed my phallus as they had squeezed my tongue and finger.

* The actual term is *zrendaet*, a sorcerer who turns himself into a firelynx, the nocturnal animal whose pelt is used as one of the constituents of firesilk (*zrenfilh*).

I could feel Kael's penis rooted in Jethi, and our three bags of testicles slapped together. Kael's back streamed with sweat. I have never before seen such an expression of ecstasy/pain, except on a statue showing some female saint ravished by some god. Kael's tongue protruded like a gargoyle's. Jethi turned his head on the pillows, and I could see tears streaming down his cheeks. Apparently the abnormal shape of Kael's member caused Jethi more pain than mine, even though mine is an inch or so longer. I have to confess once again, Jethi's tears excited me beyond measure.

The sequence of orgasms began with Jethael, who yelled and bucked like a colt, the power of his sudden climax almost dislodging his two mounted lovers. At once Kael responded with a banshee wail, a pistoning of his loins that kept Jethi crying, and a churning and mauling of his guts around my engorged steelbit cock.

In turn, I felt the cosmos sucked thought my brain, down through my heart into my loins, up the channel of spermducts and tubes, swelling my cock till it threatened to split Kael's flesh... and burst like a comet into the extreme far reaches of the undersea secret stomach of Kael's beloved Jethael-impaled dancer's slender-skeletoned adolescent body.

... AND SO ON, ON INTO that Suvyamaran night, Valamiel poured out the story of his obsession to the barbarian, there on the houseboat on its sluggish back canal in an unfashionable suburb of the Viridine Peninsula. Meanwhile...

... ON MANTICORE'S TONGUE, across the Mouths of the Oryx in the Western Fan, in a round room in a tower one might have witnessed — at about the same hour of the night — a scene at once touching and scarifying, eerie and tender: little Varo, ten-year-old Varonael, naked in the arms of an ugly middle-aged sorcerer.

Oddly enough, Varo and his brothers were in very truth the nephews of Sorolon. From the moment of his birth, Varonael (whose name means Avatar of Varon, the boy-love god) was horoscopically marked as Sorolon's apprentice. One day — aged five — the imp told his uncle, "You need me. I'm coming to live with you." Two years later he did. His brothers came too, aged nine and ten, Valvaen and Esteva — the eldest already eager to experience Uncle's embraces.

But there was never any doubt that Varo and Varo alone owned the sorcerer's heart. He'd doted on the imp since babyhood, and seen him grow into a miniature of exquisite beauty. Aged seven, Varo climbed naked into his bed one night and demanded to be seduced.

The method of love they discovered was innocent and simple, a prolonged cuddling and huddling, kissing and hugging, playing and caressing, that often ended with the boy naked and asleep in Sorolon's avuncular arms and the sorcerer dreamily finishing himself, hand hidden in his robe.

In the last few months, however, Varo had become more demanding. He grew interested in the sorcerer's magic wand (which was prodigious, even for a purebred Suvyamaran). Sorolon never asked for anything from the tiny creature except the privilege of cherishing him.

However, despite Sorolon's utter annihilation in love of this child, love was not the sole motive of his attachment to the strange little being. Varonael from earliest infancy crackled with sorcerous power. Strange events seemed to cluster around him, omens and apparitions, impossible coincidences, pixillations, paradoxes and just plain trouble. His brothers regarded him as a holy fool, and carried little knives around to protect him from all harm.

The latest coincidence Sorolon had noted: a minor deity called Jeth (or less), who — according to Suvyamaran myth — controls one of the two hundred tides which mark the local year, had been assimilated in some folk-myth variants (collected locally in the Fan) with the boygod Varon. In some tales the two are brothers, in other versions comrades. So Avatar-of-Varon and Avatar-of-Jeth are destined to meet and work magic together. The monk will be fascinated by this discovery, thought Sorolon. It proves we're on the right track. If only we could discover the hiding-place of Marbreuse!

Varo's greatest talent was this: sometimes, if you asked him a question, he would answer. Ordinarily he spoke only as a normal (if admittedly very eccentric) ten-year-old. On other occasions, however, he would almost glow with some eerie inner light, open his mouth and answer questions about the future, unseen things, abstruse problems of ceremonial magic or the questioner's emotional and spiritual needs. He was, in short, all by himself, a sort of oracle.

Sorolon tried never to use Varo for magical purposes. Scrying tired the boy — although he seemed always to recover well enough on sleep and enormous quantities of food. The sorcerer simply felt that Varo was not given to him as a magical (or sexual) tool, but as the one human being he would ever love without the slightest hesitation or regret. Therefore, although he listened eagerly to the boy's prattling, and accepted all advice given as valuable, he usually waited for the child to offer it unprompted and spontaneous.

Thus, at midnight, when the imp appeared in his nightshirt, rubbing his eyes and saying a dream had awakened him, Sorolon did not order him back to bed. When the boy crawled into his lap, pushing aside books and papers, pulled up the hem of his garment and begged for a special goodnight kiss, Sorolon again did not order him back to bed. And when Varo stripped off his nightshirt and asked to see his uncle's magic wand... Sorolon capitulated utterly.

When Varo finished his game, and cuddled himself comfortably in the sorcerer's ungainly arms, and sighed a few times, he murmured: "When are we going to invite Jethael again? I miss him."

"And so you should. Alas, although Jethael is ready to help us with the Garden, we still lack the one piece of information I promised to uncover before we began the operation. We still do not know where Zaek's beloved is hidden. Of course, we could simply invite Jethi to come and play with you, but..."

"Uncle, haven't you sent our relatives to look at all the places on Val's list?"

"I have, but they've seen nothing of value."

"Suppose that wicked Marbreuse has put a Spell of Invisibility on the hiding place? Then it might only *seem* to be empty."

Sorolon was suddenly alert. Despite his reluctance to abuse Varonael's strange powers, he felt some intuition that he should probe more deeply into this matter. Little flickers of almost invisible light seemed to be playing around the child's sleepy face.

"Varo," he whispered, "Varonael, what have you dreamed? Do you see the place? Where is it?"

"The least likely of all..." muttered the nodding imp. "The one you know is impossible." His head fell against Sorolon's shoulder. Eerie little sparks of green light vanished down his dark sweet single pigtail. Varo was asleep.

Gently slipping the tiny body off his lap, and wrapping it tenderly in a sleeping robe, Sorolon tiptoed to his book cabinet and took out an ancient map of Suvyamara (brought up to date with various coloured inks). Lighting a candle, he carried the map to his desk where an annotated version of Valamiel's list was spread out, X'd with angry red marks. One by one Sorolon began to point a sinuous finger at spots on the map, matching them against the list.

After some time passed Sorolon looked up and stared into the candle. "Impossible... he'd never dare..."

He glanced over at the sleeping oracle, then glared at the map as if it had personally insulted him (which, in a sense, it had).

"...but of course... it's so totally impossible... it must be so. I will go have a look myself in the morning. If Varonael was right I'll have much to accomplish before tomorrow night."

9.

Jethael's Pavanne

NEXT DAY ABOUT noon Zaek was sitting on the deck of the houseboat. A thick warm mist, soporific as blue-willow tea, hung muggily over the sluggish canal. The barbarian was naked, his depilated scarred body sprawled on a reed chair. Damn this climate, he thought. How I long for the crisp air and violent lightning of the north — if only...

...and he tried not to think of violet-eyed Xiri, or of how his long golden hair would fly in the cross-winds that buffet the eldritch peaks and precipitous valleys of Far Thuren.

How his skin would glow in the mountain streams, and how Zaek would drink the cool water from his thighs...

...or climb trees... or practice swordsmanship together...

Damn these nostalgic masturbatory maunderings, thought Zaek for the hundredth time. By Chaos, this has gone on long enough.

But suddenly something stirred in the mist. Across the canal an ancient mossy stone wall spanned the length of the bank, serving no doubt as the archaic border of some clan demesne, ten feet high, backed with impenetrable jungle, haunt of gloomy birds and small complaining wild voices, dank and silent. In the fog Zaek could barely make it out. Something large was climbing over the top of the wall.

Silently Zaek reached for his sword and froze.

The indistinct shape — a man? — reached the top of the wall and tried to let itself down onto the bank of the canal. It slipped. It fell and tripped in the mud. It splashed noisily into the water.

It swam across the canal.

It heaved itself, drenched and festooned with algae, stumbled to its feet in the shallow water. It gazed up at the gaping barbarian and wiped its face. It bowed.

“Good day, Zaek. Pardon me for intruding. Would you give me a hand up on deck?”

“Sorolon! What the devil are you doing in the canal?”

“HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED who your neighbors might be?” The sorcerer dripped lugubriously all over the deck. His muddy face was scratched.

“Not once. Why should I care?”

“Can you think of no reason?”

“Are you mad, Sorolon?”

“Even now, when you look at that wall over there, your eyes slip away. Your intuition tells you there’s nothing to interest you over there. Dullest damn wall you ever saw. Right?”

“Right.” The barbarian grabbed the damp magus and shook him by the shoulders till he splattered mud like a foolish dog. “What are you saying? What have you been up to? Speak clearly, man!”

“And even if you did happen to know that tract of scrub and moss belongs to a trust-fund administered by a deceased aristocrat represented by a nephew of utter respectability named Tharactus, you would still feel no interest in that wall. Yes?”

Zaek’s eyes dulled. He shook his head.

Sorolon spoke in a tone of awe. “It’s true, then. There’s a Spell on the place. Almost unimpeachable. Amazing work.,1 Zaek! Wake up! Look at the amulet in my hand. Do you hear me? Is your head clear now?”

“Yes... what were you trying to tell me...? Something about a wall?”

“Keep looking at the amulet. Xiri and Dragon are behind that wall, Zaek. In a ruined house — almost within earshot of this houseboat (which by the way also belongs to that same Tharactus).”

The spell broke.

Zaek could *see* the wall.

THAT AFTERNOON VALAMIEL bullied Tharactus into allowing three of the choristers an outside excursion: three days at the beach resort in Lookingglass. By late evening he had arrived with Jethael, Ravinan and Kael at Manticore's Tongue.

Meanwhile, Zaek, disguised as a mad beggar, made his way by a circuitous route that took him to Hierophantis, then by ferry to Port Oryx; then by water-bus down Ship's Channel to the Eastern Fan. There he landed at Three Snake Gate, a cluster of derelict towers in a sandy marsh, inhabited only by a few thieves and little colonies of impoverished aesthetes, vhang addicts and recluses. The Three Snakes themselves, sinuous islands of sand dunes and scrub-palmetto to the east, were home to camps of waterpeople so poor that they were unable to keep their women in seclusion — thus their remote hiding places. Once a week the men came to Three Snake Gate for a market-day. Zaek passed through the bizarre little suburb unnoticed in the crowd.

If you knew your way or possessed a good map you could cross the Fan and its hundred watery ribs on foot by safe pathways and ingenious self-powered ferries, attached to pulleys and tackle. Beyond these few beaten tracks no one ventured into the region except (reputedly) a tribe of mad outcast ritual corpseeaters, and a few cutpurse thugs and murderers of unwary travellers. A neat symbiotic relationship thus prevailed in the Fan, Zaek thought with a laugh.

He had often disguised himself as a mad beggar. He enjoyed the role, and had perfected such tricks of gaping and drooling that even a saint would avert his eyes in embarrassment and revulsion. It was the barbarian's own peculiar version of invisibility. For some reason he kept up the masquerade even when alone in the Fan. Any ghoul who saw him would have slunk away in disgust.

However, he came upon nothing startling except a myriad waterbirds of exceptional beauty. By nightfall he was halfway across the Fan, and arrived at Manticore's Tongue by unpleasantly dark deserted hidden overgrown paths a few hours after Valamiel and his choristers.

SOROLON SPOKE TO THE GATHERING that evening at supper. He explained to everyone how he had solved the problem of Marbreuse's hiding place, with the help of Varonael. (Zaek rose from his place at table, leaned over the imp and kissed him in sheer gratitude. Varo grinned happily.)

"So, early this morning," the sorcerer continued, "I made my way by boat to the eastern shore of Viridine Peninsula, where the little islands, bays, inlets and canals make such a confusing jumble on the map with their locks and levels and ancient water-gates."

He held up the map and pointed with a long sinuous finger.

"It took me four hours to find Fennelbank Hall, or rather a crumbling wall which might be Fennelbank Hall. I've never been so lost in all my years. I thought I knew the city well. I do know it well.

"If the damned estate has a main entrance, or indeed any entrance, I remain unaware of it to this hour. I finally climbed over the wall — but not without fighting against some very peculiar sensations, hallucinations, fits of forgetfulness, nameless terrors and hesitant dread. That protective Spell is truly wonderful, a lovely piece of work."

Zaek snorted in angry disgust.

"If you're going over that wall, my friend, I want you to respect it deeply. It's much worse than the Cloak of Invisibility."

Zaek nodded grimly. "This time, no tricks. Swords against sorcery," he declared. The children stopped eating and all stared at him with worshipful eyes.

"I'm afraid you'll have to change your mind about that. Listen: the place is alive with malign influence. It took all my courage just to find the house... and one other thing as well. I saw no one, heard no human voice. But the very potency of the Spell which protects the place convinced me that I was looking at Xiri's prison.

"Zaek, if you can abide in patience for one or two more days, sorcery may be able to take you past that wall and within sight of the house — instantaneously and in relative safety."

"Speak clearly, Sorolon."

The sorcerer glanced around the table, a frankly worried expression lining his ugly face. "Well... near the house I found an almost completely ruined pavilion, an ancient- stone gazebo choked in

vines and creepers. All that remains is one arch. Under that arch, in the dirt, I buried a certain amulet. The amulet of the Garden.

“If we succeed in opening the first Gate you can cross to that pavilion from my laboratory in two minutes. Less. Without passing though the protective Spell and its horrors.”

“Supposing we fail to open that first Gate?”

“Then I will join you in an open attack on Fennelbank Hall.”

“But more than a fortnight remains till the ceremony of the Crowstone,” Valamiel pointed out. “If we rescue Xiri now, we’ll give our whole plan away. We must ask ourselves this question: do we really want the Crowstone? If so, then why?”

“The hour is late, and I have many thoughts to divulge on that subject. For the moment I shall say only this: If you both decide to give up the Stone — after we have talked tomorrow — I shall agree with you. Think about it tonight. If we decide to wait, and try our fortune with the Stone, it will still be possible to smuggle a message of hope to Xiri and his fellow prisoner, telling them that rescue will shortly follow.”

“I can wait till tomorrow for a decision,” Zaek admitted.

“Till tomorrow then, my friends.”

RAVINAN, KAEL AND THE TWO elder nephews left the room together — not without certain wistful glances at Zaek the handsome barbarian. (Kael in particular seemed rather deeply smitten, Valamiel noted with a mixture of amusement and worry.) But the four boys seemed happy enough with each others’ company. Far into the night giggles and candlelight escaped from the eaves of the dormitory under the tower’s roof. But if the Chronicle were to tell every charming tale and subplot and narrative-with-a-story, it would never reach an end.

Zaek retired to rest alone. Varonael pretended to fall asleep in Sorolon’s lap.

Valamiel and Jethael found a little room for themselves, a bare clean cell with a mattress, a lamp and a vase of flowers.

“What do you think of the question of the Crowstone, Jethi?” the monk asked as he unbuttoned the boy’s vest (silk the color of the smoke of burning leaves).

“If only Zaek can agree to wait. I feel sorry about it... but... we must have the Stone.”

“Why? If Xiri can be rescued we could all run off together — without the Stone — and live happily ever after. Maybe.”

“True. I don’t know why. I just know we *must*. Perhaps Sorolon will explain. It must have something to do with sorcery.”

“Ah. Professional secret?” asked the monk, kissing the amber bead at Jethael’s throat.

“No, really... I don’t know. .. I must have dreamed it.”

“Well, your feelings and dreams are central to the whole affair somehow. That’s clear enough... I can’t get this knot undone.”

“Use your teeth,” the boy grinned.

TIME PASSED.

Valamiel sat crosslegged naked on the mat. Jethael perched in his lap, facing him, thin white legs wrapped around his waist. They kissed, and prepared themselves for the “complete” culmination of love. Suddenly the door of the room opened.

Varonael walked in. He came and knelt at the edge of the mat in his firesilk tunic and bare legs. He stared gravely at man and boy alike.

For some reason the monk felt neither startled nor annoyed with the imp. Jethael turned, without disturbing their tight embrace, and smiled happily. “Hello, Varo!” he said.

“Hello Jethi and Val. Can I sleep with you tonight, Jethi? I’ve missed you a lot.”

“Of course. It’s all right, isn’t it, Val?”

“Unquestionably...” gasped the monk, who would have kept on making love to Jethael even if the entire population of Manticore’s Tongue trooped in to watch. “I’ll go away if you like, the imp offered, “and come back when you’ve finished.”

“It’s all right to stay, Varo. After all, you’re my friend, said Jethael

Varonael pulled his tunic over his head. Underneath he was bare: tiny perfectly-shaped limbs, a miniscule organ pointed like a puppy’s, now growing into a stiff little nubbin. His hair was braided in its single queue. Naked he sat crosslegged next to the embracing pair. Despite his sparkling, curious gaze Valamiel found the child’s presence warming, and intensely erotic.

Jethael had been masturbating the man; now he bent forward and pursed his lips to dribble saliva onto Valamiel's aching phallus, working it over the head and shaft: shlip, shlip. Then he embraced the man and began inching himself closer and closer, till his soft inner thighs pressed against the lubricated organ then slowly the child began to lower himself onto the impaling peg, knees trembling with the painful effort of forcing himself down over its punishing ridged crown.

With a groan of relief/pain/pleasure, highpitched as birdsong, Jethael slid down the pole and felt it gradually fill him, stretching apart his vulnerable interior like a column of carved greased wood that threatened to split him open... Then, at last, he rested his full weight against Valamiel's loins, stabbed deep as could be, man's flesh inside him halfway to his stomach - and came to rest, panting like a summer solstice dog.

Varo studied the spectacle of the monk's pilon embedded between the slender buttocks of the twelve-year-old dancer. His tiny fingers reached out to caress this juncture of soft flesh and hard flesh: like white moths brushing across fever-burned nerves. "I could never do *that*," he said. "Uncle's wand is much too big."

Valamiel and Jethael now wedded together like lock and key; kissed deeply and did not break the kiss. With one hand man held Jethi's body with the other caressed his swollen boyprick. Jethael's fingers found the man's distended nipples, and his legs tightened convulsively around Val's waist as he felt his great peg swell inside him.

For minute after minute they held this pose, unwilling to disrupt and leave behind a moment of such happiness. Varo laughed, a sweet delighted chuckle which sounded like wildflowers blooming.

At last Jethael's head jerked back - eyes closed, mouth open. His hands clutched like claws on the monk's breasts, fingernails nearly breaking the flesh. He heaved himself up till half the buried penis came to light, then plunged down again smoothly. For the first time Valamiel felt the child open all the way as if every last vestige of pain had turned to bliss. No tears now - but a beatific smile, alternating wildly with a grimace of ecstasy - Jethael moved his hips, his whole body, in a rhythm more exquisite than any dance.

By some miracle (perhaps granted by Varon himself through is tiny Avatar), Valamiel was able to prevent himself from spending into Jethael for many long minutes of otherworldly trance. Slowly, as the boy wailed and danced against him, he ate the sun, till all was dark yet still luminous. The Sun at Midnight. Then, within him, the sun went nova.

Varo was delighted. Afterwards, however, when Jethi and Val seemed to lie unconscious, as if struck down by lightning he grew a trifle bored and tired. He shook the chorister's shoulder. "Are you asleep, Jethi?"

The older boy opened his eyes and smiled. "Not yet."

Tiny and warm, the imp embraced the naked lovers. He kissed each of them on the cheek. "You're so beautiful, Jethi. Did you know that once we were gods together? And you," he addressed the seemingly half-dead scrivener, "are a good man."

"Don't small sorcerers need plenty of sleep?" smiled Valamiel, deeply touched.

The imp snuggled close to Jethael, touched the older boy's still throbbing penis, and grinned. "I know what, Jethi. Let's dream together."

"How can we do that?" asked the chorister drowsily, allowing himself to be nuzzled and hugged.

"It's easy. I'll show you how, once we're asleep. We can dream about the Garden."

"All right..."

"Shall we go to sleep now?"

"...all right..."

And suddenly they were asleep.

Equally suddenly the monk was wide-eyed and awake. He pulled away from the softly breathing children. He stared in wonder at tiny sparks of green light, disappearing and flickering like marshfire along Varo's pigtail and among Jethi's tangled curls.

AFTER BREAKFAST NEXT MORNING the children all ran outside to splash in the surf. The three men sat round the table sipping tea.

"Just what is the mysterious stuff you smoke in that priceless antique pipe?" asked the monk.

“Almost precisely nothing,” said the fume-wreathed sorcerer. “A preparation of my own, something close to the Primal Matter, unformed and vague. The pipe, however, as Zaek will tell you, is the actual tool.”

“It’s a chaos-wand. Suvyamaran viridine, but Thurenian carving. About four hundred years old.”

“Correct, Zaek. I’ve travelled much on Qamar. Once I placed an amulet-of-the-Garden in an abandoned hut behind the Eagle’s Nest in Far Thuren. Does that interest you, Zaek?”

“I’ll probably never see the Nest again,” said the barbarian, beginning to look uneasy.

Sorolon puffed smoke. It seemed to take on the shapes of the weird crags, buttes and crumbling tors of the northern valleys. “Will you be content forever, then, with others sitting in your seat, weakening the People, letting the traditions of strength and will and beauty die away in quarrels and feuds?” asked the ugly man.

Zaek stood up so quickly his chair fell over.

“What do you know of *that*, sorcerer?” he almost snarled.

“No details. Only the vaguest of oracular nonsense, couched in the fairy-tale symbols of a child’s language. Something about a Prince exiled from his kingdom, who has roamed the Moons as a lonely warrior-for-hire. Something about his dreams of revenge and justice. Something about the wild free ways of the north. A banner inscribed with the emblem of this hawk-wand. Something about Change, about Rings coming full circle, about adventure, danger, war and also love... also splendor... and understanding. All quite annoyingly imprecise and misleading, no doubt.”

The barbarian was silent, bowed, radiating bitter anger. At last he said, “That is foolishness, such as sixteen-year-olds indulge in. That is passed, Sorolon. The exile does not return in triumph. Do not mock me.”

“Zaek! Do you not realize? The Crowstone is a nexus, a focus, an amplifier for the Will. It can really only be used for one purpose: to wield power, power such as kings may have — or militant prophets of Chaos, perhaps. The nomads of the Waste lost it to Marchion’s father, who built a kingdom of ensorcelled slaves. Suvyamara stole it, and shores up its decadence and slavery through the Stone’s magic power. Now, I say, if we are to have it at all it must be used to carve out a

realm of total freedom for ourselves — behind *your* banner — by our own power and that of the Stone. Otherwise, let Marbreuse have it. Or the foolish theocrats.

“Well, Zaek? What do you say? Of course it’s a childish idea - what else could you expect from men who make gods of children? The Change is coming, Zaek. Suvyamara will not hold us, and we must embrace the wind. The north wind, alive with lightning. Your time is coming, Zaek. Feel it. Speak from the heart, without the yoke of weakness. Speak by Chaos.”

“I speak, shaman,” said the barbarian in the same ritual tone. He paused. He began to breathe like a wounded bear. His body seemed to increase in size, as if seized by the berserker’s rage. The monk’s neck bristled with superstitious awe.

“I will be tryptarch of my clan. With your help, and yours, I will unite the valleys in the true worship of Chaos, which is freedom. No longer will the clans be seized into slavery, or decimated by piracy.”

He seemed to shake off the prophetic trance. He glared at the two men, sat down heavily in a chair. “To have Xiri would, in truth, be enough for me. But to give him Far Thuren again... and be with him there... to give him a life of adventure and love... that is worth...”

“Worth waiting two weeks?”

“Yes. Besides,” he grinned, “it may take that long to break into this cursed Fennelbank Hall — unless your Garden can be built to order.”

“Oh, it’s already built. We’re only looking for a key. Well, Valamiel, what do *you* say?”

“Jethael, oddly enough, wants to study dance in Thuren. He also thinks we ought to have the Crowstone. I like the idea of helping to found a dynasty of anarch lovers. And *kidnapping by magic* rouses my thief’s instincts with erotic shivers. I’ll steal all seven boys away from Perpetual Benefice — or as many as want to be stolen — and start an academy of Transformations in Thuren. What a splendid notion! Now... how do you go about finding that key?”

“The ‘keys’ are outside building sandcastles. I’ll go and call them inside,” answered the sorcerer.

AT MORE OR LESS THAT VERY MOMENT halfway across the city a boy woke out of a dream screaming, “No! No!”

Beside him on the pallet another boy awoke, startled, and shook the nightmare-ridden one to full consciousness.

“Dragon! I saw Zaek in a dream. He was looking for me — for us. Just when he caught sight of me he began to drift away and vanish.” Xiri burst into sobs and flung himself at the other boy for consolation.

“There, there,” said Dragon, clumsily patting Xiri’s back and stroking his fine yellow hair. “If he’s still looking maybe he’ll find us.”

The room they woke in was large, malodorous with decay and neglect. The windows were shuttered and nailed closed, and almost no light penetrated to reveal that outside (wherever they were) another day had arrived. A pallet, a table, cobwebs, a small windowless bathroom with drearily dripping water.

Over the days of captivity Xiri and Dragon had passed far beyond fear and apprehension, beyond depression, beyond misery. They were still all those, and worse. But primarily they were bored.

Every day at midday, under the locked door of their prison chamber, a tray of food appeared. Aside from that they had no contact with the world and no idea where they were, or why, or even how (since they’d been drugged in the carriage and remembered little of their abduction).

As Xiri choked back his sobs, Dragon began absently to amuse himself in the prisoner’s favourite way to kill boredom. He began rubbing his morning-hard penis. Idly, lazily. After all, he had all day.

Time passed. Xiri sniffled. “Dragon, tell me a story. Tell me about the desert — or no, tell me about the mad poet who gave you the tattoo.”

And so, Dragon played with himself and talked. And since his tale was so quintessentially and absurdly Qamarian, the Chronicle cannot resist making a digression wide enough to include it.

ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO — said Dragon — when I was smaller, and *this* was not quite so big, I had no tattoo, and I was only an extra musician at the Water Fly Cafe. That was before you came there. I was a scrawny dark and hooknosed kid, and many nights no customer took me at all. I was glad. I hated them, hated the place, hated my life?

Then one night a noble aesthete visited the cafe. He was middle-aged, stooped and fantastically dressed all in puffs and explosions of lace — slightly torn and yellow with age — and a velvet robe (stained with wine and patched) and pearl earrings. He smoked vhang like a heap of burning leaves. He was quite drunk.

He had me for only twenty sequins. But when he saw my cock, his eyes popped open wide. “Such a formidable weapon on such a slender child! Are all the Chromatic tribeschildren built to such startling proportions? No? Then you are unique!”

He found out about my people, how we worship the Dragon. He said, “But my sweet savage, *you* are the Dragon... and this is the Dragon’s Tongue. Yes, I can see the image now, adorning your fragile body: fierce giant reptile, coiled about your loins. By heaven, it’s a religious vision I’m having. I’ll turn savage myself and write odes to saurian monstrosities, adored by bloodmad wailing nomads... lizard odes, snake sonnets, frog epics, Dragon hymns. And you: the godhead! And *this*? The First Principle!”

And so on and so on, till I laughed at his ridiculous notions.

He bought me every day for a week. Each time he brought me some little gift, sweets or a silver chain. He tickled me and laughed with me and recited the poems to my penis he’d written. I was young and greedy. I thought he must be wealthy, and I begged and pouted for more presents.

Then he disappeared. Three weeks went by.

He’s forgotten all about me, I thought, and found someone else. A *free* boy, perhaps. I shrugged it off, and went back to being angry and sullen — which I’m quite good at, as you know.

Finally one night he came back and bought me again for himself. When we were alone he gave me a few coins and said, “This is all I’ve got... I’ve bought you a present, but I was afraid I wouldn’t have enough left to bid for you.”

“Where have you been so long?” I exploded. I hit him in the face, hard — and knocked him off the bed. Suddenly I realized: he’d been the only one who could make me laugh and forget I was a slave. And now he just wandered in after nearly a month, expecting me to jump in his lap!

I was raging. “I thought you *worshipped* me. Now you want me to suck you for a handful of pennies.” I grabbed the knife I keep hidden under my pillow. “Get out!” I screamed.

He waved his hands in the air and sighed. “You’re right, little Dragon. Please forgive me. I *couldn’t* come to see you. I was... uh... travelling...”

“Either get out or tell the truth. If I don’t like the truth I’ll cut I out your eyes.”

He looked at me, sober for once. “I was in jail. You see, I stole the money I spent on you. Took it from my employer. He caught me, hand in till.”

“Employer? I thought you were a poet.”

He laughed. A little blood ran out of his nose. “Such a sweet desert boy. I was cutting flowers in a warehouse at Ashgate. No one buys my poems. No one even likes them, except you — because they’re all about you and your glorious member. Where did you learn to hit like that?”

“And where did you get the money for tonight?”

“I won it at dice, my godling. No, that’s false. I pawned my earrings. Listen: that stiletto at my throat thrills me as nothing else I have ever known. But... do you think you could...?”

“But... aren’t you an aristocrat?”

“With only a single suit of lace, a sword and a hereditary curse of madness. If I were wealthy, Dragon, I’d buy you more than bangles and sweets and gilt hoops for your primitive ears. I’d buy your freedom.”

Suddenly I felt very nice, for the first time in a long while. I pricked his ear with the knife. “And did you still pray to me while you were locked up, mad poet?”

“Every night, Dragon-lordling, desert-demiurge. Sometimes twice without stopping.”

“Then I forgive you,” I laughed. And while he opened my kilt and started to kiss me off, I stroked his forehead and cheeks with the dagger, because I could see it excited him.

In fact, I liked it too. He sucked me so hard he was almost biting. It never felt that good before. Suddenly I stabbed the knife into the pillow beside me, and shot in his mouth. For the first time! That was

the first jac I ever made. I liked it so much I ordered him to do it again, immediately.

Then he started trying to do it a third time.

“Wait a minute, Your Madship,” I said. “I have to piddle.”

I stood up, but he grabbed my wrists.

“Wait! I have just had a new religious revelation! The skies have opened. A miracle has occurred, the epiphany of your first ejaculation. Now I realize the truth of the Two Noble Sacraments of the Chromatic Dragon (that totem which I envision even now, glowing spectrally upon your barbaric little body). Drinking the Dragon’s Milk has made me a prophet. What if I were to consume the other Sacred Substance as well?”

“What are you babbling about, mad poet?” I was jumping and bouncing in agony, I had to go so badly. My cock was flipping up and down in front of his face.

“My sweet idol of the mirage-ridden wastes, favor me with your blessing. Give me the Water of the Dragon.”

“What!? You want... to swallow my piss?” I laughed so hard I almost wet myself. And him. “You really *are* crazy.”

“Don’t despise me, my lovely assassin.” He was trying to kiss my penis. “Your bodily fluids are an integral part of the Faith. They’re better than hygienic. They’re ineffable! Sweet dew... and perfumed rain.”

“And do you expect that after you’ve done it I’ll ever let you kiss me again?”

“Oh, my harsh desert deity, would you force me to choose between the pleasure I know and the mystical fulfillment I envision? Cruel one, pity your malfunctioning prophet...”

I laughed again. “In the desert, if we were lost and dying of thirst, we’d be glad to drink each other’s water. Or if we took the drug called *aebalh*, which costs three horses for a single bud and gives visions of the World of Animals, we’d have to share it by the same method. I never heard of *your* mad notion, but if it gives you pleasure, go ahead — and I’ll kiss you as much as you like.”

Eagerly he took me in his mouth. “There’s just one problem, Your Lunaticness. I’ve lost the urge, after all your chattering. See, your crazy notions make me too stiff to...”

So, kneeling in front of me (and yanking himself) he sucked me yet a third time. I came like a thunderbolt, so hard I toppled over and landed on top of him. He fell on the floor... and I started pissing.

You know how thirsty we desert people always are? You know how addicted I am to gallons of cool sherbet? I couldn't hold it in — believe me, I had no intention of wetting the carpet. I was laughing too hard to control myself. I piddled so much the floor was like a swamp. A gyser, a waterfall, a whole ocean, all steaming and yellow — all over the mad poet. Finally he managed to get me into his mouth — and shot his syrup all over his robe, all over me, the carpet and everything else. What a mess!

“Can you write a poem about *this*?” I asked, after giving him the kiss I'd promised.

“Oh yes,” he answered. *Inundated By A Dinosaur, In Three Fits & A Flash Flood.*”

Three days later he showed up at the café with his earrings redeemed, beaming with happiness. “Dragon, the desert gods have blessed us for the sincerity of our faith. A friend of mine has come into a bit of money, and rented a derelict tower in Three Snake Gate. I myself have had phenomenal luck at Rondelay* and a third boon companion, a professional duellist, has... well, never mind. Both the others have been converted to my preaching and have agreed to donate towards a fund to rent you for a week.”

Quelleron agreed — though he insisted I be registered with the Enforcers' Guild as “property-on-loan”. I didn't care. What a holiday!

The mad poet and his two companions had stocked up enough vhang and dreamwine for a small tribe. We smoked night and day, but I drank sherbet rather than wine. The tower's rentier was a tattooist. My poet said, “Now's your chance to bring our vision to reality, sweet savage. Let him practice his art, and make you a living temple to the god who inhabits you.”

*A Game played with fifty round plaques of ivory painted in various ancient symbols, and a cup of six pyramidal dice. Success demands both mathematical skill and a mastery of recondite mythological lore.

I was too deep in dream to protest. In fact I thought it a wonderful idea. They stripped me naked and the tattooist began drawing on me in colored inks. I dozed off. I woke feeling hands massage some icy lotion into my skin, making it numb under the dragon-design, as if frozen. I gawked at myself: my body was alive with color.

The artist brought out his bag of needles, hundreds of thin quills, and began sticking them into me. I could feel pain, but far away, not really part of me. While the artist worked my poet sucked on me and blew me, for hours at a time. Then the duellist. Then (while his needles stuck out of my belly) the tattooist had me. I smoked vhang and drank milk and sherbet, and gave them Dragon Water, all they wanted.

During the week the house was attacked once by thieves. The duellist chased them off, and I kicked one of them in the gut; the poet was slightly wounded in the fray. He was ecstatic to have been nearly martyred in my cause, he said.

By the end of the week, however, only the dragon's head was complete. I had to go back to the cafe. I wept to leave those fools. In truth, I'd never had such fun since I left the desert. But they all escorted me back, and pleaded with Quelleron to let the tattoo be finished. The pimp was furious, but at last he saw the commercial possibilities and allowed the work to be completed.

It took several more weeks. On the day it was done and healed the mad poet spent everything he could amass on a party for me and his friends, and bought me for a night. The four of us smoked half a *maen* of vhang, and then I decided to pierce my nipples, like an air-pirate. I let the poet do it. He drank my blood and fainted.

Next day the man he'd cheated at Rondelay caught up with him, and he went back to jail.

ON THEIR PRISON-PALLET Xiri and Dragon were stuck together with coagulated drying semen, too lazy to get up and bathe.

"He sounds like a nice person, your poet," said Xiri — who had been brought up to consider madness a sacred profession. "When Zaek rescues us will you go back to him?"

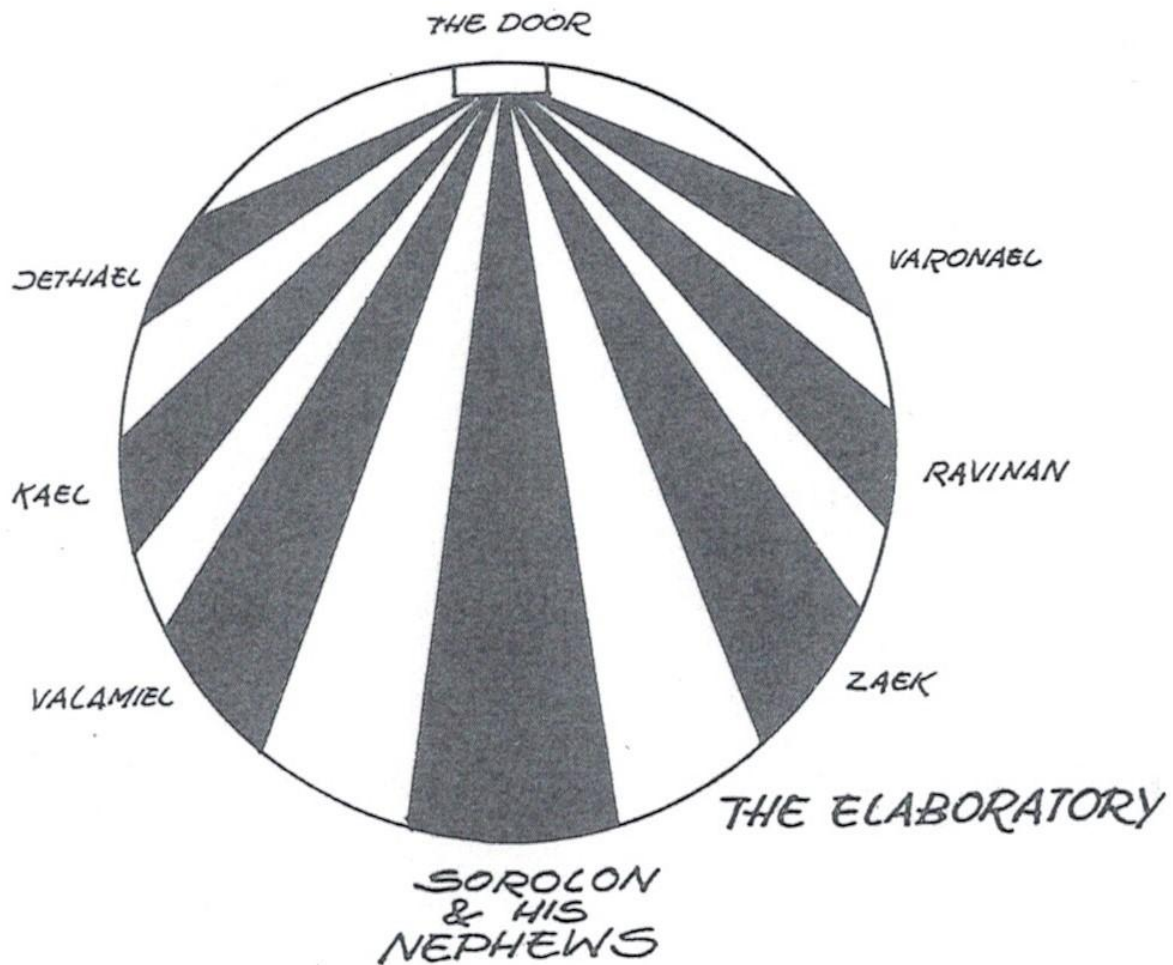
"I don't know," Dragon shrugged. "He's still locked away, poor lunatic. Perhaps I'd go back to the Waste — even though my people are mostly dead or scattered."

Why not come to Thuren with me and Zaek?" said the blond dancer, hugging his friend.

"All right. If... well, never mind. Xiri, want me to clean you up with my tongue ? "

"Crazy savage!"

"Why not? What else is there to do?"



SOROLON'S ELABORATORY HAD BEEN cleared of all furniture, and the old magic circle of runes and sijils erased. Instead, a new pattern had been laid down: seven pathways were chalked across the floor in rays which seemed to converge and point towards (or away from) a child-sized mirror mounted on a cabinet set into the wall. Within each of these pathways new conundrums and archaic diagrams, words in lost or daemonic alphabets, pictograms and zodiacal signs had been neatly drawn; but the spaces between the rays were left blank.

All the guests and inhabitants of the tower on Manticore's Tongue were gathered, and Sorolon dispatched them to various seats (or "sieges" as he called them) around the walls of the room. On the first two rays nearest the mirror, Jethael and Varonael. On the next two, Kael and Ravinan. On the next two, Valamiel and Zaek. On the central ray, Sorolon, attended by his two older nephews.

"This afternoon," said the sorcerer in a rather school-masterish tone, "we will simply begin to think about the idea of evoking the Garden. No ritual is planned. Indeed, the mandal is not yet sealed. Instead, we will invoke the spirit of the work we wish to perform. Not in any ceremonial sense, but in a mood of play. 'Serious play', if I may say so. Today I want no planned or studied actions but only the spontaneous evocations of a dream. The dream of the Garden. You've all had time to think about it, even without full consciousness. It's sunk into your minds, become part of your memory already.

"This is my idea: Once I heard a little tune which reminded me of the Garden, called *Aevaen's Pavanne*. I taught Varonael to play it on the reed pipes. Perhaps you, Jethi, would like to dance to this tune. Perhaps Kael and Ravinan would join you after a while, or perhaps not — as they wish. My older boys will strum these drones. We adults will simply witness and enjoy. Well, Jethael?"

"If I can."

"Good, my dear. Varo, please serenade us."

The pavanne piped out eerily, a strange modal repetitious lilting swooping air, deceptively simple, made up of bitter haunting changes and unexpected resolutions that deepened like an elusive fragrance. Varonael's technique was surprisingly good — even for an invariably surprising child. The tune seemed an integral part of him — or perhaps the expression in music of his unique and enchanting young soul. Not only did he play well, but even worked variations into the reprises and ornamented the melody with trills and warblings.

Jethael rose and walked to the center of the room, not with any ceremonial stride but in his own walk, infinitely graceful, innocently sensual. He stood for a moment, waiting for the tune to begin again. Then began to dance.

If his movements represented anything it might have been a butterfly, or a firefly. Dressed in a child's tunic of pleated white linen — bound with a firesilk sash — barelegged and barefoot, hair untied,

he seemed the very personification of boyhood's most impossibly theophanic moments: all those leaps and pirouettes and saltambic caperings, those uncontrolled laughs and glances from the corners of eyes, all the encyclopedia of smiles — all gestures which drive men to empty their pockets and grin like imbeciles with rapture and nostalgia — everything about Jethael which was innocent (not ignorant but innocent) — and everything about him that seduced the senses...

...all this was called forth, gently suggested, playfully, almost humorously evoked — or rather, not evoked but *shown forth* (*attajaell*, “embrillianted”, in the old tongue) by Jethael's pavanne.

But this constituted merely the prelude. With the next repetition of the tune he began to work through the persona he'd created, and project it outwards... toward the mirror. His hands moved rapidly through a sequence of sijils that Valamiel recognized as signs for various flowers, trees, birds, scents and colors. Instead of leaping, now he swayed in deep swooping motions to right and left, his face no longer playful but full of grave purpose.

As if at some telepathic command Kael and Ravinan both stood at once and moved (rather like somnambulists) toward the center of the room. (Indeed telepathy seemed to Valamiel the only explanation of what followed, though none of the boys later claimed to have experienced anything more than a great happiness and a sense of knowing exactly what to do.) Kael was dressed in crimson, Ravinan in blue to match his eyes.

Now — precisely one half-measure behind Jethael — the two danced in perfect imitation of the entranced boy. Every gesture, step, posture or expression was copied flawlessly — one halfmeasure after Jethael had created it. For he danced to no known choreography. He improvised. And the Transformation had seized him.

Valamiel noticed that piping Varo's head was alight with spirit fire. It pulsed around the imp in time to the music, flickering green, transparent as ice.

Now an urgency wove itself into Jethael's dance. He turned more and more often toward the mirror, making gestures of stylized pleading — gestures of hesitant searching. Still Kael and Ravinan danced with him, but still a half-measure behind him. The syncopated pattern created by their synchronization and eerie delayed mimicry of

Jethael upset the hearts of the audience more and more, in time to the increasingly insistent pulse of the reedpipes and drones.

Suddenly, on the last note of the tune Varonael broke off playing. Precisely on the beat the drones ceased as well and Jethael stopped dead, on the tips of his toes, arms raised and outstretched toward the mirror and bent back gracefully at the elbows, hands open wide, fingers arched back in splayed beauty (a traditional posture called “Jubilation”).

Kael and Ravinan finished their imitative trajectories in a halfmeasure of silence, and came to rest, mirror-images of Jethael to his left and right. At that instant of rest Varo piped loudly again, repeating the last phrase of the song. Without missing a beat, Jethael repeated the last phrase of the dance. Kael and Ravinan came to life again, following behind him.

This jubilant end-sequence was repeated again and again and again. The complex stop-and-start, the swirling rhythm and motion, the increasing tempo...

...drove Valamiel toward madness, heart in his throat...

...and the fire appeared around Jethael’s head, and blazed up around his body, just at the very last and final *stop!* of the music, Kael and Ravinan kneeling before him, his arms outstretched again, still pleading, but victorious.

Like some foolish aesthete in the Temple, the monk keeled over in a dead faint.

AFTER A GARGANTUAN EARLY SUPPER, Jethael and Varonael fell asleep at table and had to be carried to bed by their respective lovers. For the monk and the sorcerer, undressing them and tucking them in together was an awesome experience, carried out in reverent silence. They tiptoed back to the table, Valamiel trying not to stagger with weakness. Kael and Ravinan, so tired they could scarcely keep their eyes open, offered to share the monk’s bed in place of Jethi, but seemed glad enough to be sent to sleep alone (or with Varo’s brothers). Zaek’s feet were propped on the table... he, too, was trying not to nod. It almost seemed as if a Spell of soporific web-mist had settled on the tower.

“It’s the after-effect of so much unbridled and unexpected power,” Sorolon explained. “We’ll all be recovered by morning. In

fact, I feel quite remarkably alert myself. Perhaps my diet accounts for it.” Indeed the sorcerer seemed exalted, an urgent cheerfulness creased his ugly face, he prattled loquaciously to the drooping pair of adventurers.

“I did expect something of the sort, of course. I knew Jethi and Varo were ready, more or less. Jethael’s innate power is perhaps the greater, or more advanced by reason of his age, but Varo is more at home in other worlds, and fearless... I thought perhaps we’d begin to start to unfold the very edge of something. Instead, we were plunged into its midst. What could they have dreamed together to inspire such unleashed purity of magical intent? You saw it, dear friends: but perhaps you cannot realize the full beauty of what you witnessed, from the *magical* point of view. There indeed was the whole flowering of our Will. Tomorrow we have only to harvest the blossoms...”

All night Sorolon locked himself away in his round chamber, chanting and working into the dead hours while others slept.

INDEED BY MORNING the floor of the elaboratory seemed to have blossomed with impossible splendor. But this was Sorolon’s work, preparation for magic rather than magic itself. As the men and children filed (rather solemnly) into the chamber they found it transformed: on the wall were hung seven tapestries or banners, each in a pure color of the sorcerer’s spectrum, each sewn with a single large unreadable letter or sign (I’ve seen something like them somewhere once, thought Valamiel — yes... in a childrens’ book... the names of the Paeraen kings?). By some trick of the light the elvish symbols seemed to hang against three-dimensional space rather than flat fabric, like knots of golden serpents suspended in empty prismatic air.

The floor was now littered with magical paraphernalia laid out in rows between the chalk pathways, as if beds of improbable flowers had already sprung up overnight, transforming the room into a premonition of the Garden itself.

Sorolon must have lavished a fortune on these toys, the monk marveled — for indeed they were like toys, this harvest of statuettes, vases of real and artificial gemcarved flowers, figurines of ichthyomorphic deities, inlaid censers, mixed heaps of coins and candy, flasks of rare liquors, attars, tinctures, extracts and vapors, jars

of preserved eggs, embryonic lizards in aromatic balsam, belljars containing stuffed animals never seen on any Moon (the jape of some demented taxidermist — perhaps), illuminated manuscripts, candles of every size and color in holders moulded as beasts or fat men riding turtles, gaudy boxes shaped as cones, pyramids and heptagons (which might have contained birthday presents from another Dimension), water-clocks in bestiary form, seashells, bits of coral, chased goblets full of uncut jewels, lyrebird feathers in profusion and a scattering of actual childrens' toys, gimcracks, gewgaws, model houses, wooden blocks, balloons and tinsel.

Sorolon's own "seige" had now mushroomed into a throne or cockpit with a carved lectern, heaps of parchment and scrolls, two great candles held by silver seamonsters, a low table littered with wands, aspergils, lightning-weapons, pyxes, electories, pastilles of incense, tiny vials cut from viridine, ruby, starcrystal and other precious gems, each with a miniature spatula or jade spoon beside it, and an immense bowl of jasper heaped with petalshaped wafers of gold leaf.

Sorolon sat ensconced crosslegged in the midst of this bizarre array, robed in forest green (like all the others) but hung with a collection of shamanic fetishes: cat-tails, iron hooks, silver daggers, animal skulls, feathers and iridium chains: the costume of the "flying" shamans of the Hyperalbine Waste, who are said to physically disappear during their trances and soar to other worlds of vision.

When the men and boys had all taken their places, Sorolon addressed them in hieratic solemnity. "We begin the Work. Stoke the fire of your magical Will, and send forth your Intention that the Gate to the Garden of the Beloved be opened to us."

The "Gate" seemed still to all outward appearances merely a child-sized mirror. But since last night none of them had thought of it as anything but a *door*. A locked gate.

Sorolon talked — or chanted — nonstop for the next seven hours... but since every audible phrase was spoken in some language even older than the oldest remembered tongues of Qamar, none of the others understood a single word. Except perhaps little Varonael, who was already deep in trance, already corruscating with spirit-fire.

As he sat and chanted, Sorolon also "danced". No other term will suffice to describe the constant graceful movements of his hands,

torso and head. Hand-sijils performed by the sinuous tapering fingers took on mesmeric life of their own, convincing and terrifying. Not a single casual gesture: each pinch of incense in a censer, each half-bow, each commanding or supplicatory or incomprehensible waving and tossing and juggling of wands and “thunderbolts”, each asperging of the air: all ceremonial, studied yet smooth as if practiced daily for years.

Periodically the sorcerer filled his hand from the bowl of gold wafers and tossed a few score of them into the air — where they fell much more slowly and glidingly than real leaves, glittering in the candle-light. Sometimes he smoked his pipe, waving its stem in patterns toward the seven tapestries, then puffing huge clouds of odorless smoke into the room from its glowing viridine bowl.

For the first few hours Valamiel found this rigid yet flowing ritual as fascinating in its way as the telepathic spontaneity of Jethael’s pavanne.

After a while, however, his muscles began to ache and he started to nod.

After more hours — during which time some of the children seemed actually to have fallen asleep — he began to feel a new sensation overtaking him. He noted that Jethael was now surrounded by a stable but gently pulsing halo that englobed not only his head but his entire greenclad body. He and Varo sat utterly straight, unmoving, twins of otherworldly radiance.

Valamiel glanced at the mirror... nothing seemed to have changed. But within himself he felt a new burst of energy and desire to accomplish the Work, and with great ease he felt himself fall into an alert meditation, a state of effortless concentration, the paradoxical Station of Thought-No-Thought (according to the Blessed Maervaen).

Gradually, then, things began to happen. Soon no one was nodding, not even lazy Ravinan. One by one the censers placed around the room began to smoulder and give off fumes — without anyone having lit them, needless to say. Valamiel realized that seven of these fumitories were stationed around the mandal, and that each gave off smoke of a different color and odor.

Red — spicewood, blood and aloes

Blue — nard, ice and attar of violets

Yellow — dandelion, urine and wheat
Green — cedar, seawater, jadewood gum
Black — carrion, musk and wet fur
Brown — sandalwood, excrement and myrrh
White — gulls-milk, sperm and benzoin

The fact that Valamiel could detect all these odors must be attributed not only to the sorcerous potentiation of his senses, but also to the fact that he had once studied a system of scent-poetry developed by certain long-dead aesthetes of the vanished Veil-horn Empire, some two hundred thousand leagues away, on another Moon. This olfactory invocation, then, was perhaps the only part of the ceremony he really understood.

Sorolon's chanting had gradually been growing louder and more commanding. He was finished with prayers and petitions. Now, in an unknown tongue of harsh sibilants and uvular clicks, he was *ordering* someone — or something — to obey his imperious Will.

And now Sorolon burst into Glory... no weaker word could describe the aura that suddenly flared up all around him in slow-motion baroque coils of colored light... not the simple green glow of Jethael and Varonael, but a multi-hued serpentine kaleidoscope of tints and shades unnamable by any artist... or perhaps by any human language.

And now the whole room glowed, crackled, sizzled, coruscated, burst and flowed with lights. Eldritch sparks leapt from object to object in the magical clutter. Idols spouted fountains of sparks, pyrotechnic goutts and scintillant globules of color, writhing worms of gemlike transparency, auroras of scaly diamond-bright showering rays, lustral implosions and scatterings, palettes of insubstantial flickering illumination... all striving to take some shape, some reality, some opening into the world of Permanence and Manifestation.

Far away, they could hear music — but none of them could identify either melody or instruments. Valamiel had experimented at one time or another with nearly every known visionary drug to be found in the Ring. But never had he experienced the clarity or perception he now enjoyed (except — in a different way — with Jethael, in bed).

He felt as if he might die of joy.

Sorolon no longer chanted but sang, answering the distant music, harmonizing to its alien strains with fluent ease, as if reading from a score.

The *lights* began to fly up and mingle with the clouds of incense smoke in vast thunderheads of spectral corruscating brilliance which seemed (like true clouds) to be constantly hovering on the verge of some recognizable form or significance.

Slowly, as if magnetized, these clouds began to drift toward the mirror. Somehow the nebulae and cumuli seemed to be moving backwards through time, to some primordial pre-eternal shape which once, aeons ago, they had escaped and lost forever through the entropic weakness of all matter, which forgets its being and drifts into a subtle nothingness of exhausted Meaning.

With an audible implosive *whoosh!* the clouds of light and smoke were sucked into the mirror, and vanished.

Sorolon's voice, the distant music, the auras of light around the sorcerer and the two magic-children... all motion, scent, sound and sight of magic ceased at once. Silence and ordinary candle-light filled the room. But everything had Changed.

"Jethael. Varonael. Varonael. Jethael. Rise," said Sorolon grandly. "Take in your right hands the amulets, the seven-pointed stars I have given you. Walk to the Gate and enter. Step beyond... but do not remain. Return at once, and tell us what you have seen."

Gracefully the two stood up and walked along their rune-paths to the mirror.

The mirror had vanished. In its place, a crude wooden door stood there, with an iron latch in the shape of a gargoyle's head.

Varonael opened the Gate. Sunlight streamed into the room (though outside the Tower night had fallen).

Jethael stepped through. Varo skipped after him, laughing.

They vanished.

Part Three

10.

Masks Of The Beloved

THE GARDEN APPEARED EXACTLY as Sorolon had told them it would, and as they had dreamed of it. With one great difference: in visions they were somehow aware of the whole pattern of the place even as they studied its smallest details. Now they stepped into a landscape which existed not in dream or imagination but — to every human sense — in utter palpable reality.

The air felt crisp, dry and warm (but cooled by shade and water). The sky's cobalt blue stretched cloudless above them, and the sunlight seemed less uncanny than in their dream-perception. Real fruit trees and flowers of familiar and unfamiliar species grew all around them — especially roses, vast profusions of roses. A curved blue pathway, flanked on one side by a clear shallow stream, vanished before them and led presumably to the central fountain and pool. The path's gravel seemed to be made of crushed lapis lazuli, and the shady walk was lined with benches of ivory and alabaster. Insects buzzed the ferny streambanks and parakeets screeched in the trees. The wall through which they passed as they entered the Garden appeared to be some twenty feet high, made of mudbrick, higher than any of the trees which grew near it, impossible to see over. A desert oasis, one might think.

Without knowing why they felt instinctively that the place was empty of all human life, had been so for unmeasurable time, perhaps

forever. Despite the Garden's quite believable sense of actuality, the children felt no doubt of its magical provenance. Here not a single vibration or rattle or echoing sigh of Qamar — or the universe in which Qamar existed — remained to disturb the perfect contemplative tranquility of this enchanted refuge.

Jethael and Varonael held each other's hands and drank in everything with their eyes and other senses. Perhaps the one most alien feature of the Garden was the keenness it loaned to human perception — as if, after so long without anyone to see it, the whole place was somehow pristine, new, completely *present*. Freshness intoxicated them, and they laughed for joy.

"It's really here," said Varo at last. "I mean, we're really there. It's wonderful, don't you think? Everything looks so beautiful!"

The older boy laughed, and they embraced and kissed. Varo stuck his tiny tongue into Jethael's mouth; two tongues met and licked each other; Varo pulled away, grinning and wiping saliva from his underlip.

"Let's go back and fetch the others," said Jethael.

SOROLON UNCORKED A CRYSTAL VIAL and drank whatever it contained. He grimaced, shuddered. He stood up, brushing gold leaves off his robe. He staggered, caught himself and looked across the room at the two boys who had just walked out of the wall.

"Splendid," he said, obviously a bit dazed. "Congratulations to us all. And now, if the rest of you will step carefully, each along his own pathway, and meet me at the Gate, I'll give you your amulets."

One by one (adults stooping under the low lintel), they filed into the Garden.

"SOROLON, I APOLOGIZE FOR DOUBTING YOU," said Zaek. "Now, which of the other six Gates opens on Fennelbank Hall?"

"Any one we chose, my friend. Valamiel, come with us. We'll use the Black pathway for Marbreuse. I'll have to open the Gate this first time; after that your amulets will suffice. Luckily, opening them from the inside will be much easier than opening them from the outside... but I know you are eager to be off. Follow me, all paths lead to the center and out again. You others, stay here and rest. We'll be back shortly."

As the elated sorcerer, the barbarian and the monk strode away down the sapphire path, Sorolon continued: "I think it might be best if we limit ourselves to a brief preliminary reconnaissance. We need rest before any rash acts are to be committed."

"Don't worry," said Zaek. "I've passed beyond mere recklessness. All will proceed now according to the best military discipline I can muster. I agree: for the moment we simply do a bit of spying. Or rather, since I have expended much less energy than you, I will watch while you rest, then consult you before acting. You too, Val. I can handle this preliminary stuff alone."

The sorcerer nodded. "Agreed. But I'll come through with you now to scout for... ah ... whatever psychic effluvia Marbreuse has left lying about the place. The whole estate is crawling with bogeys and miasmas."

In about two minutes they arrived at the Garden's center. A circular lawn of smooth grass surrounded a large square tank in the midst of which a statue of two golden fish chasing each other's tails presided over a display of seven jets of crystal water. In each of the seven directions, seven unique flower-trees grew in the midst of open lawn. Each weird tree had seven massive petals and each tree was a different color. One of the trees was jet black, like the most sensual of velvet. Flowing out of the tank and across the lawn, seven streams wound cheerfully along beside seven parabolic paths into seven little parks of exquisite flowers and shade trees,, too dense to see through, not quite formal, not quite wild. The perfume of roses filled the air.

The three men followed a path of crushed onyx till they came to another small wooden Gate, identical to the first, set deep into the mudbrick wall.

Sorolon lectured for several minutes to the bronze gorgon's head latch, entreating it in a reasonable tone, but speaking some utterly daemonic-sounding dialect. At last he touched the Gate with his star-amulet, turned the latch and pulled open the door. On the other side night had fallen over the Viridine Peninsula, and moist air flowed through the doorway, redolent of fungus and dead wood.

Sorolon, Zaek and Valamiel stepped through the Gate, and vanished.

THE CHILDREN REMAINED in the Blue Park. Thus they were the first to discover why the Garden of the Beloved was so called by the master of Sorolon's master. A few minutes of breathing the limpid air stole away all their resolve to explore, or play, or sleep, or do anything else except... make love.

Perhaps some subtle aphrodisiac scented the air. Perhaps the clarity of perception they enjoyed stemmed from some erotic and purely physiological ground, rather than metaphysical or magical (for example, the flowers' perfume might have contained a drug). Or perhaps the perfect weather and beauty and sense of seclusion led inescapably to the idea of nudity, with inevitable results. Whatever the reason or reasons, the six children offered no resistance whatsoever to the mood. After all, unlike other less fortunate youngsters elsewhere, they knew exactly how to answer the call of the Garden. They knew not only that their bodies tingled with pre-echos of pleasure, but also they felt themselves totally free to indulge and to awaken the full music of this sunfilled paradise.

Varo announced, "Clothes are no good here!" and stripped off his green ceremonial tunic, kicked off his green velvet slippers and stood naked.

In a moment the air was filled with flying green garments and laughter. Varo pulled Jethi to the ground, trying to smother him with kisses. Their white bodies gleamed against the verdant lawn as they rolled together in the grass.

SOROLON CLOSED THE DOOR behind them, and daylight vanished. Pushing aside a tangle of brambles they peered out into the grounds of Fennelbank Hall.

Valamiel had always believed that landscape and weather in themselves are beautiful. Only man's subjective gloom makes an abandoned park, a swamp, a cold and rainy day into something dark and anti-human. Nature is largely *inhuman*, he believed, and follows its own inexorable ways — but it is never ugly or evil.

Now however he wondered if he had been wrong.

The trees around them seemed not only withered but menacing. The mist seemed not only dank but filled with foreboding. Parasitic vines clung with malicious pertinacity, the ground squelched with sickening ooze, as if mulched with dead worms and unspeakable

poisonous mud-burrowing slugs. The air oppressed him, suffocated him with nightmarish vapors and noxious miasmal hints of decay.

Sorolon softly laughed. "I told you, this one we oppose wields power, and does it with undeniable style. But remember, the depression we feel in this malodorous forgotten place originates neither in ourselves nor in any actual physical reality. Without the influence of magic this would seem a reasonable setting, even romantic. Use your discrimination, remember to fight off the suggestion of terror and defeat. Now... this way."

As stealthily as they could in the murky darkness, they stole through the clinging underbrush. Night is almost never totally obscure on Qamar. Moonlight penetrates all but the fiercest storms — and the storms are lit by lightning. Therefore the stygian umbrosity of Fennelbank must have been the product of sorcery rather than any real weather.

"Beyond those trees," whispered Sorolon, "is the Hall itself. You can detect its ruinous condition even in this pitchy night. Not a light shows forth. The senses are somehow repulsed by its hunchback crumbling menace, like an open grave. Believe me, the effect is even worse by day. And yet I have picnic'd in ruins more otiose, and thought them merely picturesque. Such is the skill of that one!"

"Is this a sample of his handiwork creeping up behind us?" asked the monk, with hysterical calm.

The others whirled about. From a copse of bracken near them a corpse was approaching.

It made no noise. It disturbed not a single thorn or dead reed. Its shrouded face glowed with malign phosphorescence. It stretched out its rotting fingers.

Sorolon threw something at it... and it blinked out of existence.

"Low-grade phenomenon, part of the matrix of the Spell itself, no volition of its own. It coalesces near any intruding human consciousness and drifts menacingly," the sorcerer explained to the others. "You can resheath your blades."

"Is this the whole of it?" asked Zaek contemptuously and a bit loudly. "Paltry spooks, gloomy mists and haunted ruins?"

"Shh. Undoubtedly not. *He* (do not speak his name here, even his false name) would not leave the prison unguarded by someone or something more intelligent and more dangerous than a mere

hallucination. Possibly the two men... or whatever they are... who bought and abducted the boys.” The sorcerer yawned fiercely. “Evil is so boring,” he muttered. “Let’s go back.”

“If I were to Stay here and spy,” said Zaek, “what should I look for?”

“If I were planning to cook that stoop... pardon me, I mean burglarize that house,” whispered Valamiel, “I would watch it for a day and a night, study the routine of the inhabitants, look for ways to break in. Be careful of *real* dogs — if an honest beast could bear to live in such a place...”

“No dogs,” said Sorolon. “Be sure.”

“Think about tools needed for the job. Guards who may have to be incapacitated to some degree. Watch for traps, pitfalls, alarms, tripwires.”

“And ghouls,” said Zaek. “What was that you tossed at our late friend, Sorolon, to make it go *poof*?”

“Here, take a handful. If they don’t work, run.”

“They feel like toy marbles,” said the barbarian. The sorcerer laughed.

“Leave me here then,” whispered Zaek. “I’m happy. I have work to do, waiting and watching like a wolf. You too, Val. Get some sleep. I’ll find you.”

“Good hunting, then.”

Sorolon and Valamiel slipped away into the inky weeds and rotting willows. As their footsteps receded into the murk Zaek settled down, sword in hand, to begin his watch.

SOROLON AND THE MONK WASHED the slime of Fennelbank off their legs and feet in the purling sunlit stream. Then at once they made their way back to the Blue section of the Garden to see what their young comrades had been doing.

Valamiel was stunned. The sorcerer laughed with delight. “And this, you see, is the very reason for the Garden’s existence: love!”

Ravinan and the two older nephews, Esteva and Valvaen, had invented their own unfettered version of Hoppy-Toad. Stark naked they squatted in a row, kneeling on the grass. At the moment Ravi’s fair soft body, girlishly full and blond, was sandwiched between the two dark slender forms of the sorcerer’s apprentices. The chorister

was thus impaled by one pubescent penis, and himself pegged one suntanned thirteen-year-old's rear end..

Suddenly Valvaen pulled out his weapon and leapt over the bowed heads of the other two, erect penis flying and flapping between his outstretched legs. Landing on his knees in the soft grass, he snuggled up to his brother, and thrust his pelvis back till the triple linkage had been restored. Now Ravinan prepared to jump.

Instead he landed heavily between the copulatory siblings and bore them to the lawn in a tangle of squirming bare limbs and squeals of laughter. Oblivious to the watching men they attempted to revive the game, but fell to tickling one another and forgot...

Jethi and Varo still lay where they had first fallen, crushing a bed of white flowers (called Cups-of-Day) which were now matted into a couch of broken blossoms... so much less white and much less fine than the skin of the two witch-boys who lay wombed in the attar of bruised and scattered petals.

They lay on their sides in the ancient pose of the two fish that chase each other's tails — but Jethi and Varo had caught each other's tails and suckled them in sweet-lipped comradeship. Their eyes half-closed, hair undone and disordered, petals caught in their tresses, naked as if never clothed since Time began, the Keys to the Garden kissed and licked each other with languid preadolescent comeliness, exploring the magical shapes and tastes of their own almost translucent organs: Jethael's pale, rigid, membranous; Varonael's tiny but perfectly formed, an infant's arrowhead with two grapesized pendant gems in a velvet sack.

Beside them on the lawn Red Kael lounged on one elbow, studying the entwined bodies and gently massaging his own genitals.

As if an enchantment lay over the Garden, none of the children noticed the two men for several minutes. By now the threepronged Toad was halfway across the lawn, half submerged in the stream: distant summer voices, chuckling, laughing, sighing.

Jethi and Varo clutched each other's heads between their white thighs and disturbed their pose of gentle harmony by bucking and squirming with pleasure.

When they had given each other the invisible benison of simultaneous climax, they rested for several minutes, heads still

tucked between each other's legs. Then Jethael reversed himself and kissed Varo tenderly on the mouth, tongue to tongue.

Finally the boys noticed the monk and sorcerer standing shyly under a tree's shadow, smiling.

"...AND SO," SOROLON CONCLUDED, "from now on we must use the Garden only to plan Xiri's rescue. A fortnight from now, when our purpose is accomplished, we will leave on our great journey, and enjoy the Garden for as long as we like. For now, Valamiel and the others must return to Perpetual Benefice — and plant a Gate-amulet in some secret place. We of Manticore's Tongue have much work to accomplish."

"But Uncle," protested Varo, "Val and the others can't go back till morning. Why can't we spend one night here? (Even if it *is* broad daylight?)"

Sorolon indulged the imp unquestioningly. "After all," he conceded, "I first began to seek this place for you when you were born. You and Jethael have accomplished it. Now that an even greater purpose lies ahead, we *must* spend this night here, in the enchantment of these environs. Just think: my master's master..."

But Varo interrupted with a cheer and a kiss.

He and his brothers dragged the happily befuddled sorcerer to a bench not far away. There they assaulted him. Varo kissed him while Esteva, the suntanned eldest, slipped his hand inside the man's ceremonial green robe. Twelve-year-old Valvaen (a boy of the prettiest and most delicate manners, despite his lean brown body) pulled at the sorcerer's hand, trying to direct it toward his own agitated member, snake-shaped and still wet from the stream. Now impish Varo plunged grasping inside the robe, and took over the task of rubbing the wand with his tiny fingers; to judge by the sweeping gestures he made, Sorolon's magic wand must have been of magisterial proportions.

Valamiel failed to notice the magician's plight because he himself was being stripped of every stitch of green cloth by Jethi, Ravinan and Kael, working in consort, groping and ripping and giggling. While the two older boys held him spread-eagled, Jethael sprawled on top of him, jutting almost angrily with his stiffness against the man's flesh. "Val," he whispered urgently, "I feel like I'm burning inside, as if I

need to do it a hundred times tonight. Can we all play together? I want to give myself to Ravi and Kael as well as to you. All right, Val? May I?"

"Yes, of course, little sorcerer, but..." But Jethael kissed him to silence.

"... but let me hold you like *this*... while the others take you."

The mad monk sat crosslegged on the lawn. Jethi perched in his lap, facing away from him. The man grasped the childishly thin knees and raised them till the chorister slid down in his lap, presenting bare exposed buttocks, thighs gaping wide. In this way Valamiel was able to see, feel, smell and almost participate in Jethael's passive pleasure.

Ravanan, always greedy, tried to plunge into the offered slot without lubricant. Finally he accepted defeat and bent over to lick Jethael's ass; his fluid blond hair cascaded over Jethi's thighs and stomach.

At last he lifted his head, licked his lips and held his sturdy little weapon in his hand. With eager haste he lunged himself in, and laughed with pleasure. His fair face flushed and his cupid's-bow mouth grimaced and pursed with concentration.

Jethael was so small, his body so lithe, that Val was able to grasp the delicate feet, one in each hand, drawing the thin legs farther apart and feeling the soft toes flex and writhe against his palms. The child sighed and coo'd and wildly chuckled, his dark amber-tinted hair spread out cool over the monk's protective breast.

Ravanan sang discordant sweet notes, heaving himself against Jethael's rectal walls... blond Ravi grimaced and moaned, went rigid... fell, collapsed onto Jethael's body (and thus simultaneously into the monk's capacious embrace as well).

When Ravi had managed to disconnect himself and sprawl gasping on the lawn, Kael was there at once, engorged red rooster in hand, comb and wattles bright with spit. With almost adult passion he kissed both man and boy. Valamiel noted the difference at once: where Ravanan was all spun sugar, lazy blue eyes and summertime creamy flesh, Kael was fire, blood, temper: handsome as a pirate-chiefs peg-boy, mad-green-eyed little berserker of love. He covered Val and Jethi like a lightning-storm, attacking with tongue, teeth, spit, strong hands and shy blushing protestations of love.

And now he too faced the monk, pumping his young virility into Jethi's soft-as-buttermilk-and-sunlight... How Valamiel loved to watch the faces of boys who have lost every mask but the eternal visage of pleasure! How he loved to hold the body of his beloved and watch Kael's painful-looking wedge appear and disappear and reappear... as Jethael almost at once approached yet another peak, tensing and choking, writhing in the monk's loving embrace. The man kissed Kael and sucked the boy's long red tongue into his mouth. Kael kissed Jethael, and carried the younger boy's saliva on his lips, so that the man could drink it. Val kissed the redhead just as the boy ejaculated — and Kael nearly bit his tongue off.

Now Kael rolled away, destroyed, fell in the soft grass, holding his groin as if he'd been kicked. Val looked at Jethi's sphincter, and saw that it had begun to dribble and run with the mixed boyseed of his own two blood-brothers. "Jethi," he whispered, "I'm going to lie back. Please lower yourself over my mouth, so I can kiss you where they loved you, and taste their milk."

Graceful Jethi was soon in position. The monk watched the petal-white buttocks open; saw the anus angry pink, almost bruised; saw the goblets of spunk oozing from it; and pulled the boy down onto his suctioning mouth and curling, cream-licking tongue.

No one has invented anything as delicious as boysperm, nor does Nature provide any syrup or theriac to compare with its exquisite subtlety. Therefore how can anyone describe with accuracy the sensation Valamiel experienced while consuming this excruciatingly rare substance (one boy alone can only provide a few drops at a time) in quantities almost sufficient to satisfy the appetite of a true gourmet? (Although to tell the truth, Perpetual Benefice as a whole could never have filled him with too much liquid pubescence. Ah, no! Fifteen or twenty spurts a day? Still more rare than imported musk! Still costlier than nascent pearls!) (...and to suck this double dose of childjuice, these strands of lunar-glowing scum, these sticky elastic white plugs of civet, from the very steaming pulsing spermslick ass of a twelve-year-old angel... No, there can be no greater delicacy... impossible.)

When the monk had received the last droplet, whiff and memory of the semen deposited in Jethael's rectum, he urged the boy to stab his open bearded mouth with that little weapon that so obsessed him,

tortured him as the singing-bird is tortured by the rose's thorn and plunges upon it to die in rhapsody.

Using his fingers, Jethael pushed into Valamiel's mouth not only his penis but blue-veined scrotum as well, like a mother bird feeding its chicks with violet plums... and when the monk was thus choked with ambergris-scented marzipan-textured membranes and glands and sugarbone, Jethael bent forward and found the monk's rod, first with his fingers, then lips, tongue and teeth.

The man could now reach back and insert a finger into the child's distended anus... and at this intrusion the fragile body began to flail in rhythmic spasms. The entire genitalia, childish but swollen to full dimension, rammed again and again into the monk's gorge. In a frenzy Jethael chewed the man's livid erection with sharp tiny teeth.

The choirboy did not pause more than a moment to catch his breath. His cock still pulsed with hidden blood, and rested in his lover's mouth. Moaning, he began to suck passionately now, caressing Val's ballooning testicles with ungentle hands. The mad monk felt the childish body tense once again, almost as if for another climax... he felt a spear of fire penetrate his own heart, brain, loins and painfully burning spar (now quite deep in Jethael's sweet cool mouth)... and opening himself to the universe, he exploded so violently against the little boy's tongue that pellets and fragments of molten jelly spewed out in a fine spray around Jethi's pursed lips, faster than he could swallow it.

Almost fainting, Valamiel felt the boy leap upon him and kiss his gasping mouth: he could taste his own musty sperm on the child's love-swollen lips. The boy breathed hotly into the man's mouth, into his lungs, filling him with spirit... and dribbled strings of lazy saliva from his exquisite fever-red lips, like opalescent dew, for the monk to taste and swallow.

To their right, Kael had assaulted Ravi from behind, and was humping and jerking against the blond boy's cream-buttocks in ecstasy, Ravinan grunting at the rooster's corkscrewing and dipping...

... and to their right, Sorolon was masturbating his two elder nephews with the sinuous fingers of either hand... while little Varo the imp had opened the magician's green robe, and was kissing and caressing a vast penis at least the size of his own small forearm... which suddenly erupted in a violent white spray, sluicing and

sprinkling the laughing apprentices like a magical rain of melted pearls.

"LISTEN JETHAEL, AND I'LL TELL you something you still might not fully grasp: I am yours. Your power over me is absolute and totalitarian. My heart is enslaved by your grace and beauty. I am your servant, your worshipper. In return for one kiss I would follow any command, give you any gift... and in return for what you bestow on me besides kisses I would stake my life. Here in this Garden, where not only bodies but hearts seem stripped bare, I find a beauty in you even more profound than the loveliness I already adore as divine... each pore of your skin, indeed each inner organ (which I sense without seeing, and sometimes taste)... indeed, your very skeleton (which must be made of crystal weightless as birds' bones)... your very being, the glowing palpable life in you that gives you this shape, breath and molecularity... all, all is to me more beautiful than any faith or heresy, more real than Reality itself. Indeed, such is my madness that I declare: nothing at all subsists without you... but since you are everything, then the world itself subsists in beauty. Jethael, I would strip and loot the universe to buy you one finger-ring. Not even an ocean of nectar will serve as a metaphor for the sweetness which threatens to annihilate me in the cool fire of your nearness.

*"For centuries I lay in sea-bed
Bottled as brandy, Spell-encased in glass
Growing more potent with age — but untasted,
A wasted vintage, an unsummoned daemon*

*Till you uncorked me. Like smoke
I issue forth assuming the shape of a giant
Pliable to your mastery, longing for commands
To fly forth and ravish all creation*

*To adorn you. I am the Slave
Of the Green Flask: all bulky magic
And ogrish cape rings are to delight you,
To fetch sweetmeats from the Vanish Isles,*

*Gems more translucent than day.
Three wishes, three more, and more:
Your desires invade my consciousness,
The monster swoons with pleasure to obey.”*

“Val, you shouldn’t call yourself my slave. I’m only a boy, and you are my master, my father, my teacher, my brother, my lover. You own me. Without your love I’d be nothing — not even a real dancer. I had no life at all till you came. Now I have love and adventure, magic... and even a bit of fame! And pleasures that I never even dreamed of. You don’t have to give presents or follow my orders.”

“I didn’t mean... that is, of course I’ll cherish you, protect you, care for you, even guide you if I can. Trust me and let me give you my life. No, what I meant was... you are the king of my heart...”

“Couldn’t we say that we belong to each other?”

“Of course. But here in this Garden you must be king in a special way. Everything must be done for the pleasure of the Beloved here; and you are mine (as Varo is Sorolon’s and Xiri is Zaek’s).”

“All right. But I want my subjects to be happy, so I order you to... demand of me whatever you desire. Especially whatever you dream about when you think of me... you know, you told me how you thought about me and masturbated, before we became lovers.”

“I believe I’ve been given all that, and much more. But what of your dreams? Have you any wild fantasies as yet unrealized?”

“Well, perhaps. I know something you promised, but never did. When you made the love-bite (look: you can still see the bruise) you said...”

“That I’d open a vein for you in return... Where are you going?”

“I have a little knife in my robe. Wait... See? I found it at Sorolon’s: a miniature dagger, very sharp, with a snake-eye crystal in the hilt.”

“Beautiful. Now stab me with it, wound me.”

“Just a little cut, silly. Here on your arm.”

The boy kissed Valamiel’s forearm, and the man thrust it urgently between his small sharp teeth. Jethael understood, and clamped down hard, sucked, bit with nearly enough pressure to break skin.

Then with trembling fingers — but no hesitation — he pricked the dagger’s point into the bite-bruised flesh. Valamiel’s arm jerked

almost violently. The blade tore a shallow gash about an inch long which dripped a rivulet of blood. The monk's cock sprang to full erection (a naked male cannot lie about what gives him pleasure).

"Val, I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't."

"It tastes nice. But let me give you more of mine." And before the monk could stop him he'd cut his own forearm nearly as long and deep as Valamiel's. He winced with pain and dropped the knife.

"Your Majesty should be more careful. Are you hurt?"

"No... I heal quickly. Now, taste."

The monk drank perhaps five or six drops of blood, and felt the delicate incision of the wound with the tip of his tongue... and so, he thought, I discover yet another dark secret about myself... now I'll be suffering ithyphallism at the sight of bare knees scraped raw from a tumble at play... or fingers cut on kite-strings...

The man and boy had retired behind a rosebush, thinking the others had all fallen asleep. They sat together on a low slab of marble, which seemed to cover an underground cistern. But now, as they embraced, a voice whispered, "Jethi? Val?"

"Here, Kael," said the bleeding child. "Come play with us."

The slender dancer appeared, still naked — and once again almost hard with the organic resilience of puberty — and his crimson mane tangled with flowers.

"It seems to be getting darker," he said. "Perhaps day and night are reversed here. The sun must be coming up in Suvyamara. Jethi, you're cut! and you, too. What are you doing?"

"Turning day to night with mythical pleasures," the monk whispered, drawing Kael down into the double embrace, warm against the desert twilight.

"Val and I finally exchanged our blood. Now we belong to each other forever," Jethi boasted.

The scrivening monk was no stallion. He enjoyed the sensation of holding two boys, but he entertained no thought of making love to one of them again. His penis felt almost raw and chafed, intensely sensitive but only half-erect — now that the pain of the dagger-cut had faded.

But the children were determined to rouse him again. They kissed, caressed, bit and sucked his ears, neck, face, throat, nipples

and genitals, as he lay between them, prostrate with delight at being nearly raped by these two (whose combined ages were less than his own).

“I want you to take me,” Jethael whispered into his ear.

“But... you’ve already... you shouldn’t... aren’t you still sore?”

“Not enough. Anyway... I command it.”

“But *I*’ve already expired once today... tonight. I’m not fourteen years old!” The monk exhibited himself, swollen but flaccid as a dead snake.

“I know how to make it hard,” said Kael. “I learned it from Michchi; he heard it from one of the kitchen slaveboys. Wait.”

In a moment he returned with a ceremonial boy’s green slipper, and yanked out the laces. (Jethael, giggling, inserted his penis in the slipper’s velvet toe and friggd himself. The boy is possessed! thought Valamiel, giddy with cosmic lust.)

“Kael, what are you doing to me?”

“Tying up your cock, Sir, so the blood will stay in,” Kael chortled wickedly. “After I’ve jac’d myself ten times, I use this method... and a candle.” Jethael laughed, and watched in fascination as Kael wound the green velvet lace around the root of the monk’s rubbery genitals, then tied it in a bow under the pendulous sack. The two fauns then went to work with their hands till the penis stood up, bulging red veins as if being strangled in a thug’s noose. The boys cheered.

“Val,” asked Jethi, eyes glittering, “have you ever been loved ‘completely’?”

“No, Your Sweet Majesty. Never. Would you like to take me? You may, with pleasure.”

“Not yet. When I’m old enough to make milk I’ll do it, I promise. But what about Kael? Then... you could be in the middle.”

The monk looked incredulously at the red rooster, which seemed to stretch its ungainly neck and swell another contorted inch, as if displaying its ruff before battle. Kael blushed bright enough to banish the twilight and said, “Jethi, you’re very rude.”

The monk reached out and pinched the underside of Kael’s foreskin till it stretched like taffy. “Crimson warrior...” he breathed, “don’t you like the idea?”

“But you’re a grown-up!”

“This is as big as many an adult’s weapon. I’d love to take your manhood, Kael — and give you the last vestige of my virginity.”

“Well, if you don’t mind... Just thinking about it makes me hard enough to burst.”

Jethael pushed the man onto his back, buttocks resting on the edge of the marble cistern-cover, and made him spread his legs till his dark pudenda were fully exposed. Then both boys spat together on the red rooster, till it seemed to have been dipped in a tub of white honey. Mastermind of the operation, Jethael guided the strange blunt bludgeon toward the monk’s sweating posterior and pointed it poised on the brink of attack, homicidally rigid.

Kael was prepared to be hesitant, but the monk’s rectum, acting on its own accord, opened so capaciously and ravenously that the fighting-cock thrust itself forward without meeting the slightest resistance.

Nevertheless the man realized at once why Jethael and Ravinan looked so deeply pained when similarly impaled by the redhead. The marvelous ugly-beautiful rooster was not meant for any human anatomy: its exaggerated (almost corkscrew) bend and its bulbous awl-shaped snout totalled less than six inches, but felt like a twisted cattle-prod. The wrinkles of Kael’s knobbly foreskin scraped against mucous membrane like fine bristles. Convulsively the muscles of the rectum seized this alien intruder and moulded themselves like living wax around its shaft, as if to engulf and consume it. The pain was exquisite.

Kael came to rest, gasping and grinning. Now the two boys spat on Valamiel’s unnaturally swollen erection and rubbed it till its veins seemed about to pop with the pressure of knotted green velvet. Throttled in their bondage, the testicles appeared swollen to the size of peaches.

Now adroitly Jethael lowered himself into position over the monk, knees pressing his sides, facing him and smiling down at him lovingly. Kael helped the slender child find Valamiel’s penis with the bruised and swollen rim of his anus; the redhead held Jethi in tight embrace, and drew his light body down and back... till the head of Valamiel’s cock squeezed and battered its way into the ravished sphincter. Jethael sank with his full weight and settled onto the penis with a scream of pain... his little cock jerked by itself as if berserk. “It

feels...,” he gasped, “... as if *both* of you are inside me at once... all the way to my lungs...”

The ridge of Jethael’s sphincter pressed against the knotted shoelace and squeezed the man’s tortured scrotum like squashed overripe fruit. Kael began prodding and probing into Valamiel’s ass, all the while hugging Jethi — who reached out to pinch and knead the monk’s nipples.

Val found Jethael’s cock with one trembling hand. His insides were flaming lava, his eyes exploded with black light.

Kael began to pump himself as deep and hard into the man as he could... till Valamiel felt that — like a real virgin — he must be bleeding. As Kael thrust home, Jethi would grind his hips against the man’s loins; and as Kael pulled out, Jethi would raise himself till only the head of the man’s rod remained in him; then, as the red rooster attacked again, Jethi would plunge down as well.

Because he had already spent once, Valamiel took a long time reaching the peak again. But as a result the whole of his being seemed to fall deeper and deeper into the Joy Void, the Ablyss, the martyrdom and sacrifice of consciousness. Every nerve of his body was transformed into a tortured penis, hamstrung and bitten. His violated intestine received the sweet obsidian knife of the galaxy in mindless atavistic wallowing swamp-sucking tissue-splitting churning red froth. His world-tree, stripped of its bark, embedded in the body of a godling, creaked and hissed and expanded with captive blood.

Jethael — to judge by appearances — had been taken by one long unending dry-spasming orgasm, as if he had become a very part of the plasma of the universe of eternal erotic pulsation. Truly, thought the monk, no one has ever been more boy-fucked than I.

Kael’s semen spraying deep into unseen passages of his never-before-explored anatomy, finally triggered off the gysering of his own ejaculation... which seemed to go on and on, till one more spasm would kill him, pumping into Jethi’s tight bowels... and then again...

... and the whole fantastic acrobatic trio of spent lovers collapsed in a heap of sweating, sticky, steaming, slippery, kissing triple-embracing bodies, and fell to the grass as if stunned.

TIME PASSED. JETHAEL WOKE UP shivering with night chill. The Garden was dark. He glanced up at the sky.

He shook Valamiel urgently.

“What’s the matter? You’re trembling...”

“Look!”

Jethael pointed into a sky which displayed not a single Moon. Not only was the Garden obviously not on Qamar, it was nowhere near it, perhaps not even in the same universe. Instead of the Ring of Moons they saw (horizon to horizon) a net or web or mesh or billion-faceted billion-light-year-wide expanse of stars laced with phosphorescent dust, stardust, something they had never seen or heard of before, galaxy-wide wisps of stellar smoke, multi-hued as prism-crystal, and unthinkably hugely deep.

They woke Kael. They stared together into space for endless time, hugging each other, almost afraid, ravished by beauty no other human eye had ever witnessed.

HOURS PASSED. DAWN CAME to the Garden, then full day. The Black Gate opened and Zaek staggered through, muddy and exhausted. He spied fruit on a nearby tree, tasted, devoured it, looking gratefully up at the bright turquoise sky.

When he had eaten he stripped and bathed. Naked, he lay in sunlit grass (sword near his hand) and slept.

More hours passed. Shadows grew longer. A small voice calling his name woke him. “Oh... hello Varo. What are you doing here? Where are the others?”

Direct as always, the naked imp seated himself crosslegged, chewing a blade of grass; wriggled his toes and said, “Val and Jethi and the others have gone back to Perpetual Benefice. They planted an amulet in a closet in Val’s rooms, and Sorolon opened it to the White Gate, just a few hours ago. Now Uncle’s back at the Tongue with my brothers, working. But I’m playing in the Garden.”

“Everyone at work but you, eh?”

“After all, it’s *my* Garden; that is, mine and Jethael’s... and Xiri’s too.”

“A beautiful thought, little sorcerer.”

“Did you find out any *clues* about Xiri?”

“Nothing,” sighed the barbarian. “All night and well into the day I remained watching, till depression and hunger drove me back here. I

saw not a single human soul. It's a terrible place. Stay away from the Black Gate, little one."

"*I'm* not afraid of ghosts. I see them all the time. They're stupid. If I were grown-up I'd kill that Marbreuse. But listen Zaek, don't worry. I had a dream about all of us together in Far Thuren, and Xiri was there. He has long golden hair, like yours."

"So he does, wise one. Well... I feel a hundred times better now.

"Would you like to sleep with your head on my lap?"

"I'm sure you'd rather run and play..."

"No, I like it. I do it for all my family. I'm very good at it. You'll see."

And Zaek fell asleep, small fingers stroking his forehead, in the purifying sun.

JETHAEL WAS RUNNING A SLIGHT FEVER. His face was flushed, his eyes shone and fascinating blue bruises appeared beneath them like antimony: stigmata of love's exhaustion. His lips were full and red, warmth emanated from his body. He wanted to be cuddled, but Valamiel was worried. He tucked the boy into bed in Noon Tower and went through the Garden to fetch back Sorolon with a bag of medicines, lotions and syrups.

Jethael was asleep, but awoke when they entered through the closet door. His brow was cooler but still flushed. (A boy is almost at his most beautiful with this febrile heat radiating through him, the dreaminess of gentle disease.) Sorolon treated the cut on Jethael's thin arm, then felt all twenty-one of the boy's pulses in wrists and ankles. He poured out a glass of bitter root-brown syrup which the boy drank with a grimace. "Nothing serious. We might all have taken a chill from the evening dew. Next time we'll bring a little tent, a brazier and some blankets. Now: sleep, and then lots of food. Any other symptoms?"

"Well...", said the boy with a sleepy grin, "*I am* a bit sore in the behind."

"I have something for that." Sorolon rummaged in his bag.

"Jethi, really, we mustn't overindulge again like that. I might have hurt you. I *did* hurt you."

"It's all right, I'm only sore, not damaged. It even feels rather nice."

“Would you... care to apply this salve?” the embarrassed sorcerer asked the monk.

Valamiel smiled. “What do you say, Your Majesty?”

Jethael grinned and replied innocently, “But you wouldn’t know how, Val. You’re not a doctor.”

Sorolon actually blushed as he raised the sheet, and Jethael pulled back the hem of his linen nightshirt. “Just bruised,” said the sorcerer, dipping his finger into a jar of green translucent goo. “But really, Jethi, remember: you’re still a little boy.”

“Oh, it feels like ice!” Jethael’s penis surged erect as Sorolon slowly inserted a long sinuous finger, saying apologetically, “Sorry, my dear... have to coat the whole fundament with lotion...”

“I’m all numb and cold inside,” the boy said wonderingly. “And sort of pepperminty.”

“Sounds delicious,” said the monk.

“It’s not at *all*,” the sorcerer reproved him, withdrawing a greenslick finger from Jethael’s pink bottom. “Now, tuck yourself up and sleep.”

“Alone?”

“Well... *sleep*, anyway.” Still blushing, the ugly magus vanished into the closet and closed the door behind him.

NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE that Jethael was living openly in Noon Tower. Next morning the monk sent him back to bed after breakfast, and set out on an expedition of his own.

Jethael obeyed orders, slept again, woke up, read for a while, masturbated (wishing he had more of that green salve) and fell asleep in a tangle of sheets.

MEANWHILE VALAMIEL TOOK A FERRY all the way to Port Oryx, the most crowded, urban, noisy, wealthy and newest part of Suvyamara (a mere three centuries ago it replaced the totally drowned quarter of Squid Gate as the city’s commercial center). He was dressed in his grand Praeceptor’s robe, had trimmed his beard and doused himself with foppish attar.

In a noisome side street he found a row of tiny shops, each marked with the sign of a gold coin. These were the pernicious money-lenders of Suvyamara, reputedly controlled in secret by the

Theocracy, but ostensibly a free market — of ruinous proportions. Those desperate ones who borrowed could expect to choose death or exile if they defaulted. Valamiel had already decided to leave the Delta-land — in such a way that his flight could never be traced. So, he set out to borrow money knowing full well that it would never be paid back.

It has already been noted that the heretic monk possessed more than a fleeting acquaintance with the un-Guild of thieves. It must be written: he was a larcenous man. He never robbed with violence (except that one time with Zaek at the midnight crossroads) and made a rule of striking only at the wealthy. But essentially he stole because he enjoyed it. Burglary gave him an erection.

Fraud was not his usual “stretch”, and he needed all his wits to deal with rapacious men, withered and bloated with cold silver and indigestible gold. They all reminded him of Quelleron. He worked industriously, visiting and borrowing from five different shops before afternoon.

He hinted at great bribes to be made as a Praeceptor of Perpetual Benefice. “Really, the place is so *badly* run, I think if some of the boys were to vanish into thin air no one would ever *care*...” Let the cadaverous mudslugs think what they like. Let them think him a slave-stealing pimp, if it would loosen their safe-hinges. Eloquent innuendoes flowed glibly; coins rattled plumply.

As an intellectual, the monk needed to explain his actions to himself. He intended to spend all the money on Jethael and his other friends. Therefore, he decided over a cup of tea, this is a *religious* act. (I’ll try just one more shop before I quit.) Then, too, it’s a blow against injustice. Surely an interest rate of a hundred percent compounded monthly amounts to excessive usury. Yes... this is an act worthy of some romantic Chaote bandit, who robs the caravans of the rich to distribute largess amongst the poor.

Besides... as his private water-taxi pulled away from the pier at Port Oryx, headed down the Channel in a light rain, Valamiel developed a raging erection under the weight of cash he held pouched in chamois on his lap. He laughed and spat in the water for luck, and ordered the oarsmen to head for the toy bazaar near Varon’s shrine in Ashgate.

He was unable to spend more than two-thirds of his loot, hard as he tried. The bazaar overflowed with sweet boys, and his black robe had to be held modestly before him as he strolled the narrow boardwalk, spending like a lord, winning the sincere admiration of every stall-holder and shopboy (grinning at their tips of silver pennies), and loading down his boatmen with packages. He bought:

for Kael: a real short-sword, with a hilt in the shape of a rooster holding a ruby in its beak, and a sheath of red laqueur; and a box of alchemically-prepared artist's colors;

for Ravinan: a full robe of sky-blue silk, a pirate's gold earring, and a box of sweets imported from the Vanish Isles which cost their weight in silver;

for all seven boys of Blue Rain, and for Varo and his brothers, he bought small and decorative but very real daggers (gifts for which some of them had often loudly sighed and begged) and expensive illustrated books; a medley of kites in gaudy mythshapes; and a toy airship for Venyamin;

for Sorolon he bought one small bottle containing seven-times distilled dream wine, guaranteed over a hundred years old; and a curious tattered booklet called *Magic Tricks Any Boy Can Master*;

and finally in one extremely small cluttered shop he found all the things he'd really been searching for, without knowing it.

The shopkeeper squatted surly, stubble-bearded, fanning himself with a bundle of reeds, half-asleep. He watched Valamiel with utter contempt from beneath slitted eyelids.

First the monk picked up an exquisite gold coronet, made of rough-cut hyacinth and jasper in the shape of leaves and flowers.

"What's this?" he asked.

"That," muttered the shopkeeper, "is a boy's First Hunt Crown from Far Thuren. Very old; very expensive." He reached to rescue it from the customer's hands.

"I'll take it."

The merchant grumbled incredulously.

"Now... what's that in the cage?" In a gilt aviary festooned with gingerbread, a tiny black animal sat forlorn and despondent.

"*That*," snarled the man, "is a fire-lynx kitten."

"Ah. Very young, very expensive?"

"Precisely."

"I'll take it. Hmm... Have you any firesilk tunics, in about a size twelve-and-a-half?"

"As it happens," said the man in a rage, "I do."

"And perhaps slippers to match?"

"These fit all sizes nine through thirteen. They cost four hundred sequins... apiece."

"You mean, eight the pair?"

"So... you can multiply!"

"Two pairs, then, please — and the tunic. Let's see... the crown for Zaek, to give to Xiri... the kitten for Varonael... the tunic for Jethi, and the firesilk slippers for the two witchboys... Ah, something for Dragon. What about this pipe, with a bowl of opal carved like a cyclops-dolphin?"

"That is not for children, Sir. That is used..."

"I know. I'll take it. But listen, I haven't bought enough for Jethael yet. Let me see... that half-mask on the wall there... may I hold it?"

With infinite sarcasm, the merchant placed the fragile-looking mask on the counter. Exquisitely carved, it represented the eyes, nose and forehead of a youth with wide-set almond-shaped eyes, and tendrils of tiny flowers growing from his brow and cheeks. It was carved of a single piece of some translucent green stone... "Not real viridine, is it? No, jadeite. But Suvyamaran work. About two hundred years old," Valamiel said, entranced.

"So... you know something after all?"

"This mask seems to embody the whole spirit of the Qamarian Transformations. It is perfect."

"Yes... you are correct."

"Can you identify the deity portrayed, Sir?" asked the monk. The merchant sighed, reached into a drawer, took out a small sunglass set in an onyx tube, and screwed it into one rheumy eye-socket. He peered into the mask, holding it up to the light.

"Since you know so much," he said, still squinting, "I'll tell you: this mask was once used by Poron himself. It represents... ah yes... a very obscure deity... you can make out the name here in Old Letters, but faintly. I. E. S. S. The modern pronunciation would be 'Jeth'."

He unscrewed the eyepiece. "I suppose you'll want *this* too?"

But Valamiel had been seized by rapture, and could not respond.

It took him five minutes to realize he was being shown a list of numbers on a grease-stained sheet of paper. It said:

Crown — 4,000
Fire-lynx — 2,500
Firesilk tunic — 20,000
Slippers — 16,000
Vhang pipe - 1,000

Total - 44,300 S.S.

“Sir... if you do not sell me the mask, I cannot buy the rest.”

“The mask? The mask? Damn you, the mask is for nothing. It has no price. It’s obviously yours... take it! Now pay me for the rest... and go away!”

BY THE SECOND NIGHT Zaek had grown quite used to the ghouls. They served to break the monotony. As he tossed little black marbles at them and watched them vaporize, he’d almost regret their timidity. At least they provided some sport, however grim and nauseating.

Sorolon had been correct in calling Fennelbank Hall a worse sight by day than by night. Its half-tumbled walls leaked pestilence and decay from every pock and crevasse. The grim shutters nailed across every surviving window seemed like patches on open sores. Mist shrouded the place day and night. Animals larger than insects shunned the district of the Hall entirely.

Zaek prayed that the Spell of horror held only for the outside of the building and did not inflict the prisoners within. He tried to visualize the place as a charming ruin but his backbrain kept moaning, “Haunted house! Haunted house!” After two days he gave up the attempt at double vision and simply concentrated on his surveillance. One thing was certain: if spies could be detected from the Hall he would long since have been apprehended. Apparently the Spell was expected to provide complete security. With the trained patience of the hunter he kept watch.

Finally, on the third day, his “wolfishness” was rewarded. At daybreak a cloaked figure emerged from the Hall and made its way scuttling down a bramble-choked path, away from Zaek, and vanished

into the park. He moved slowly and stealthily to gain a hidden look-out near the path. He froze. He waited.

At noon the cloaked figure returned. Seen close, it proved to be (or at least resemble) one of the mysterious abductors, face invisible under shadowy hood. The figure bore with it what appeared to be a basket of food. It vanished into the tower, and once again all fell silent.

Shortly through the miasmal stink of the ensorcelled park he caught a whiff of frying leeks.

That evening just before dark a sound of loud knocking began, as if someone were beating fists against wood, from somewhere near the top of the tower. Zaek judged the noise to emanate from one window in particular, and memorized the spot. The knocking kept up for half an hour at different random tempos — then ceased.

Of course no one outside the park could hear the noise. Zaek was surprised that the boys would even bother to try, after such long incarceration, to attract any passerby's ear. I hope they're not punished for it, he thought.

The basket of food might just suffice two boys and a guard for three days, on short rations.

Conclusion: Marbreuse was not inside the Hall, at least not at present. The boys still lived. Magical "seals" on the Hall itself? No way to be sure... except... try to break in.

He might have attempted this while the guard was out shopping. Now he might be forced to wait three days for another chance.

He needed advice. He crawled back to the stone pavilion and vanished into its dark maw.

11.

The Book Of The Garden

MY DEAR COLLEAGUES: I am sure you grow impatient, as I do, for the moment in which our purpose will be achieved. Be of good cheer, for now we begin to count the days — and soon the hours — before our task is completed. Beginning today you must undertake to familiarize yourselves with the true scene of our operation — which is not precisely the Viridine Temple, as I shall explain.

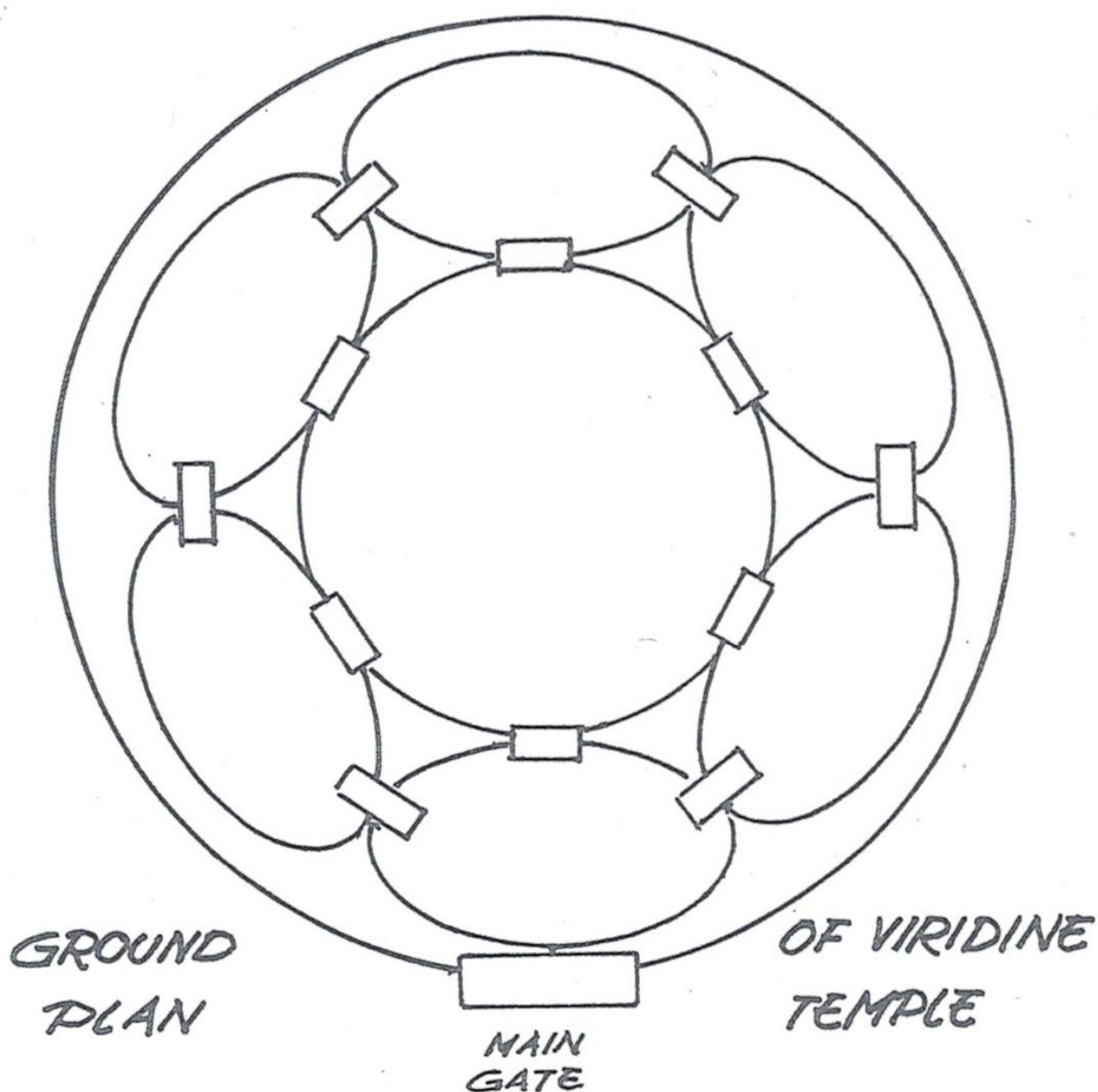
You may have heard that beneath the Temple catacombs are said to exist. The report is true. Enclosed you will find a map showing the actual extent of these man-made tunnels, dungeons, wells, pits and sewers.

Note several points of particular interest: for example (a little-known fact!), a tunnel exists which leads from the Temple to Perpetual Benefice and emerges under Bell Tower. Our mutual friend, who presides therein, will no doubt permit you to poke around (privately) and locate the long-disused doorway into this tunnel. As you may imagine, my discovery of this tunnel system (several months ago and quite by accident) led to the elaboration of my entire scheme.

*Now, please also note the complex of tunnels directly under the Temple itself. Unlike the radiant systems these catacombs exist on **three** underground levels. The highest level is open to all Temple personnel, and is widely known to exist; it is used for vestries, offices, storage and the like. Even Praeceptors of the Benefice may wander freely on this level.*

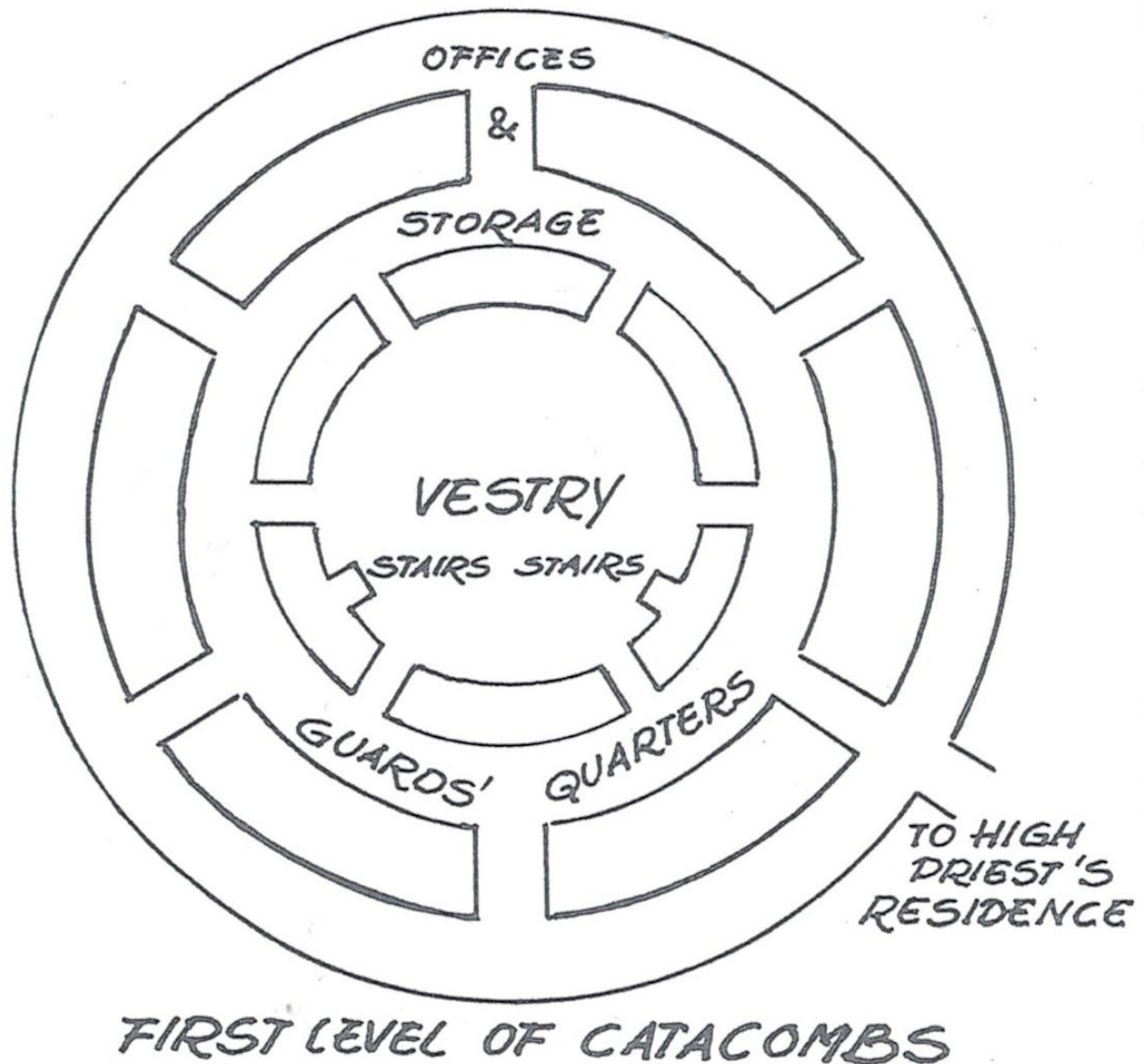
The second level is reputedly disused and known only to a few. It may be empty or it may not be. In any case, our mutual friend will also supply you with a set of keys, acquired by him in his capacity as a trusted administrator of Temple funds. These keys will open various doors to the second level, shown on the chart. In practice you may not need them, however, since your access to the Temple will lead direct from the Bell Tower to the second level of the catacombs.

The third level (the existence of which is known only to a guarded few of the Temple Hierarchy — you see how I share my secrets with



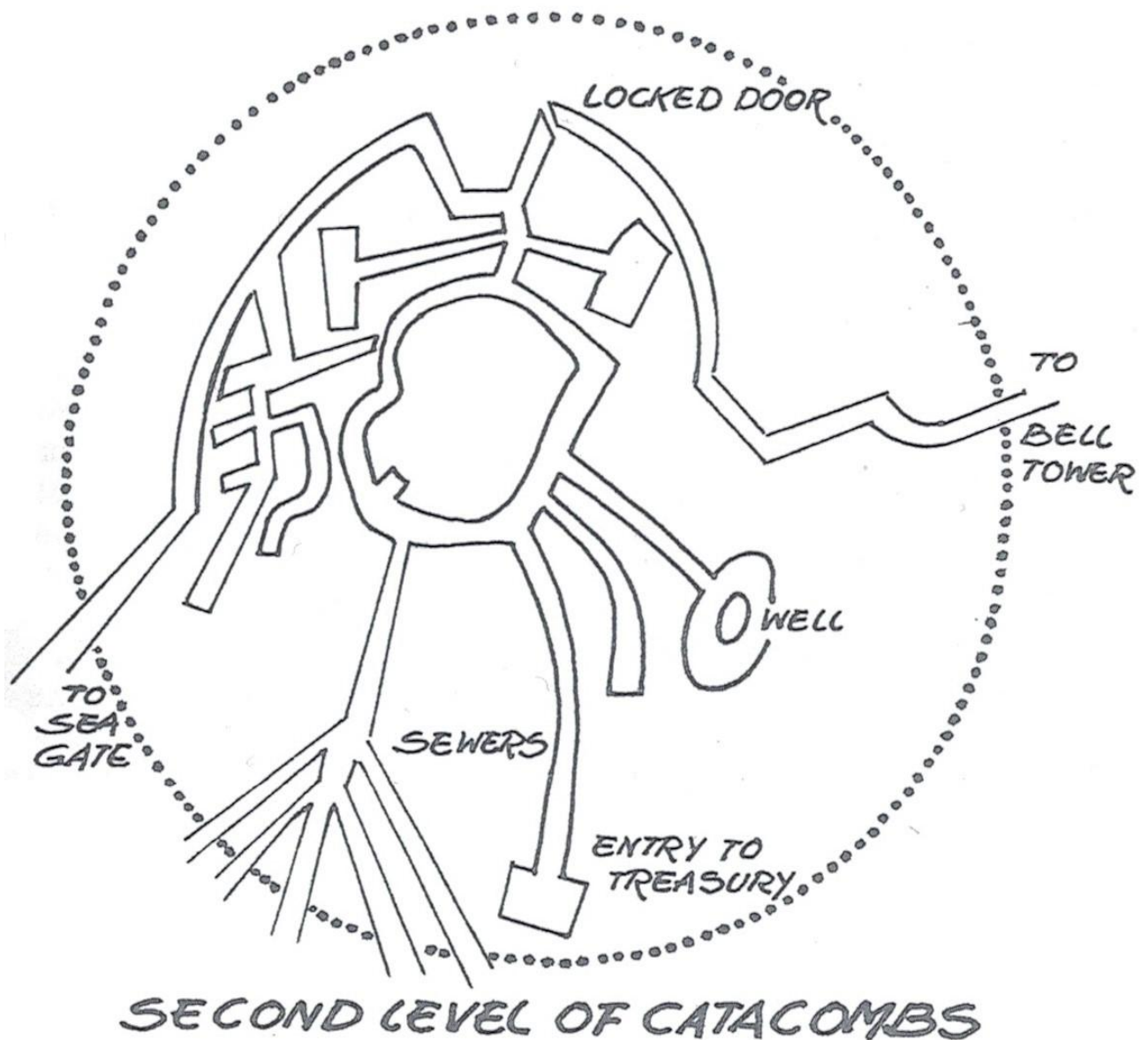
you!) contains the treasury of the Viridine cult. There the costliest baubles are kept, and the vault sealed not only by elaborate locks but also by Spells of incredible potency, known only to the High Priest and which not even I could overmaster.

But... eight days from today the Spells will be removed. Then for three days and nights only locks and keys and magic of an ordinary sort will seal off the third level. The Crowstone will be taken from its resting place on these three consecutive days and each evening at sundown will be shown to gawking multitudes in the Temple above. Then, after each of these Presentations, it will be returned to its hiding place till the next day and the next Presentation-performance.



During these three days and nights, of course, the Temple will be alive with guards. The second level, I imagine, will be particularly well-watched.

And so, shortly after sundown on the first night — imagine this now! — the Stone will be replaced, the door sealed. The congregation will disperse. Next day, this door will be opened, the Stone again removed and shown. Then, by the second watch of the night, all will be silent again, all doors sealed and guarded. Why should anyone imagine that *this* night will pass any differently from the first or last of the ceremony?



But... in the still small hours of that second night, the door on the second level, the door which opens on the tunnel to Bell Tower, the forgotten and unguarded door will creak open... and no one will be there! Only the wind? A ghost?

You will enjoy the jest! You see, all three of us will walk through the dungeon-full of guards — and not one of them will sense our presence. We shall be invisible! (And by the way, I am a much better tailor than your swamp-magus. My cloaks can be put on or off at will, and last for three days!)

Unseen, then, we descend to the third level of the catacombs. Suddenly, perhaps, a few last guards fall to the floor without making a sound, knocked unconscious by invisible fists. The last locks are picked and broken. The door flies open!

There... not even I can say what we shall find. Human devices, traps and guards, can be dealt with by you, my colleagues. Magical devices, traps and guards will fall to my Will.

At last, Stone in hand, we return to Perpetual Benefice and part good friends. But what of recompense, you ask? Ah, you shall have helped yourselves to whatever portable wealth you find during our operation — and I assure you that chamber contains much of purely monetary value — such as chests of uncut viridine, and gold in abundance.

*I have been invited to attend the ceremony on all three nights, and will be residing the whole time in Bell Tower as the guest of our mutual friend. Meet me, then, on the night of the **second** Presentation, at precisely the third hour after sundown, in the office of the Master of Boys. We will proceed from thence about our business; and upon our return your slaveboys will await you.*

(Signed, for the Regnant of Chaeth, MARBREUSE)

Postscriptum: This letter and chart will fade within an hour. Memorize what you need to know.

“AN EXCELLENT SCHEME,” Sorolon said sincerely. “Brilliant. I suggest we adopt it as our own. With a few exceptions, of course. One: we must create a door into the Garden leading into the catacombs, as close as possible to the Treasury on the lowest level.

Let me see that copy of the chart you made, Val... Hmm... This entrance to the sewer system looks promising. You must reconnoiter as soon as possible.

“Then, on the *first* night, after the Presentation, when Marbreuse is safe in bed in Bell Tower, all three of us will enter the Garden. We’ll step out into the catacomb and steal the Stone — as per these instructions... except that I will play the role Mar-breuse has designed for himself. Then, Stone in hand, we vanish into the Garden for good. How does that sound?”

“It leaves Marbreuse alive,” muttered Zaek darkly.

“Ah well then...,” said the monk. “Perhaps... a last visit to Bell Tower?”

“The man cannot be taken by assassin’s tricks, I fear,” Sorolon sighed, “though I’m not sure even of *that*, after all. It’s true that should we succeed he will try to pursue us. But I prefer to deal with him later.”

“My inclination prompts me to agree,” said the monk. “But I have a more urgent question. Can *you* make Cloaks of Invisibility that may be taken off and put back on at will? As I see it, that’s the gist of the funeral... excuse me, I mean the burglary. (We call our jobs ‘funerals’ in the trade — for good luck, you know.)”

“Charming,” said Sorolon. He frowned. “Frankly, no. Never even heard of such a Cloak. Marbreuse may prove too much for us yet! But I have another plan: a Spell of Somnolence. I’m quite good at them, because I’ve always been fascinated by the phenomena of sleep. We’ll have time for it to take effect while we wait behind our Garden Gate. With luck even the guards on the third level — if any — will succumb. In some ways I like this better than *his* version, which involves violence.

“Now, about the rescue of Xiri and Dragon. As soon as Marbreuse arrives at Bell Tower on the afternoon or evening of the first day, of the ceremony, we can be reasonably certain that Fennelbank Hall will stand guarded only by one, or possibly two dark-visaged henchmen. At that moment we strike from the Garden, using both swords and sorcery as required, and break down the prison doors. Back to the Garden with our young friends. Then, sometime after midnight... we strike out again for the Crowstone. Well, what do you think?”

The monk said, “Jethael is to dance in honor of the Stone at the Presentation that first night. I shall be there to watch him if possible, and to keep an eye on Marbreuse. It’s beginning to sound complicated. I suppose we’ll have to work out the precise schedule as affairs actually develop.”

“I intend to keep my vigil at Fennelbank Hall for the next eight days,” Zaek declared. “I want to see if Marbreuse even visits the place. If he shows up there we may not have to worry about him anymore... at all... ever.”

“Zaek! Consider: the man is protected by more than human power. It’s better to avoid all confrontation...”

“All right, Sorolon, peace. I told you: military discipline. I’ll do nothing to endanger our purpose, never fear. But if I see that sneaking bombastic slave-owning two-faced sorcerous coward... well, I’ll watch for a lucky chance, Sorolon. I tell you that openly. I’ll kill the scum if I can.”

“WEARING FIRESILK IS ALMOST as good as making love,” said Jethael, dancing slowly around the room in Noon Tower.

Officially he was still recovering from his fever and resting before he started to rehearse for his dance at the First Presentation of the Crowstone. In fact, both he and Valamiel found this a convenient excuse to keep themselves locked up and alone... *The Mad Monk And His Catamite*, languorous, perfumy seclusion in the willow-shaded chambers, spacious and almost empty of all furniture save a capacious low couch strewn with messy sheets, books, toys, clothes and bowls of fruit. Outside storms brewed up, blustering cozily against closed windows. Inside a brazier warmed the chambers. And for once Jethael was dressed — in firesilk tunic, sash and slippers. Except for Jethael, none of the other boys had yet received their gifts... except for little Varo.

The imp enjoyed free run of the Garden. He visited Zaek at the Black Gate, bringing him choice delicacies and cheer. He visited Valamiel’s tower, popping unannounced through the closet door (which opened directly onto the White pathway). His gift, the fire-lynx, needed instant loving attention; so the monk had already presented it to its new master.

In a single day under Varo's ecstatic and tireless care, the lynx had lost its dull black look of sorrow and begun to sparkle with kittenish good spirits. Its bright fur already held promise of fiery brilliance; the cat made an excellent match for its firesilk-clad master. Varo called it "Silk".

"That's not his *real* name, but only he and I know his real name, because it's magic. I'm bringing him up in the Garden, so that he'll be trained as my *familiar*, and when he comes out into this world he'll be able to help me cast Spells and things. And watch for ghosts; cats are excellent at that."

At the moment, however, Silk and his master were playing on Valamiel's bed. Varo held up the hem of his corruscating tunic, and Silk batted his tiny paws at the boy's tiny penis, to their mutual amusement. Until...

"Ouch!" said Varonael, and plucked the kitten up into his arms. "No more of *that* game! Jethi, have you tried on the mask yet?"

The dancer paused. "No."

(Jethael had been so deeply moved by the green half-mask and its story that he had not yet dared to place it on his face. Old Poron had been invited earlier that day to come look at it. He remembered it.

"It's odd I'd forgotten how I once danced the role of Jeth... but seeing the mask brings it all back... No one knew what ritual purpose the thing was supposed to have. Someone found it in the Temple treasury I think, and handed it over to someone at Perpetual Benefice. My lover liked it for purely aesthetic reasons. It's a masterpiece, without doubt. I wore it several times. I think later it disappeared... stolen, perhaps.

"I have a splendid idea, however," the old dandy continued. "Why not wear it in your dance at the Presentation? The connoisseurs will be pleased to see a piece of such virtue displayed.")

... And so... in answer to Varonael's question Jethi said, "No, I haven't tried it on yet. I think perhaps I shouldn't, till the evening of the Presentation."

"Well... if you say so. Still... I want to see what you look like with your god's face," said the astonishing imp. "I think you should wear it now, and look in the mirror."

Jethael paused. He pirouetted slowly around, three times. He posed, arms stretched out, balanced on one pointed foot. The firesilk

followed and clung to the slender form of his limbs. He paused again. “All right... just for you and Val... one time.”

The mask rested in a place of honor on Valamiel’s single cabinet. The boy danced (tonight, it seemed he *must* dance) to the mask, picked it up in both hands and contemplated it. A black velvet ribbon had been strung through two holes, and the mask was ready to be donned.

He turned away from the two spectators. He placed the mask on his face and tied the ribbon in place. Slowly he revolved to face them again and assumed a simple standing pose (called “Natural Presence”).

Valamiel saw at once that the mask, although not precisely moulded to Jethael’s face, nevertheless resembled it strongly enough to produce an uncanny sensation of recognition, a shiver of superstitious dread. A thousand times he had thought Jethael divine, or a reflection of the divine (or the Real). Now... he saw before him an actual living idol. The Avatar-of-Jeth played the role of his own Self-in-Eternity. Utterly hieratic and unreal, the upper face glowed green as Spring tendrils or translucent jade. But living eyes sparked through the mask’s sockets, and the red lips and pale cheeks and delicate chin were fully human.

The monk could only stare in speechless wonder. Varo too studied the masked visage in silence.

Jethael turned and walked to the full-length mirror (hung on the closet door that led to the Garden). He gazed at himself.

Slowly he raised his hands, fingers pointed up and splayed wide in the sijil of “Surprised Recognition”. Under the almost-lascivious firesilk tunic his penis grew quickly to full erection, tenting the flashing material as it arose. Of course, thought the monk: the gods are always erect.

Now Jethael walked back toward the bed, using the sliding strutting “god-walk” of the formal Transformations — but so convincingly that Valamiel moaned and drew back in numinous fear.

Jethael stopped, facing them again. Green fire englobed his serene half-human face in a halo of sudden light.

With slow intense sinuosity he danced the length of one or two measures of unheard music, his hands flashing through the sijils of Attention, Awe, Command, Openness, Victory and Love.

He stopped
He removed the mask.
Valamiel could breathe again.

OUTSIDE, THUNDER RUMBLED and lightning split the seams of the storm. Rain fanned noisily on the willow leaves, and the brazier had died down. In candlelight the monk sat up in bed watching Jethi and Varo play... and sometimes playing with them.

In keeping with Varo's nature the game was both innocent and sensual. Varo reclined against the monk's shoulder, with Silk asleep beside him on the pillow. He was rubbing his own penis idly with a fist of firesilk (which is nearly as soft as a boy's lips). Jethi sat opposite him, back straight and legs spread open wide on the sheets. He took off one of Varo's silken slippers, and lifted the hem of his own tunic with one hand. Then he slipped his erection into the toe of the shoe and masturbated with it. The children grinned at each other.

Jethael tossed aside the slipper and made Varo rub a small bare foot against his penis. The imp's pink toes caressed Jethi's bare groin gently as the touch of sleep. Jethael smiled at Valamiel: "Varo's foot is softer than silk."

Now Jethi crawled on top of the monk's body, and from that perch he contrived to bend and caress Varo's narrow waist with his hand, feeling under the tunic with slow delicate fingers. Varo sighed and snuggled close to Valamiel, while with one hand he pushed back Jethi's tunic till the slender buttocks and pale genitals were exposed. The little boys kissed... as if in slow motion...

... and Valamiel lay beneath the two warlocks as they embraced and kissed. He felt the small limbs stir against him, arching and rubbing like kittens at play. He inhaled the two sweet breaths, and was warmed by the two fragile bodies... But he did nothing except subtly caress the two boys while they played with each other, holding them like a living couch. So soft and quiet and warm were the three of them that Silk napped on undisturbed.

As for the children, even the culmination of their love was almost silent, for their lips were locked in a kiss when orgasm took them both at once, and they pressed tightly against each other, whimpering like doves...

... and then fell asleep on top of the mad monk, who continued to serve as their bed, meanwhile weeping with delight.

After some time he disengaged himself carefully from the tangle of limbs, and watched the two little magicians share their dreams, twins dressed in matching wrinkled dark-sparkling silk, pulled up to reveal smooth bare limbs, genitals like the tongues of angels, feet like the dreams of angels, heads nestled together in the pillows, in a nest of white sheets and scattered toys, lit by candlelight.

As Valamiel watched he opened his own robe and masturbated, drinking in the sleeping forms with his eyes and nose. Soft as a thief in the night he caressed one bare boy's flank from time to time; then returned to his voyeuristic pleasure.

Perversely, Silk woke up and stared at him with kittenish wonder... as he splattered copiously against Jethael's soft warm leg.

THE ENTRYWAY TO THE SECRET TUNNEL under Bell Tower proved easy enough to discover. In the basement behind the baths, in a back storage room, hidden by a dusty old cabinet once used for towels and linen, they uncovered a door. Valamiel tried the latch. Locked.

"Well, Tharactus, many thanks. Perhaps you'd better leave us to get on with it."

"Indeed... well... I'll let you and the other... gentleman just carry on, then... ah... if you'll excuse me..." And the smarmy Master of Boys wriggled politely out of the dark stuffy little cellar and clumped away up the stairs.

"Fling the bolt, Zaek, and lock him out. He makes me shiver, that one. His association with Marbreuse seems to be eating away at his character and face, reducing him to a mass of quivering mannerisms. This lock won't take but a minute... I hope all our obstacles prove as archaic... Why, even you could handle this one, Zaek."

As he spoke he rummaged in his thieves-bag (or "covey"), flat and many-pocketed, which could be carried neatly rolled up and tied, or attached around the operator's body by supplementary laces. At last he found the implement he was searching for, a crude pointed awl with a peculiar double hook at the end. He inserted it into the large keyhole of the ancient forgotten door and twisted it. "A bit rusty." He twisted it again, with all his might.

“Allow me,” said Zaek. Using both hands he twisted the awl till something snapped with a dull *twank*, and a little puff of dust flew out of the keyhole. Valamiel turned the latch, and the door creaked open. He slipped the tool back in its pocket and they passed through, leaving the door open behind them for light (but the monk had his eye-lantern lit already, with an extra vial of fuel screwed into it. He also carried a pocketful of candles.)

Stone steps led down in a spiral into gloom. As they descended, the air grew at once much colder. Little dust seemed to have gathered here, but the place had an antique and abandoned atmosphere, a slight stench of decay. They climbed down to a depth of about three storeys underground, and found themselves at the beginning of a long tunnel, cut square out of the bedrock of Viridine Peninsula, perhaps seven feet high and five feet wide, leading south toward the Temple, dank and lightless.

A few hundred feet into the tunnel the monk paused and lit a candle. The flame stirred faintly but consistently toward his face. “It would seem there have been no cave-ins, at least.” He blew out the candle. “Well, it’s a long claustrophobic stroll down to the Temple. Let’s be off.”

EXCEPT FOR A FEW PECULIAR TWISTS and turns toward the first leg of the tunnel, the passageway offered nothing more unpleasant than dead and living rodents — and few even of those. At several points seeping water had created small stalactites of lime and salt, but the tunnel seemed perfectly sound. They found evidence that unusually high tides sometimes flooded the tunnel, for in some places the floor was squelchy with mud. Some fifteen minutes later they arrived at the end of it... at another well-bolted door.

“Same old lock,” whispered Valamiel. “But if it’s rusted the sound of the break may attract some guard’s attention. We have no idea whether or not a watch is kept on the second level of the catacombs. As soon as the tip is sprung, step quickly into the shadows of the tunnel and douse the eye. If anyone appears we’ll melt away.”

This “tip” proved only slightly less recalcitrant than its twin in Blue Tower. A resounding *sproinnng* announced its demise — and five minutes of silence passed before they dared approach the door again.

Very very slowly they elbowed their way through the rust-stiff unused exit — and found again more darkness, lit only by the eye's narrow beam. "According to the chart," the monk whispered, "we have now entered the catacombs on the second level, and the keys given us by Tharactus should open all doors except that to the third level. Around the next corner two halls branch out toward the stairwells leading up to the Vestry." He shut the lamp. "Do you see any light ahead?"

"A slight glow, perhaps."

Indeed, a large nexus where five stone tunnels met proved to be lit by one feeble gaslamp, blue and steady in the airless, almost tomb-like catacomb. The stonework here seemed much more ancient than in the long tunnel from Bell Tower. Valamiel guessed that the system of caves they now contemplated might actually pre-date the Viridine Temple itself. An awesome thought for one of such antiquarian tastes as the scrivener monk.

They avoided the tunnels which led to the stairwell and to the Seagate (presumably a hidden cave with a landing that opened onto the sea below the Temple promontory somewhere). They headed toward the passageway which (according to the chart) ought to lead to the real goal of their reconnaissance: the entry down into the Treasury below their feet.

As they passed a turning to the right, and another fitful lamp, Valamiel whispered, "We can follow this passage around past the sewers and approach by a route perhaps more secure. See: this hall is unlit, hence untended. Come."

In the tiny pen of light cast by the monk's thief s-eye they made their way along a curving tunnel till they found on their right a large rusted-iron grillwork gate. "This must be the entrance to the sewer. Smells no worse than the rest of the place..."

"What's this door here on the left?"

"Not on the chart. Let's see... it's open and unlocked. An empty closet, by the look of it."

"We could plant the amulet here, under this wooden doorjamb."

"True. But let's see if we can get even closer."

However... they soon found themselves peering carefully around one last corner into a dimly lit hall, and spotting an actual living human being — in the uniform of a Temple guardian — far away at

the end of it, standing under a lamp, spear in hand, stamping his feet to keep warm and awake. Behind him was a large wooden door, set into a frame of solid stone.

They ducked away into their own gloomy tunnel and tiptoed back to the empty closet.

“Well... I don’t envy that fellow his job. Do you suppose he’s the only one down here?” asked the barbarian.

“I would guess so. Probably change the guard every four or six hours. The guardroom must be up in the Vestry somewhere. I’ll check on it tomorrow. This closet looks the best place for our Garden Gate. Could you handle the task of planting the amulet? I want to prepare a wax hermaphrodite.”

“A *what?*”

“More thieves’ argot. I’ll show you when I’m done.”

While Zaek pried up the rotted doorjamb with his sword and slipped the seven-pointed star amulet beneath it, the monk ducked into a corner, spread out his covey of tricks, and began working quickly and deftly.

First he unfolded a sort of steel star with six long spine-shaped points. Sorting through a pocketful of small objects, he selected a number of different flat bronze blank bits of different shapes and sizes and screwed one onto each of the six points.

Then he opened his lamp entirely (shielding the glow with his cloak) and produced a bar of fine wasp-wax. Holding it over the wick of the lantern, he melted the wax and let it drip onto each of the bronze blanks till they were evenly coated. He then treated a dozen or so more bits of wax and lined them up carefully on the floor to dry. Holding the star in one hand, he re-assembled his lamp with the other and rolled up his bag.

“It will save us a lot of time next week if we carry with us a key to that door the guard is protecting. I couldn’t see the lock from where we stood, so I’ve prepared wax blades to take impressions from various standard keyholes. You see the sexual symbolism, of course? Burglary is an erotic art.

“Now... if you could go lurking and skulking back through the halls and creep up toward the guard from another direction you could make some unpleasant little noises, sounds that might be a large rat, but might be an intruder. The guard will wander off to investigate and

leave me a few minutes to make love to the door. I won't seduce it yet. Just soften it up. Then, meet me at the entry to Bell Tower tunnel — or inside the tunnel — in about twenty minutes."

Cheerfully the barbarian made his way into the pitchy dark, swearing he'd memorized all the passages and could find his way blindfolded.

It took a long time to entice the guard away from his post. Zaek sounded so sinister... like a small pack of vampire-rats, or a creeping ghoul. The guard looked pale with gullible suspicion as he passed by the well-concealed monk — who could have reached out and tripped him — and vanished down the dim hallway, spear held ready in both hands.

Valamiel slipped into the now-unguarded passage and soon stood before the great door to the Treasury.

The lock baffled ten wax bits before he found one that fit. He was shaking with terror as he ducked back into the dark hallway and made his way to the closet. Sweat poured into his eyes. He heard the guard returning to his post... baffled and nervous, no doubt, but still innocent of the true situation.

When he'd regained complete control of his body and breath, the monk carefully packed up his gear and crept away into the intestines of Viridine Temple.

*UNDER THE EMBRACE of the pale clouds,
Under the blue willow's embrace I change,
I approach change, I am growing, I change.
Under your caress, which covers me like a storm,
I am unchanging in my very heart,
Where your love has been planted like seed
Which will blossom in this Garden forever.*

So wrote Jethael to Valamiel. The verses were contained in a volume which Jethi and Kael prepared together — pictures by Kael, words and illuminations by Jethael. They titled it *The Book of the Garden*, and presented it to the monk as a gift during the party he gave for the Blue Rain boys in his chambers one night shortly after the episode of the catacombs.

Valamiel wept in a dignified manner at his present, and the children felt they might have repaid him somewhat for his incredible spree of gift-giving. Each boy sported a dagger proudly stuck in his sash, and Kael had to be physically restrained from wearing his sword at all times, even when naked. Each of the others had also drawn at least one picture for the book, and Valamiel found to his delight that some of them — notably Ravinan's — were uninhibitedly erotic.

Before the party grew too boisterous Valamiel decided to speak to them all in a serious vein, and ask them about their hopes for the future. Jethael, Ravi and Kael were already sworn to accompany Valamiel wherever he went, but he now asked the other four if they wished to stay at Perpetual Benefice... “or be stolen away”.

Michchaeris said, “You couldn't *force* me to miss the fun. My brother and I will come with you, no matter what.”

Venyamin said, “I'm a slave. Of course I'll run away with you.” He climbed on Val's lap and kissed him, sniffing happily. “Will we still learn to dance, wherever we're going?”

“Yes,” said silent shy Anathael, “what about Poron? Is he coming too?” (Ravinan giggled.)

“I'll ask him,” the monk promised. “But if he stays, will you stay?”

“I *have* to come with you... but... well... please ask Poron too!”

BY NOW THE CHILDREN were no longer willing to think of such serious matters. For a long time the four “attendant angels” of Blue Rain had burned with envy of the three blood-brothers — who, so far, seemed to have enjoyed all the fun and adventure... and all the private sessions in Val's chambers as well. Now they were determined to attain full initiation into the cabal. They had convinced Ravi to plead their case.

“Val...,” he said in his sweetest treble, “we all feel we haven't thanked you enough for our presents. But since we lead the sort of life we do, we have no money to buy you anything. All we can give you is... well... our love. You see,” he went on with an earnest smile, “we know that you like Jethi the best, and we're happy that way. But... we also know that you like to kiss boys' penises. So we thought that you should have all of us — just this one time — if Jethi agrees...”

Jethael, of course, agreed..

It was decided that the monk should begin with little Venyamin, and progress upwards in order of age. With charming lack of any perceptible modesty, Venya stripped off his robe, kicked off his slippers and allowed Valamiel to undo his loincloth.

The boys crowded around to watch. Some of them were already naked, or wearing only pretty slippers (Jethael, Kael, Daevaen). Ravinan had stripped off pantaloons and undergarments, but still wore his sky-blue silk vest buttoned to the neck, and blue shoes. Michchi had undressed to his loincloth (which was revealed as one of the nearly transparent chartreuse flimsies given by an anonymous admirer to Kael.) The dark boy's long thin penis was already stiff under the lascivious cloth. Shy Anath was still fully dressed in chestnut-cream silk, but apparently he was naked under the pantaloons, for a little bulge stuck out neatly between his legs as he watched the monk kneeling in front of Venyamin.

Valamiel had often gazed with longing upon eight- and nine-year-olds (even six-year-olds, if the truth be told), but had never done more than fondle them and spoil them (a keenly erotic pleasure, to be sure). Even in peghouses he'd never come across a child younger than eleven. Venyamin — all honey-colored ringlets and huge slanted tawny eyes — was the youngest and tiniest boy he'd ever contemplated as a lover, but also one of the most exquisitely beautiful. His body was like a sparrow's for thinness. He was smaller even than Varonael, small even for nine years. His penis, however, grew to a charming little sausage of perhaps two and a half inches length as soon as the monk touched it. Valamiel felt almost dismayed to see the child clutching his favorite stuffed animal as he lay back dreamily on the couch. But the nursery imagery only made his mouth water with anticipation. Under seven pairs of eyes he bent to his pleasure, and the tiny stem of his youngest friend.

Venya's body possessed a distinct and personal odor, an unmistakable perfume: the smell of a young cat lying in hot sunlight, mixed with a nursery-bouquet of milk, soap and bed-wet sheets; mixed with a faint overtone of amber. He was a practiced little masturbator and certainly needed no lessons in how to enjoy Val's attentions. The monk savored the sensation of holding such a small body while it rippled in orgasm.

When little Venya had been kissed, and rolled over to drowse with his toy, Daevaen took his place on the couch.

Michchi's little brother had learned certain tricks no ordinary ten-year-old could know. He knew how to chew on Valamiel's tongue, and let saliva flow freely from mouth to mouth. He knew how to wrinkle his freckled nose and look as small and enticing as a miniature daemon. He knew how to lock his legs around a man's neck and buck like a colt, till the monk felt half-suffocated — by a bit of flesh scarcely thicker than his own finger. Daevi laughed and chattered through the entire operation, and his brother sat beside him and pinched him till he squealed.

By now Valamiel felt he was swimming in attar of roses. Jethi sat beside him on the floor, groping him under the robe and occasionally kissing him, or reaching out to touch one of the other boys' bodies. The children sprawled out all warm, relaxed and intimate — but bouncing from time to time with ticklish glee, or giggling softly.

Anathael had been picking up lessons somewhere, too. He flowed gracefully onto the bed in front of Valamiel, and smiled at him under his brown bangs and velvety lashes. He reached and pulled up the front of his silk vest, then bit the hem between his teeth and yanked it up till his rather plump ivory-smooth belly and half-penny pink nipples were exposed. Then he undid the knot of his beige pants, and slowly — teasingly — pulled the cloth away from his groin.

Around the base of his genitalia he had fastened a silver-link chain with pendant baroque pearls. It made his testicles appear plump and swollen, and his foreskin was already peeled back to expose half a moist fat glans. "Poron gave the chain to me. Do you like it?" asked Anath in his soft shy soprano.

Valamiel kissed the pearly chain with nearly as much ardor as the living jewels that seemed to be set in a lapidary bezel of silver and nacre. The texture of Anath's penis was superb, silky and delicious. Eagerly the monk pried apart the coquettish legs, burrowed his face into the warm silk drawers (aromatic of soapy boy) and searched with his tongue for regions below the bejewelled little organ. Anath simpered wickedly, but offered not one token iota of resistance when the probing tongue finally found his anus and wriggled its way inside. Before the monk could return to the pearl-mounted penis, Anath had masturbated himself to an orgasm.

Jethael came next in age, and Valamiel took him on the floor — but he climaxed almost before the man's lips closed on his cock, and so wildly that Val could scarcely hold him down.

In quick succession now he drank from the distended pubescences of Ravinan and Kael, who seemed to have saved up their juices on purpose for the occasion. Then, panting and sweating, jaws sore from so much fellation, the monk ripped away the pink frill of Michchi's minionesque loincloth and plunged down on the adolescent's snake-thin pointed six inches with its fringe of crinkly black curls... and within a minute he swallowed a third mouthful of sperm, not sweet and syrupy like Ravi's but clotted, ichorous, almost chewy, copious enough to coat his tongue with hot gel and drip down his beard.

Catching his breath he watched the children — more naked-looking for their random bits of clothing — as they squirmed about like a ship-load of lovely fish, gleaming with sweat in an orgy of touching and pinching, masturbating and sucking. The couch overflowed with lithe nakedness; rounded buttocks and pointed daggers of flesh, thin arms and white thighs, feet against crotches and hands between legs, hair spilling like the treasury of a kingdom; sighs, whispers, and an overwhelming warmth. As the monk found himself kissing someone's toes (possibly Venyamin's), he thought: if I should die tomorrow and find, as many prophets have maintained, that the individual soul is not immortal, I should not care a tinker's damn — for this is already paradise, and I doubt the gods could offer anything better.

ZAEK KEPT WATCH by day and night at Fennelbank. Once more he passed up a chance to break in while the hooded jailor went away after provisions. Once again he was forced to listen to that forlorn knocking at the shutter... and do nothing. Marbreuse never showed his face, and the barbarian finally came to believe that the Chaethian sorcerer must be laired elsewhere.

If it were not for Varonael and the Garden he might have gone mad with impatience and grief. The imp searched him out during his rest periods, camped on a blanket next to the Black Gate, just inside the Garden wall. Varo brought Silk the kitten to play with, and food for Zaek, and chattered away happily till the barbarian fell asleep.

Once, particularly melancholic, he dozed off — and dreamed — and woke to find himself drenched with his own semen, stored up unused for so long, released by his dream.

Several yards away Varo sat in the grass holding the firelynx kitten. “Did you dream of Xiri?” asked the imp gravely.

“Yes...,” said the barbarian, somewhat abashed by his spent vision.

“It was beautiful, wasn’t it?” the child asked; but Zaek realized he was talking to the cat, and said nothing. He lay back, wiped himself with the blanket, and closed his eyes again.

After a while he opened them. “Varo...?”

“Yes?”

“How did you know I dreamt of Xiri?”

“Well... we thought you looked so sad. So I sent you a good dream. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No... that was kind of you, Varo.” The barbarian went back to sleep — deeply — and forgot to puzzle about the incident till later.

He never doubted Varo’s word. He just wondered how the child had done it.

VALAMIEL POKED AROUND the Viridine Temple — arousing no suspicions in his black robe — and studied the Vestry in the first level of catacombs beneath the green translucent seven-spired cathedral. He found the guard-room, and learned that extra duties for all the fancifully-armored corps had been posted during the Presentation ceremony. He chatted with the guards, picking up bits of information, memorizing faces, counting off the lengths of hallways, poking into cupboards and closets, admiring the thousands of ritual garments in every imaginable tint and hue, testing his keys to the two stairwells...

He judged the Guardians a potential threat. They were laggards, because the Temple was a peaceful place — but some of them seemed well-trained and even intelligent.

Sorolon opened the Brown Gate from the Garden into the empty closet in the second level of caves, near the Treasury door. Thus Valamiel could penetrate the dark tunnels almost immediately, stepping from his rooms in Noon Tower into the Garden, and from the Garden direct into the catacombs.

He wanted to try the key he'd made from the impressions of his wax hermaphrodite — but the Treasury was guarded continually, and he dared attempt no further diversions.

Sorolon kept to Manticore's Tongue, working feverishly. Jethael had begun to rehearse intensively with Poron for his role in the Presentation. The other choirboys were all to dance and sing in the chorus this time, and had little to occupy themselves with except play — or worry.

"We were all in the chorus last year," Jethi told the monk, as they discussed the up-coming ritual. "It was very dull, I'm afraid. But the Crowstone makes quite an impressive miracle: a sort of vision of the goddess which everyone can see. Poron insists I wear the mask of Jeth while I dance for the Stone. I wonder what will happen!"

AND SO THE LAST WEEK before the ceremony dragged on, everyone too busy (almost) for love. Tense, slightly on edge and bursting with excitement, they all felt the hours slowing to an exasperating crawl, like the famous snail in the Paradox of Unrealizable Time (first propounded by the Blessed Maervaen).

A full day and night before the ceremony Valamiel suddenly burst out of the mirror in Sorolon's elaboratory, startling the sorcerer so badly he dropped the glass of seven-times-distilled dreamwine which he'd been about to allow himself — just a thimble-full — as a reward for his labors. "What in Varon's name...?" he sputtered.

"Quick! Get your magical trick bag! Where's Zaek? Marbreuse has arrived! At Bell Tower! A day early! He's locked away with Tharactus. Fennelbank Hall...! Xiri...! Quick!"

"One moment please," said the sorcerer. He poured another tiny glass of liqueur and tossed it down, grimaced, squeaked, coughed, smacked his lips, picked up his bag and rose to his feet.

"Zaek's over there now, I believe. Shall we join him?"

12.

Ghouls And Kings

A MERE FIFTEEN MINUTES before the monk burst so precipitously into Sorolon's elaboratory he had been sitting on a bench near the great Pavilion in the Inner Court of Perpetual Benefice chatting in the dim late afternoon with Poron (and about to invite the old man to visit the Garden), when suddenly he noticed a group of adult figures making their way from Landgate to Bell Tower. Strangers, in the cloister of songbirds? It couldn't be...

... but it was. Marbreuse! Accompanied by two dark hooded henchmen, a pallid Tharactus and a muttering sweating coachman struggling along under an enormous voyaging-trunk. The sorcerer greeted Valamiel heartily.

"Ah, my learned friend! We meet again. As you can see, my love of the Suvyamaran Epodes has brought me to your little paradise a day earlier than I'd planned. One must prepare... spiritually... for such a profound ritual, don't you agree? Otherwise one will lose the full reward of its grace. Our good friend Tharactus has offered, with splendid generosity, to put some chambers of the Bell Tower at my disposal. I've had a trying journey, and much still to do... on the spiritual plane, I mean... before tomorrow night. Of course I shall meet you at the Presentation! I gather your... *boy* is dancing at the ceremony. Charming, charming! Till then, my dear friend..."

The sorcerer swept away with his train, and was swallowed up by Bell Tower before the monk could blink.

“Excuse me, Poron... I must be off... speak to you later... very important...”

... and he ran.

VALAMIEL, WITH SWORD IN ONE HAND and the thief's covey rolled in the other, ran beside Sorolon (with his kit of magical paraphernalia) through the Garden.

"... something I ought to mention," the sorcerer puffed. "I told Zaek... I suspect those dark hooded creatures may be slightly more... or less... than human. May be dangerous..."

"Well, try hitting them with marbles," said the monk.

"I have several notions..." But they spoke no more. They'd arrived at Black Gate.

ZAEK TOOK THE NEWS CALMLY. They found him ensconced in his usual hiding-place (by now, after so many hours of surveillance, a well-hollowed-out nest), sharpening his sword. He stood up and stretched. "Let's go in," he said, almost woodenly.

"One moment please," Sorolon begged. He was sorting through his bag. He found his chaosaw pipe. He stuffed it full of colorless powder and lit it with a flint. He puffed out clouds of odorless smoke. "I don't think we'll find we need to break any locks here, Valamiel. But there's sure to be a doorway-guardian of some sort. Once I've flushed it out we should be able to proceed without further sorcery (although one never knows). I doubt our enemy would have the inside of Fennelbank haunted as well as the outside. All right, I'm ready now."

They stood casually and walked sedately up to the door of the decrepit house. From within they heard only silence. Nothing seemed to stir. Sorolon puffed at his viridine pipe and grumbled under his breath.

The pipe smoke hung in a cloud in front of the three men, just before the tower's gate. Gradually it seemed to take on some amorphous form. After several minutes it appeared to have become a tall shrouded ghost with talons (made of tendrils of smoke) — indistinct, but distinctly forbidding. Sorolon muttered arcane gibberish, daemonic gulplings and snarls.

Suddenly he pointed his pipe-stem at the gaseous genie and hissed some exorcistic imprecation at it. Immediately it began to writhe silently as if in agony, clutching at the air with its vaporous claws.

It twisted itself into a spiral of smoke like a “dust devil” of the Waste, and gradually faded away, leaving behind it a faint bad smell, as of burning gas.

Zaek stepped forward and stood before the ruinously ancient wooden door, set and bolted into the cancerous wall of Fennelbank Hall. He pushed the door. It sprang open. They walked inside.

Inside they found themselves in a large tubercularly damp dank badly-lit chamber. Almost bare of furniture (a rough bed, a table and chair, a few pans and pots). It looked as if no one had used the place for twenty years. Dust and old rags, cobwebs and bones.

But two figures were seated there, hooded and darkly cloaked. They stood up as if to greet the visitors. They unsheathed their dead-grey steel swords. They moved to stand before a flight of ancient stone steps on the far side of the room. They positioned themselves on guard, blades pointed at the three would-be rescuers. They were silent.

Sorolon extended a long sinuous finger accusingly at the two black figures. A bolt of green lightning shot from his fingertips and crackled at the guards. Their swords lit up with green sparks.

But the two guards moved not a muscle.

“As I suspected...,” Sorolon whispered under his breath. “The Dead Who Walk...”

THE ZOMBIES - FOR SUCH indeed they seemed to be — fought extremely well. But they did not appear to relish being wounded, and when one of Valamiel’s wilder thrusts hit a black-cloaked arm, the figure reacted as if it could notice some pain — though less than an ordinary man would have felt. Moreover, although they moved quickly and powerfully, they were slightly hampered by their cloaks.

Nevertheless, they might with ease have slain any single duelist who opposed them, for their speed and strength were truly superhuman. That Val thrust home at all, even once, was not the result of his own skill. He’d never been more terrified in all his life, and without Zaek he would certainly have turned tail and retreated — if possible.

The two eerily noiseless guards found the barbarian so formidable a swordsman, and so deserving of their complete attention, that the monk managed his one wild foray — and proved that their enemies, if- not mortal, could at least be wounded. Except for the sound of screaming steel, the battle raged in silence.

Zaek tried to maintain his “military discipline”. He fought brilliantly, methodically, untiringly. But still he found himself giving way to the dark swordsmen. Gradually the three men (Sorolon simply trying to dodge the battle entirely) found themselves pressed back toward the door.

Sorolon was already half-way through it, in fact, when Zaek was finally wounded in a fierce onslaught by a lucky slash. The two guards were fighting more strongly now, as if already certain of victory.

Zaek seemed not to feel the pain or notice the blood which blossomed across his broad chest. Suddenly he was angry. All at once he forgot care and strategy. He snapped. He went berserk.

When he screamed his battle-cry even the Dead-Who-Walk flinched in shock. Sorolon tumbled over backwards, tripped and fell out of sight beyond the door, perhaps thinking Zaek had been mortally wounded. Even Val, who knew at once what had happened, nearly loosened his bowels in fear of that horrible shriek: “CHAOS!”

At once the battle changed direction again. Like a whirlwind equipped with ten steel scythes, Zaek roared and cursed and clashed his sword so hard against the guards’ two blades that sparks flew again. Val trailed along behind him, looking for a chance opening, but not daring to approach Zaek too closely. And again he managed to pink one of the zombies — this time in the thigh. It seemed to produce no effect whatsoever. Perhaps the things were unkillable!

Step by step the guards gave ground to the barbarian’s frenzy. Zaek’s hair literally stood on end like an explosion of electric gold. His eyes bulged in their sockets. Blood and spit flecked the corners of his mouth. His battle-cry seemed to drive the black figures back even more effectively than his sword, as if his mad scream possessed virtue as a weapon against their ghoulish nature.

Now their dark backs were again pressed against the stairwell. Suddenly one of them turned and ran up the steps, leaving his fellow to hold off the two rescuers.

Zaek stood face-to-unface with the single remaining guard.

The Chaote fainted in such a way that, when the ghoul thrust at him, he grabbed its sword-arm wrist in a fierce grip with his left hand.

At once the ghoul grabbed Zaek's sword — by the blade! — and held onto it like Death.

Val tried to spit the helpless monster with his long Hraevaennian blade. But Zaek had a different idea. He wanted to dance.

He jerked the guard off-balance and flung it to one side. Then to the other... and now the creature's equilibrium was destroyed. Around and around Zaek and the zombie whirled in a macabre parody of some forgotten gavotte, once, twice, thrice...

... and Zaek sent his opponent whirling away from him, ghostsword flailing uselessly, almost sprawling.

WITHOUT A WORD Zaek turned and ran up the staircase...

... leaving Valamiel to face the ghoul — alone! The monk prayed that the thing would chase off after Zaek, up the stairs — but no, curse Fate! — it had recovered its grim poise, and was now lunging after him with all its graveyard might and deadly silence.

Scarcely allowing the ghoul to accomplish more than *clink!* and *ping!* against the tip of his defensive blade, Val retreated step by step toward the door (or where he hoped the door to be), straining every nerve in his body merely to stay away and leap back retreating from the zombie's steel.

He bumped his blind shoulders into the doorway and managed to fight his way out, praying the thing wouldn't follow him into the open air.

It did.

Val was taken by sheer unminded panic. He turned and ran.

Suddenly he heard behind him a disgusting sound, like an asthmatic pig being slaughtered in a nightmare.

Utterly undone, he tripped, sprawled, rolled, scrambled up and whirled around again to see...

... the zombie suddenly *burning* like a sick bonfire, cacophonating and wailing, waving its sword, trying to beat out the raging sorcerous green flame.

Sorolon tossed another heaping handful of bright powder at the guard. Flame burst up again, and again came that ear-splitting howl. The creature seemed to be roasting and melting before their very eyes.

“I had time to prepare a surprise for it,” the sorcerer shouted. “Come back! We’ve got to help Zaek!”

ZAEK POUNDED UP THE STAIRS, still deep in his Chaote Fury. He saw (through bloody eyes) a hallway, dank and empty as everything else in this cursed place. At the end of it a door loomed open.

He ran. He burst into the prison-chamber.

Across the room: the ghoul was half-carrying Xiri, one darkclad arm choked around the boy’s naked neck, as if to hold the prisoner hostage against the barbarian’s wrath. Its blade sprang to attention as Zaek rushed into the room.

Dragon was leaping about the chamber, apparently desperate for some way to attack the ghoul, and screaming, “Murderer of my people! Bastard! Corpse! Let him go!”

Who can say what the ghoul intended to do? Kill Xiri before Zaek could rescue him? Use the boy as a shield to escape and somehow reach Marbreuse? Some other desperate ploy to lure Zaek into a fatal final duel? Certainly, for the moment, the Dead-Who-Walk possessed a certain strategic advantage.

Without a single moment’s hesitation, without even appearing to think or consider, or react to the situation — without even taking aim (or so Dragon claimed, afterwards) — Zaek threw his sword at the ghoul.

It spun through the air across the prison chamber faster than any eye could follow it.

It spun between the guard’s upraised sword and Xiri’s pale face, missing any contact with either one or the other, with perhaps an inch clearance either way: *zzip... ka-thunk!*

It ended its spin point forward, and plunged directly into the dark hood of the guard, disappearing nearly to the hilt in the folds of that mysterious garment under which no face ever showed itself, nor mask, nor color, nor movement. A grotesque sound, as of a cleaver chopping rotten meat... the sword’s length embedded in the anonymous hood... a burst of carrion-scented blood exploded around the hilt...

... the guard dropped Xiri like a sack of wheat, and staggered backwards against the wall of the prison. Its dark-cloaked legs collapsed. It slid bleeding down the wall. It came to rest toppled

forward (point of blade protruding from back of skull), slumped, and fell silent.

Then, presumably, it died a second time — and for good.

SOROLON SLAMMED THE BLACK GATE behind him. He looked at the men and boys who stood or lay around him in the sweet grass of the Garden.

Zaek bled copiously from the open gash in his chest. He stood, rasping for breath in the aftermath of the Chaote rage. He vomited. His eyes seemed to bleed, they blazed so red. “Sorolon...,” he croaked, “see to the boy...”

Xiri had fainted when he hit the floor of the prison, when the ghoul dropped him. Valamiel and Dragon had carried him, still unconscious, all the way from Fennelbank Hall to the Garden, while Sorolon supported Zaek. The sorcerer’s cloak was stained with the barbarian’s blood.

Now Xiri lay pale as death on the Garden’s grass. Dragon had collapsed, panting, beside him. Val dropped his sword, staggered to the mudbrick wall and leaned against it, held himself from falling, caught his breath.

Sorolon opened his bag, found a bottle, tossed it to Valamiel. “Get some of that down the boy’s throat. I’ll see to you now, Zaek!”

The barbarian protested feebly, but Sorolon started cutting away the red rags of his tunic with a small knife. Zaek sank slowly to his knees. He allowed Sorolon to push him gently down onto the grass and begin to dress the wound.

Dragon ran for water and fetched it from the nearby stream in a bowl (left behind by Varo, perhaps). Sorolon washed away most of the excess blood, poured a venomous-looking potion into the gaping cut (where it smoked and bubbled and settled into the wound). He tore bandages from his own robe, and began to tie them around Zaek’s torso.

Meanwhile, after many attempts, the monk had managed to pry open Xiri’s mouth and pour the whole contents of the vial of medicine between the clamped jaws.

Xiri choked and gagged, turned over, vomited, fell back, coughed and suddenly sat up. “Dragon... what happened?” he muttered.

“Xiri!” said the nomad boy. “We’re not prisoners anymore. We’re not slaves anymore. We’re free. Look!”

“Hello Xiri,” said Zaek in a more-or-less normal tone.

WHEN THEY ALL BEHELD THE EXPRESSION that came into the dancing-boy’s eyes as he looked over and saw the barbarian sitting not ten feet from him, smiling and alive - when all the others (Sorolon, Valamiel and Dragon) had been allowed to witness the boy’s face, as Xiri realized that his lover had found and rescued him at last — they all three simultaneously burst into tears. A Qamarian trait, which Valamiel seemed to have adopted.

Even Zaek the stoical mercenary wept. And not from the pain of his wound.

Tears also flowed from Xiri’s violet or hyacinth eyes, but it could never be said that he wept. There exists no precise word for his expression (transfigured? beatified? too weak)... except to say that it seemed to justify the Garden’s existence. That single smile (if it can be called merely a smile) seemed to make the Garden finally ultimately and completely *real*.

Only two of the Garden’s three true kings had ever seen it. Xiri, the third, had never even dreamed of it, and still had no idea where he might be. But — thought Valamiel — if Xiri had not yet recognized the place, then the place had recognized the boy. If the Garden had before seemed twice as alive as life itself it now felt three times more animate and light-saturated than any park deserves to be, on any clear cloudless summer morning.

And this magic was accomplished so that the universe could comprehend and contain Xiri’s smile. Otherwise all the world might have vanished away in shame before the boy’s radiance... or so thought the hyperbole-prone scrivening monk.

SOROLON WARNED ZAEK that unless he rested he’d be good for nothing the next day. “I have a salve and a sleep Spell that will put you on your feet by then — possibly — but only if you *rest*. Xiri must wait to talk with you till tomorrow afternoon. Don’t worry, Val and I will tell him of all that has passed during his confinement, in such a way as to shed only the best light on your character. Zaek, if you do not drink this potion *at once*, I’ll immobilize you by some other

means. Where's your vaunted military discipline? Xiri, make him take his medicine!"

From the boy's hands the barbarian accepted the potion, as a spoiled child will be doctored only by its mother. He kissed Xiri for a long time; then his eyelids began to flutter. He kissed Dragon. To his dancing-boy he whispered: "Guard me while I sleep," as if the two of them were camped alone in the northern forest, lost on a hunt perhaps... then he drifted into unconsciousness.

WITH HIS USUAL LOQUACIOUSNESS and a touch of mildly ironic pedantry, Sorolon lectured the rescued boys on recent history. He explained his own role in the fiasco of the Cloak of Invisibility with comic chagrin. Then, apologizing for his levity, he said, "Nevertheless... when I picture you, my dear boy, levitating three feet off the bed, being loved by the 'ghost' of our heroic friend, I cannot help but smile. He told us you saved him twice that night, once by loving him and the second time by attacking the exorcist."

He told them then of the Garden, and how it had been created and used in staging the rescue. He launched into an abstruse discourse on the magical theory of Imaginal Places and multidimensional geometry, but Valamiel interrupted him. "They've plenty of time to study the Garden, Sorolon. Let us now tell them of the Crowstone."

So... the sorcerer spoke of Marbreuse, alias Marchion, Regnant of Chaeth...

Dragon shouted, "I knew it! This Marbreuse... he is the one who stole us from the cafe? He is the one you oppose? Listen: when that guard burst into our prison-chamber and snatched up Xiri before either of us could react, I rushed at it and tried to hit it. I tore aside the black hood... and I saw that the creature was *zahyl*... 'undead', in my language. We see such ghouls in the Chromatic Waste — though not so frequently as in the days of my father. They raid the tribes for amber and slaves. My grandmother was Crow-Clan, and all of them were killed by *zahyl*. The dark armies came down from the mountains of Chaeth... and the Regnant sent them."

"What do you know of the Crowstone, then?" asked the monk.

"Only legend. The Crow people ruled many sub-clans through its power. They were defrauded by sorcery, lost it, and were slaughtered to the last infant."

“Well... our intention is to prevent Marchion from stealing it back. With its power he would soon rule the whole Waste, as well as Chaeth. Instead, we intend to use it to restore Zaek to his rightful title of Tryptarch of Hraelle, and unite the northern clans against pirates and slavers...”

“Then you can count on *my* help,” said Dragon.

“You mean,” asked Xiri, “we’re going back to Thuren?”

“Yes,” the monk answered, “and I believe Zaek intends to enlist you as his standard-bearer, or squire or whatever the term is...”

“Banner-lord,” said Xiri, starting to weep and radiate all over again. Gently he embraced the sleeping barbarian.

“Well,” said Sorolon, “it’s broad day here, but late night in Suvyamara. Tomorrow, Val, you and I have much to prepare. Zaek must rest till evening, here in the Garden. I shall have food and drink sent at once, and return with more medicaments and fresh bandages. Meanwhile, eat fruit... and sleep, Xiri. You needn’t really ‘guard’ him. The Garden is safe.”

AFTER THE TWO MEN HAD GONE, Xiri and Dragon talked together for hours. Suddenly, after so many weeks of fear and boredom, they found much to discuss, many adventures to analyze, fresh dreams to embroider, and a new world to discover (although Xiri refused to budge from the side of his sleeping lover). Dragon went to gather fruit, and suddenly realized all over again that he was *free*... jumped five feet in the air, whooping... turned ten cartwheels... and fell into the stream. Finally he climbed out, shaking water like a happy dog, and managed to gather some fruit. The pears and blue-orchid-plums tasted better than anything they’d eaten in aeons. They almost bathed themselves with the aromatic juices that dripped from these delicacies.

Finally, they began to drowse.

“Xiri... do you think Zaek will be jealous that we played with each other in prison?”

“You’re my comrade, so it’s all right to share. He’ll understand. After all, what else was there to do?”

“Do you think he might want to share *me*, too?”

Xiri laughed. “Why not? I’m sure he’ll love you once he gets to know you.”

“He’ll never love me the way he loves you. Maybe *I’m* the jealous one, Xiri.”

IN THE AFTERNOON Sorolon bustled back to the Garden with his three nephews, medicine, food, a burning brazier of charcoal, fresh clothes and other comforts. He cut Zaek’s bandages, washed the wound, applied more bubbling hissing ointment, and re-bandaged him. But the barbarian still snored all the while.

The sorcerer and his odd family chatted lightly with the rescued boys over a meal of grilled spiced fish, bread, milk, wine... “Everything but a cut of vhang,” sighed Dragon.

“Oh, I forgot. Valamiel sent you this.” Sorolon produced an opal-dolphin-headed pipe and handed it to the nomad boy. “And, although I think you’re a bit young for such things... I brought these.” He dropped two resinous pastilles in the pipe’s bowl.

Varo and his lynx-kitten wanted desperately to stay in the Garden and talk to their new rescued friends. But, “It’s the middle of the night in Suvyamara, and I need your help tomorrow,” pleaded Sorolon. “Just this once, indulge me... and I’ll give Silk a silver collar with a bead of viridine.”

“And,” said Varo imperiously, “you promised to teach me how to...”

“Yes, yes, anything! Only *please*: go back to bed.”

ALONE IN THE GARDEN AGAIN with the sleeping swordsman, Dragon asked Xiri if he’d like to share some vhang. “I enjoy it once in a while,” the dancing-boy murmured, snuggling close to Zaek. “But not now. I feel like I’m dreaming already.” And in two minutes he was.

ON THE DAY DRAGON WAS ABDUCTED he’d been wearing his boy-prostitute costume: a Chromatic nomad’s robe and a strange voluminous loincloth or diaper of the same multi-hued cloth which entirely concealed his tattoo. At the moment of his rescue he’d been dressed only in this undergarment, and had forgotten the robe in his frantic rush to escape. No one had asked to see his tattoo, so he was still wearing the loincloth. It was dirty, damp and chafing him

uncomfortably, so he took it off. It felt most agreeable to be naked in this enchanted place.

He admired Valamiel's gift. The one-eyed dolphin looked a bit like an erect penis carved in opal, and the long silver stem curved gracefully to an opal mouthpiece. A pipe worthy of a chieftain!

Vhang is not really addictive, but its devotees are fanatic. There even exists a shrine to the god Vhang in Old Qamar City on the far northwest coast, which does a thriving business in little amulets carved in the shape of a green bulbous dwarf with an enormous erection and a Trickster's untrustworthy grin. The herb grows wild in some abundance in the more mirage-haunted back hills of the palette-hued Waste where Dragon was born. His clan, in fact, sold vhang for export... and consumed a great deal of it themselves.

Dragon himself never smoked it till he was enslaved and put to work at the Water Fly. But he claimed it was "in his blood by birth," and indulged in it frequently. Nomadic shamans used it in their trances, and Dragon said he was forced to do his own shamanizing.

He crumbled one of the pastilles into the pipe and scooped a few hot coals out of the brazier. He leaned back against a tree and began to smoke.

After three puffs he turned pale and put the pipe down in the grass. He should have realized that a sorcerer would deal only in the finest and strongest product... and Dragon hadn't smoked in weeks. Usually vhang of such potency produced visions — which smokers believe are actual mirages of the Waste, symphonies of dry intense color. In the Garden, however, a different magic began to buzz in the boy's brain.

He had been so far too pre-occupied to feel the full magical effect of the place. But now it rushed in upon him all at once, enhanced by the drug he'd consumed. Now he realized not only that he was free but that he'd been stolen away to the land of spirits and set loose to enjoy it in the flesh. He gazed about him in reverent awe, his face appearing that of a much smaller child. The sleeping man and boy seemed like glowing entities, the coals of the fire like wild daemons.

For an hour Dragon simply sat and stared around him. Then he wandered off to the edge of the little park, marvelling at each flower and tree as if he'd never seen one before. Finally he lay down on a blanket next to a particularly exquisite bed of roses. Twilight was

gathering and the breeze felt pleasantly cool, like the evening zephyrs of the Waste (suddenly he realized: the Garden is a desert oasis). All reality seemed to reach out to caress Dragon. He looked at his tattoo: it was alive, and beautiful. He looked at himself and he was alive, and beautiful. The Tongue of the Dragon stirred between his legs, and the boy decided to shamanize and commune with his familiar in a somewhat blasphemous fashion.

The Garden seemed to hover around him, offering him warm privacy. Perhaps a shade of wistful melancholy crept into the twilight, but Dragon failed to notice it. He couldn't stop himself. This always happened when he smoked: if no one offered to help him, he had to help himself, sooner or later.

No one admired Dragon's member more than he himself, although he left its actual worship to his eccentric cult-following. The boy was accustomed to wolf down every pleasure as if it might be his last (for his life had proved a perilous affair so far) — and if nothing more exotic offered itself he found his hand between his legs, more often than not.

He pulled gently at the little gold rings in his nipples, and ran his fingers over his tattoo. The vhang and the Garden air combined to wake every sense; the child turned perception inward on himself, caressed himself, marvelling at the exaggerated sensibility of his own flesh.

Dragon's admirers frequently committed crimes to buy his favors, even though the only truly handsome feature of his face was the shadowed brilliance of his eyes. His nose was too big, and his body almost scrawny (though some found it coltishly lovely). The cultists were captivated by his madcap humors, his tattoo, his impossible endowments... and his skills in bed. Among other talents, he was double-jointed.

Dragon licked the first two fingers of his left hand, and probed them up his anus. He bent his back into a "C" and held his enormous cock upright. Thus he was able to touch his tongue to his own glans, and even close his lips over the tip. He knew other positions for auto-fellation, but they demanded acrobatic skills he only unleashed for hard cash. This pose, however, could be held comfortably for hours.

Only a few minutes of licking, fingering and rubbing passed before Dragon's totem grew another half-inch longer (froth-flecked

with spit), and his tongue thrust its point into the eye of the penis, forcing open the urethra. His mouth sucked in the glans, and his fist squeezed and jerked. Half the blast of milk he managed to hold in his mouth, half splattered out his lips, dripped down his chin onto his groin and belly. Still masturbating, he swirled the semen in his mouth and let it trickle slowly down his throat. He pulled his fingers out of his rectum and rubbed excess jissom over his groin and testicles.

Then he wiped his mouth, licked his fingers, rolled up in the blanket and fell deeply asleep.

IN SUVYAMARA MORNING CAME to the world. Sorolon and his nephews were occultly busy on Manticore's Tongue. Jethael rehearsed with Poron while the other Blue Rain boys wandered off to swim in the canal. The scrivener monk locked himself up and worked on the tools of his avocation. Marbreuse, presumably, did the same in his rooms at Bell Tower. Valamiel thought of the man alone with two faceless ghouls, and shuddered with disgust and hatred.

In the Temple preparations for that evening's ceremony began. Sweepers (in fantastic uniforms of reptilian-scaled armor) ritually washed the vast marble halls. In the deep catacombs beneath the Temple, the High Priest of Suvyamara prepared to break the Spells which locked the Treasury against all hands but his own. Chanting and holding two burning censers, he stood alone before a small door on the third level of the Caves and one by one removed the unseen Seals and Guardians.

IN ALL THIS BUSTLE only Kael felt useless and unoccupied. He wandered about aimlessly, too restless to go swimming out-of-bounds with his friends. Tomorrow they'd all be leaving the very bounds of the world! Kael felt edgy and excited enough to jump out of his skin.

In all the mood of exultation and the morning news of Xiri's rescue (which was by now known to them all), Kael had nevertheless been falling gradually into a paradoxical sadness. He knew that great adventures lay ahead of him. But still a web of conflicting emotions entangled him. The monk and Jethael were to him a pair of heros; Zaek and Xiri another; Sorolon and little Varo yet another. They had accomplished great deeds already, and Kael's pride was perhaps a bit threatened. Even more than most boys Kael saw himself as a hero —

and yet so far in life he felt he'd done nothing of real note. The almost triadic love affair with Val and Jethi gave him great pleasure, but somehow still left an empty spot somewhere. "If Jethi were gone," he thought, "or never existed, Val would love me. If Val were gone, or never came into our lives, Jethi and I would be lovers. (I even think I'd fall in love with Zaek, if he weren't so mad over the Thurenian boy!)"

Buckling on his sword, Kael wandered over to Val's rooms, but found the monk in the midst of an esoteric array of little files, lamps, crucibles, hooks and claws, melted wax and smelly oils... too busy to take much notice of the redhead beyond one quick kiss.

Somewhat hurt, Kael tiptoed across the room and slipped through the closet door. He'd thought of something to do: visit the Garden and find Zaek and Xiri. At least then he wouldn't be bored.

MEANWHILE:

Dragon awoke and found himself alone under the eerie night sky of the Garden. Vhang fumes still fuddled him and he felt lost and superstitious. He saw Zaek and Xiri still asleep, now cocooned under a blanket. He located his loincloth and tied it back on, built up the charcoal fire (just-one-more-little-puff from his new pipe), ate a pear and paced restlessly up and down in the clearing. He looked at his sleeping friends and felt a stab of sorrow because no one loved him as much as they loved each other. He wished the Mad Poet would come capering into the Garden, spouting verse, drunk and flush with stolen money. He wished he were back in his mother's tent.

He took a resin torch and went exploring. He found the central fountain. He noticed that someone had planted fresh torches around the rim of the pool, as if in preparation for an outdoor party. He lit a few of them with his own torch, to dispel the darkness. He dabbled his feet in the cool water. What a fool I am, he thought. I'm free, I'm in the land of spirits, my friends are with me. So why am I crying like a baby?

KAEL HAD FORGOTTEN THAT DAY AND NIGHT reversed themselves in the Garden. Somewhat abashed at his daring, he crept about in the park from shadow to shadow, imagining things. What's

that eerie flickering glow near the middle of the Garden? He tiptoed forward, sword in hand.

He found a half-naked boy, alone, surrounded by burning torches, weeping like an abandoned waif. Kael had never seen this stranger before... and he forgot that the legendary Xiri had a legendary companion.

“What are you doing in our Garden?!” he shouted.

DRAGON LEAPT UP AS IF STUNG. He saw standing before him a wild-looking child with shoulder-length mane of fire-red hair, dressed in a strange effeminate costume all of crimson silk, belt and scabbard of scarlet lacquer, brandishing a little ruby-hilted sword and glaring at him with fierce green eyes.

Dragon wiped his nose. “What do you care, little rooster? It’s my Garden, too. Who are *you* for that matter?” Dragon jumped up and pushed rudely against Kael’s chest. “Run off and leave me in peace,” the nomad boy sneered.

“You shouldn’t push people who have swords.”

Dragon shoved him again, and Kael fell back a step. “I can beat you and your little sewing-needle with my ankles tied together,” said Dragon, shoving Kael even more roughly, causing him to trip and fall over backwards.

The redhead scrambled to his feet. By now he’d been forced back nearly to one border of the circular lawn — (curiously enough, very near the great Red flower-tree) — and when he gained his feet he found Dragon glaring at him face to face. Nose to nose, exactly the same height.

Kael in his own way was a bit of a berserker. He fought — when he fought — on sheer redhead rage. Now he exploded. He tried to slash the terrible intruder with his sword.

Dragon’s open hands shot out quick as thought. Kael’s sword went spinning off into the bushes and the little swordsman found himself flying through the air, lifted off his feet by a punch in the stomach. With a crash he landed in a rose-bed, and the tiny thorns stung his legs and buttocks in a hundred places. Kael, however, failed to notice any pain. He screamed with anger, not agony, and came out of the roses in an explosion of red petals, flailing his fists.

Dragon thought he'd already won the fight. He was simply astonished when the kid flew out at him and hit him. Kael's punches landed clumsily but painfully, and Dragon needed several minutes of dodging and ducking before he could kick his enemy's feet from under him and pounce.

They rolled over and over each other in the grass, kidney-punching, pulling hair, trying to bite each other's cheeks and ears. Dragon was an expert at this gutter-fighting game, and ended up on top, pressing the redhead into the grass, completely locked.

Kael kned him in the groin, and scrambled for the advantage this gained him.

Now Dragon ended up under the redhead, who blazed with anger, face bright and flushed as a sweating lamp, hair in total disarray, emerald eyes quite mad.

The nomad boy couldn't believe it. Pinned by this sissy?!

Both of them gasped for breath. "I've beaten you!" screamed Kael. "Say you give in... or I'll *really* hurt you."

Dragon laughed as sarcastically as he could under the weight of his oppressor. "I'm a very treacherous savage, and even if I say I'm beaten, I'll *kill* you when you let me up," he hissed.

"Then I'll have to knock you out," said Kael, "and I will, if you don't swear to leave this Garden at once!"

"You really think you've beaten me, don't you?" asked the nomad in wonder.

"Submit!" Kael commanded.

"Never," said Dragon, and spat in his face.

The boy was so startled he let go of Dragon's wrist to wipe his cheek. At once Dragon raked his shoulder with long fingernails, splitting open the fragile silk (already ripped in a dozen places) and digging deep into the flesh. Kael shrieked with pain, and let go.

Now they rolled again, over and over, silently and desperately. Kael was frantic to regain his hold; he had the horrible feeling that this creature was ten times more skillful and twice as strong. Suddenly he felt a moment of fear, and almost at once knew that he was being pinned under the weight of his vicious foe.

This time it took them even longer to catch their breaths, once Kael had finally ceased to struggle.

“Since you’re so honest... say you’ll submit... and I’ll let you get up,” Dragon gasped.

“Never!” And Kael spat as hard as he could up at the hawk-nosed ebony-eyed sweating face.

Dragon laughed. Kael spat again. And again. The third glob of sputum fell back onto his own cheek. Then he looked into Dragon’s eyes, and stopped — filled with dread. He’d never seen such insane eyes. Kael forgot his humiliation, roiled in a deeper emotion. All the blood left his face in a rush... he nearly fainted.

“I thought you were a girl, little rooster, but now I see you’re a fool. Don’t you realize that with my battle-skill I could kill you if I wanted to? What will you do if I tear your heart out?”

“Keep fighting you.”

“I really believe it!”

“I’ll fight till I die.”

Dragon looked down at the terrified freckled face, scratched and dirty. Deliberately he bent his own face and rubbed it against Kael’s, smearing spit all over the cheeks and chin. Then he bit Kael’s lower lip. He could feel the redhead trembling in an agony of fear beneath him. He bit Kael’s ear, not hard, but enough to hurt. He bit Kael’s nose. He tried to stick his tongue into Kael’s mouth, but teeth and jaws were clamped tight.

“Why don’t you try to bite off my tongue? That’s the way we fight in the desert.”

“I’m not a savage.” Kael was shaking uncontrollably.

Dragon laughed. “I think you are! You’re a terrible red daemon, haunting my Garden. Are you going to run away now?”

Tears of frustrated rage trickled down Kael’s cheeks. His nose was running, but he kept his voice nearly steady.

“No.”

“Daemon, little fighting cock, try to bite off my tongue.” And Dragon again thrust that long pointed organ between Kael’s lips.

The lips opened. The tongue protruded. Slowly, hesitantly-retreated, flickered again like a snake’s. Then it stopped and simply occupied Kael’s mouth. Teeth closed over it. Slowly Kael bit Dragon’s tongue till he almost felt his incisors penetrate soft flesh. The tongue never moved.

He relaxed his jaws. The tongue slid out.

“You missed another chance, Daemon. What’s your name, anyway?” Dragon’s eyes glittered like a mirage.

“Kael. What’s yours?”

“Dragon-Who-Sees-Night-Moths-Dancing.”

“Oh! You’re... Xiri’s friend?”

“Yes. And you’re one of those boys from Perpetual Benefice?”

“Yes. Shall we call a truce now?” Kael was still shaking as if frightened, despite this new civilized tone the conversation seemed to be taking.

“You still haven’t admitted you’re beaten.”

“You never could have done it without all those dirty tricks.”

“Who kicked whose nuts, little rooster?”

“You scratched me with your claws, you... desert savage.”

“You spat in my face, sissy.”

“You pushed me in the thorns, and my ass feels like a pincushion. Get off me!”

“No.”

“All right, I’ll admit you won this time, but only on one condition: you have to teach me how to fight... so I can beat you next time.”

Dragon grinned. “All right.”

“So... let me up.”

“No.”

For some reason, Kael began crying again. But Dragon did not mock him as a coward, because it was obvious that Kael was not exactly weeping with fear or pain. “Dragon... why not?”

“Because I like holding you down, red Daemon.”

The two boys looked at each other in silence.

Kael said, “You were playing with me all the time, weren’t you? You really *could* have killed me.”

“Maybe. I’ve injured a lot of bastards in my life. But I’m not sure I could have done for you. I’ve never seen anyone so furious in all my life as you, Daemon. Even if I tore your eyes out (which I could have done several times, easily) you’d still keep coming at me. You’re a lunatic!”

“Not as crazy as you, starting a fight for no reason.”

“Who was waving a sword?”

“Anyway... you never even hurt me.”

Dragon touched Kael's shoulder and made him wince. "Anyway, you really got my groin. It still aches," Dragon confessed with a grin. "Are you brave, Kael, or just...?" (It seemed like a genuine question.)

"I'm brave."

Dragon looked at him fiercely and grabbed his wrists again, pressed down on him and whispered in his ear with hot sweetsmelling breath: "Then I'm glad I didn't kill you, brave fightingcock. We're both crazy boys. Even if you attack me every day you'll never beat me. Brave Kael..." And he began biting the redhead's ear again, gently, his mouth half-full of scarlet tresses. "I told you my full name, Kael. No one is supposed to know it except me and my mother and the scrying-shaman. Why did I tell you my name, Kael? Never speak it. Call me Dragon, and I'll call you... Daemon. Promise?" He squeezed Kael's wrists.

"I promise."

"Not like a treacherous savage? A real promise?"

"Yes. Oh Dragon, *please* let me up now."

Dragon sat up, still straddling Kael's legs and hips. His multicolored loincloth was pulled awry, and part of his tattoo was visible. Kael's fine clothes were tattered and filthy and his face was still wet with saliva. His vest was torn open, every button, and blood soaked his shoulder.

Both the children had very obvious erections.

Kael covered himself with his hands and blushed. Dragon laughed with delight at the sudden flush of color. "Would you like to see my tattoo?"

Still not allowing Kael to rise, he untied the knot of his loincloth, slowly unwound the sash and dragged the length of cloth between his legs.

Kael's eyes popped wide and his mouth opened in a great "O". For several minutes he gawked at the spectacle Dragon had unveiled: the jewel-bright vivid reptile, slaving and be-whiskered, greenblue coils and chameleonic scales almost glittering in the torchlight. The hairless groin. And the largest male organ Kael had ever seen in his entire life, completely stiff, hooded like a monster snake, and pointed straight at his face.

"Let's see yours now, Daemon."

Kael could say nothing. He gulped.

Dragon reached out and untied the knot in the crimson pantaloons and swiftly pulled away the cloth. Kael had been naked beneath his one layer of silk, and now he was naked indeed, and blushing helplessly.

“By the mad green god!” said Dragon (a favourite expression of his lunatic poet). “That’s the strangest cock I’ve ever seen — and I’ve seen a few. It looks like a sand-lizard, all mottled and gnarled and bent and sunburnt...”

“Not as strange as yours, savage. Yours looks like... like a dwarfs arm... or a dragon’s pizzle.”

He laughed. “It *is*. But I wasn’t insulting you, Kael.” He lowered himself onto the redhead’s body again till they were face to face and groin to groin. “See? The dragon and the sand-lizard are cousins.”

For a full five minutes they lay there, saying nothing. A long time for two such noisy devils. Then: “Aren’t you *ever* going to let me up?”

“Maybe never. Did I hurt you?”

“A little.”

“Should I say I’m sorry?”

“No. I’ll beat you yet, savage...”

They lay together another minute. Kael felt warm tears falling on his face. His heart beat with unbearable pain. “Dragon-Who-Sees-Night-Moths-Dancing...,” he whispered.

“Now that you know, you’ll either become my brother, or I’ll have to kill you. That’s the law of my people. It’s a terrible ceremony. It leaves scars. But you’ll be brave.”

“Do you have any scars?”

“No. I don’t have any Name-brothers. Except you. What’s your Name?”

Kael kissed him on the lips. They tasted salty.

“Did you really fall in a *thorn*-bush? Let me see...” Dragon rolled off Kael’s body (but kept him pinned with one arm and one leg). He stripped away the shredded red silk, exposing tiny scars, already mostly dry and clotted, all over the redhead’s taut buttocks. Dragon giggled.

“Like to throw me in the roses?” he offered.

“Tomorrow. I don’t want you to... let me up yet.”

Dragon touched Kael’s penis, and the boy’s entire body arched like a rod of copper bent between two crushing stones. “Are you going

to *shoot* me now, fighting-cock?” He grabbed Kael’s ears and kissed him fiercely, thrusting his tongue into the redhead’s mouth — and being bitten so hard he squealed — but never broke away till Kael locked arms around his neck and squeezed. Still biting, he spread his legs wide under Dragon’s body, and then wrapped them tight around the nomad boy’s hips. They breathed in and out of each other’s lungs.

“Dragon... until we become Name-brothers... there’s something else we could do...”

“What?”

“You could... well, you could take me... ‘completely’.”

“Fool. Aren’t you scared I’d slaughter you with this dragon’s pizzle of mine?”

“I’m not afraid... I’ve been loved by a man before. I dare you.”

Dragon sat up. He knelt before Kael’s legs and ripped away the last tatters of red silk. He spat in his hand and began to lubricate himself. “Are you sure?”

Kael smiled, trembling again with fear. “Very sure,” he answered.

Now Kael pulled back his own knees nearly to his chin. Dragon lifted him by the hips and held him easily. Slowly he inserted the head of his erection into the rim of Kael’s anus... the redhead gritted his teeth and sweat sprang from his forehead. Inch by inch, Dragon forced himself home. With poised strength he picked up Kael completely and held him tight, kissed him and lowered him onto the full length of his penis. Kael’s legs and arms clutched him like tentacles. Dragon filled his hands with Kael’s rose-whipped buttocks. “Daemon... I’ve never been in love before,” he whispered.

Kael, too deeply and joyfully pained to answer, felt his rectum and bowels churning with that strange osculatory spasming which afflicted him like quartan ague when his innards were violated. Dragon began thrusting into him more deeply and splittingly than any organ should penetrate such a fragile body. He screamed and raked Dragon’s back with his fingernails. Dragon bit Kael’s lips and tongue.

Their climax must have looked far more terrifying than their battle: Kael’s pistol shot between the two bodies, drenching them in spoonfuls of violent boy’s cum. Dragon splattered endlessly into Kael’s body, moaning and weeping.

Gasping for breath, Dragon pulled out of Kael while his cock still pumped sperm, allowing it to spray and drip on the redhead’s crotch

and belly and genitals. He threw Kael to the ground and orally attacked his groin, licking up gobs of his own jissom, inextricably mixed with Kael's. He suckled the still-stiff red rooster with noisy slurping lips and bit it till Kael screamed and shot another wad of milk onto Dragon's tongue. Then the nomad plunged on top of Kael, pinning him to the ground again, and kissed him without stopping for so long that the finally-defeated little warrior almost passed out for want of breath.

With a final convulsion of sweat, spit, blood, tears, runny noses, bitten lips and drying spermatazoa, the Garden took them into its embrace — two newly-crowned kings! — and lulled them into gold and dreamless sleep.

AT THE HOUR OF THE FALSE DAWN, when the white flowers around about seemed to glow as phosphorescent as the strange Moonless sky with its clouds of stellar dustmotes, Zaek awoke to find Xiri staring at him intently.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Miraculously so. Come kiss me... no, don't worry about the wound. Hold me."

Time passed.

"Zaek... the others told me about what you did for me. I knew you'd find me. I dreamed of you, searching (and once I dreamed of making love, too)."

"In a sense," Zaek said after some time, "I did this for myself as much as — or even more than — for you. If I'd lost you... well, I'm not a word-weaver. Without you... nothing. But now I shall begin to do something for both of us. I will give Thuren back to us; I will give us the valleys and lightning and the hunt.

"Nothing will change our suffering — my exile, your enslavement. Good. We accept. We will not turn back, as if to seek a past that came before our suffering. We will create a new Thuren, one in which we can be free to love. Then, perhaps, I may have accomplished something — for you."

"I'd be happy anywhere."

"I also. Beyond you I need nothing. But because of you, I want something. I want you to dance in Far Thuren. I want you as my

banner-lord. I want the worship of Chaos, which is perfect freedom, to support our love and surround us in strength.”

“You mean the old ways: hunting, cattle-raiding...?”

“Perhaps war. The clans are rent and weakened by feuding, easy prey for pirate-slavers and the encroaching power of Old Qamar City to the south. Does the thought of battle upset you?”

“You’ll teach me to fight, as you promised. I’ll dance your War Boast in the clan Keep at Hraelle. I’ll carry your standard and lances. And sleep with you in your tent.”

ZAEK HAD NEVER MADE LOVE SO GENTLY Xiri feared to break open his wound — though he swore Sorolon’s magic had healed it — and touched him gingerly, as if expecting the man to wince with pain. Under the blanket they lay on their sides, face to face, touching at every point, seemingly connected at every pore as if melting into a single creature. And in this way they found each other again after their sorrows, innocently as if both were children, experimenting for the first time...

... till dawn revealed them wrapped in their dew-and-love-wet blanket, still not emerged from that single kiss.

A STRANGE PROCESSION trooped forth from the closet in Valamiel’s chambers at Noon Tower. First came Sorolon, dressed in the ritual grey velvet robe and turban of some ancient Suvyamaran clan, puffing his pipe.

Next came his two older nephews, decked out in identical robes and kilts of forest green, fillets of gold in their hair and earrings in their ears, carrying silver magic-chests carved with runes and studded with onyx.

Then pigtailed Varonael appeared, clad as usual in firesilk tunic and slippers. Around his neck he’d fastened a tore of black velvet and pearls. Attached to this was a silver chain, almost gossamer-thin, about five feet in length, which was linked in turn to a tiny silver collar with one viridine bead. The collar encircled the neck of Silk the firelynx, who rode proudly beside the imp’s head, claws clutching a pad of chamois which Varo had laced over his left shoulder.

Zaek emerged, restored to almost-pristine barbaric finery, smiling beatifically, hand in hand with Xiri (who had been given a tunic of

sparkling-white silk sewn with gold thread, and had bound his golden hair with a ribband of ivory velvet).

Finally Kael and Dragon, stark naked (except that Kael had his red sword buckled on and dust-stained red slippers on his feet). Between them they boasted several black eyes, a number of fascinating scars and bruises and enough strutting peacock happiness to make the Blessed Maervæn himself smile and wipe away a tear of nostalgic regret.

However the sight which met their eyes as they emerged from the magic Gate seemed even stranger than their own dramatic appearance.

Valamiel, robed in his Praeceptor's gown, knelt before a living deity. Jethael was costumed for his role. Over his body from neck to thighs was draped a tunic of samite sewn with beads of viridine in the pattern of flowering tendrils. His bare arms and legs were ringed by bracelets of opals and prism-crystal, pearls and jade. His fingers were studded with jeweled rings and his neck and ears heavy with baroque pearls and jasper teardrops. His amberblack tresses were woven with living violets. On his feet, high-laced slippers of watered samite stitched with silver. Over his shoulders, a cape made of a hundred trailing ribbons of green silk. On his face — the mask of Jeth.

13.

The Stone Of Exile

IT SEEMED AS THOUGH JETHAEL held court. He removed the mask and perched on the edge of Val's couch — but still there hovered about him the numina of encroaching possession and divine mastery. It seemed incredible (even to Sorolon) that a twelve-year-old boy could appear at once so kingly and yet so fragile, so hieratically inaccessible yet so innocently sensual, adorned as priest or courtesan yet smiling with intimate glances, so androgynous yet boyish, so graceful and yet so young.

As if acting out a role in a play, Varo stepped forward and sat at Jethael's feet like a king's attendant sorcerer, lynx held in his arms.

At his other side Kael knelt on one knee, a naked knight pledging fealty. Jethi bent and kissed him. "Kael... you've been hurt."

"No, Jethi. Dragon and I beat each other up... and then we became Namebrothers."

Dragon, suddenly shy and formal as a visiting nomad chieftain, stepped forward and kissed Jethael's cheek. He and Kael sat at the dancing boy's feet.

Jethael arose and embraced Xiri without words, staring into his eyes, smiling. Like two kings swearing to unite their realms in harmony. Then each of the other boys kissed Xiri in turn as if welcoming him back from distant exile.

The adults beheld the levee at this Court of Angels in silent awe.

ZAEK AND XIRI HAD RETURNED TO THE GARDEN. Valamiel begged Kael to skip the ceremony of the Presentation. "I don't care how cheerful and sprightly you feel, your left eye looks like a purple tornado. You'll dance again, Kael, and soon. But for now go back to the Garden with Dragon and rest."

Before they went Dragon whispered privately with the monk and Jethael. "The red Daemon told me how he loves you both. Xiri told me about you too, Val." Dragon kissed the man with his long tongue, and his immense penis stirred under his colorful belly. He grinned at Jethael, who reached out and caressed the dragon-tattoo with wondering fingers.

"Be gentle with Kael," said Valamiel. "You know much more of the world than he does."

"Gentle?" Dragon laughed. "I'd sooner tease that lynxkitten's mother with a pointed stick than turn my back on the Daemon." And with another laugh he pushed Kael into the closet and they vanished.

OUTSIDE NOON TOWER Sorolon and his family set forth at once for the Temple while Jethael and the monk went to find the other children and join the Perpetual Benefice procession. When all the deacons, masters, praeceptors, musicians and dancing boys had set out (with no sign of Tharactus or Marbreuse), and Jethael had donned his mask again and walked silently in front of him, Valamiel spoke quietly to old Poron.

"Tonight I am leaving this paradise for good, my friend. Some of the children are coming with me and they wish you to accompany them as their teacher."

"How are you going to steal them away?"

"You'll see... if you travel with us."

"I'm an old man..."

"No physical hardship involved."

"... been here all my life. Don't know if I can ever tear myself away."

"Well, if you decide to join us, meet me in Noon Tower at midnight."

"Tell me... is little Anathael one of your fellow-travellers?"

"Yes. He'll miss you most of all, I'd guess. You seem to have made him an apprentice dandy already."

“Ah... well, I must give serious thought to your proposal. I’ll speak to you later.”

As the procession made its way down to the Viridine Temple in the fading light, a fleet of airships could be seen moving slowly through the sky near the distant southern horizon. Their great black sails billowed full of breeze, which carried their lighter-than-air bulk gradually up and beyond the reach of Qamar, toward the dark empty Void of Storms between the Moons. The last rays of the sun shone on their sleek black hulls: merchantmen in a full convoy of fifteen vessels, bound for other worlds.

Not one of the Blue Rain boys even bothered to glance up at this bold and adventurous sight, which once would have set them chattering with excitement. Their thoughts were busy with other forms of journeying.

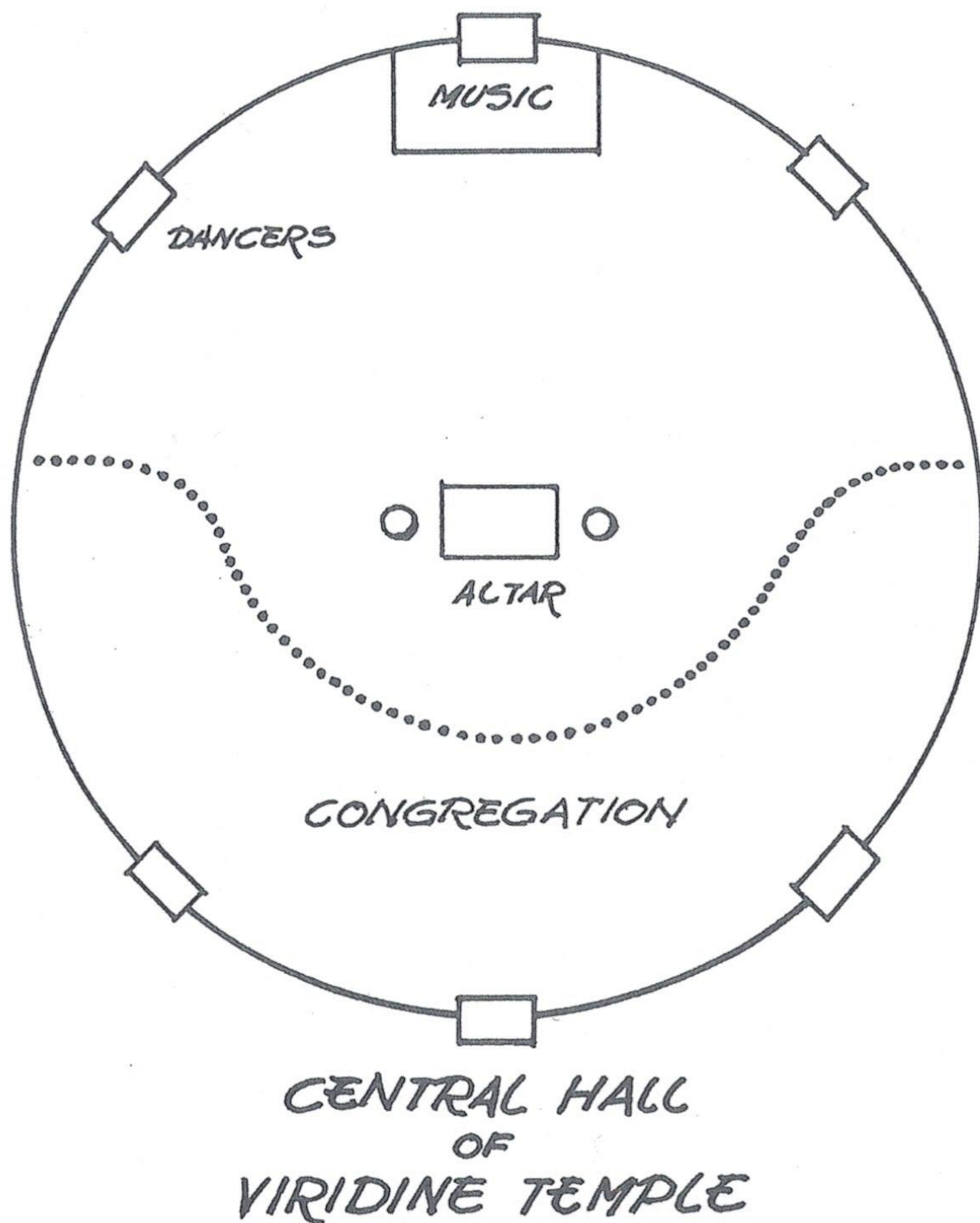
NEVER HAD VALAMIEL BEHELD the Viridine Temple so packed. The splendid clothes displayed amidst the crowd made it seem a lagoon of lace bathed in the supernatural glow of the Goddess’ Eye suspended above their heads like a drop of light chipped from some) errant star. The monk sat beside Poron in the shadow of an arch.[The old dandy whispered, “How vulgar, this modern madness for frothy lace. We Transformationists and our children preserve the archaic styles, which are both more dignified and more erotic.”

The distracted monk merely nodded. His eyes flashed across the crowd. There were Sorolon and his family. There, still hidden in the shadow of an arch, Jethael and the chorus of boys. Finally he spotted Marbreuse, misleadingly clad as a Suvyamaran aristocrat, and Tharactus beside him, pallid and half-faded into insubstantiality next to the charismatic magus of Chaeth.

Here and there in the congregation he noticed the black lacquered egg-shaped divan chairs of high-born women. And in one roped-off enclave he saw three eggs of mottled green, said to occult the High Priestess and her vestals. But the monk studied with greater interest the Temple guardians, those men armored as terrifying amphibians who stood at every corner by the score bearing spears and ancient evil-looking pikes. An army of a thousand, raiding from the air, might still fail to seize the Crowstone by force, he thought. Yet we intend to

cook this stoop with but three men — and a measure of magical and larcenous stealth. Are we fools?

Between the booth of musicians and cantors (where Valamiel sat) and the great half-ring of standing congregants, the Temple floor stretched circular and empty — save for a small altar flanked by great seamonster candlesticks.



The altar stood green-draped but bare save for one large chased-gold and viridine goblet (or grail-shaped device of some sort) and two small censers of pure crystal, filled with unlit coals.

Precisely at sundown the two altar-candles lit of their own accord, and the coals in the crystal bowls began to glow bright red. A mere trick, perhaps — but it caught the crowd’s attention. Gradually all fell silent, and the music began.

The score for this ritual lacked the usual Suvyamaran softness and atonal monotony. Instead it rang bold and victorious, stately, boastful, almost war-like. The old Epodes dealt with spiritual and cosmic symbols but this Presentation ceremony had been devised a scant ten years ago — to make use of the newly acquired Crowstone. Valamiel could hear in the music a suggestion of daunting might, a hint of vaunted imperium. Beside him Poron grimaced in fastidious disdain.

Now the chorus entered in slow-dancing procession, dressed in silk that tried to capture the color of viridine, and nearly succeeded. In sweet treble tremolo, they antiphoned the martial music’s clang. (“A cheap effect,” hissed Poron between measures of his chant, “but no doubt pleasing to foreign pilgrims.”)

The chanting droned and boomed, marching on for what seemed at least an hour — then abruptly ceased. The ensemble now began to play a more traditional mode, the *Processional of the High Priest*. From the arch to Valamiel’s left he noticed that dignitary himself appear and begin to approach the central altar in stately slow hieratic walk. His long cuprous robe was held from brushing the floor by two small paranymphs, eight-year-old choristers with bare legs and lawn-tinted capes. A white beard cascaded down velvet maniples and sleeves nearly to the old Theocrat’s waist. A peaked tiara-turban of sea-jade and long earrings of viridine. Rings and necklaces of gold and emerald. His face: strong, dignified, a bit fierce. A ruler’s countenance.

His hands were lifted before him as he walked and covered with a scarf of samite. Upon this cloth rested a round bit of glass or crystal, polished smooth and looking exactly like an overgrown child’s marble. It might have been black and it might have been dark wine-red... but in either case, not vastly impressive to behold. The Crowstone.

By the last note of his leitmotif the Priest had arrived at the altar and now stood before it, facing the crowd with his back to the musicians. Reverently and carefully he placed the Stone on the goblet-shaped device, so that the samite still hid his hands and the bauble rested perched in full sight, gleaming and impassive as any fist-sized crystal ball in a water-gypsy's parlor. Valamiel felt slightly let down.

Now the zerbals, drones and gongs, cantors and boys began to play and sing the music which all the true connoisseurs and aesthetes had flocked to hear. Let pilgrims and peasants gawk at magical miracles! The music of the goddess herself was performed but once a year... (until a decade ago. Now it was given twice a year) — and no devotee of the Transformations would miss the chance to witness a new dance invented to express its most primordial and authentically Suvyamaran strains. The rumor that old Poron had emerged from near-senility to train a mysterious witch-boy named Jethael for this occasion, had lured out every last poetaster, artist-in-perfumes, sculptor-in-jewels; every last febrile and overly-sensitive aristocrat; every last decadent lace-trimmed and fan-fluttering mystic in the city.

For one full cycle of the music the Priest stood as if entranced before the Stone, moving his hands under the concealing scarf (presumably in those sijils which would serve to awaken the relic's power), and mumbling his lips in silent invocations. As the music began to repeat its pattern (with new variations and ornaments), Jethael appeared from the archway to Valamiel's right, and slid in a "god-walk" across the smooth floor toward the altar.

The boy bowed to the priest and Crowstone in obeisance, then turned to face the crowd. They were well-prepared — both pilgrims and aesthetes — to be impressed; and the sight of the lone small dancer did not disappoint them. The green mask's subtle beauty made the poets sigh with longing. The green halo of pulsing light around Jethael's head caused the peasants to moan in superstitious awe. Already the child was fully taken by the Transformation, and his presence riveted every heart, his grace transfixed every gaze.

Then he turned back to face the altar and priest and began to dance.

The choreography seemed at first not to fit the music at all. Where the mode was simple, dignified, primordial as if it had emerged from the very first moments of a culture's self-awareness — the First

Flower of an infant civilization — the dance itself was complex, acrobatic and sinuous, and much faster than the music. The monk realized that Jethael was embroidering the music rather than simply dancing to it. Between each two notes he fit a burst of whirling, kicking, leaping and gliding that seemed to stretch and augment the sound, to divide it in hundreds of geometric crystal fragments, and finally weave it together again in heart-stopping cadenzas of pirouettes and skips. At the end of each resolution the boy would pause briefly, either to stare godlike at the congregation or to bow once again toward the altar.

Now a third reprise of the goddess' mode began. This time the musicians, following Poron's nasal but pure ululations and vocal warblings, imitated the complexity of Jethael's dance, ornamenting the tune to a nearly unrecognizable syncopated double-reversed melismatic fantasia.

But now the boy's dance was reduced to one pure motion. Now he simply whirled: around and around in a rhythmic blur, the long verdant ribbons of his cape, flashing like a pinwheel, cascading like green meteors or a waterspray of trailing green diamonds.

As the music moved to a louder and ever-more-complex finale, the Crowstone began to wake. From deep inside it a tiny glow appeared... and by the end of the whirling swooping halting swirling music the Stone had lit up like a lamp, black with a tint of ruby: the Sun at Midnight — unmistakably a sorcerous light.

And now the expected miracle occurred.

Over the altar and living Stone a human form took shape out of thin air. It appeared to be a woman robed in aqueous and undulating sea-wrack green, crowned with viridine and bearing a seven-pronged spear of jade. Her face, beautiful, serene, ageless, appeared to live: eyes moved, lips breathed, tresses stirred. But from tip to toe she was all green: eyes, skin and hair as well as robes and armor. The Goddess Suvyamara.

Valamiel remembered Sorolon once saying, "The Stone is a focus or nexus to enhance and amplify the Imaginal Will" — or something to that effect. So he guessed that this apparition had been called forth by the High Priest, who fed his contemplative vision through the Stone, which in turn gave it a visible form. So in a sense the figure

was no goddess but rather the idea of a goddess. Still — he wondered — what else are the deities if not the personifications of ideas?

Certainly his partial understanding of the phenomenon failed to eradicate the shivering worshipfulness which took him as Suvyamara turned her gaze around her Temple with inhuman calm. Pilgrims fell to their knees, moaning. In a land where women are never seen, here was a goddess, foundatrix and protectress of the city, slightly larger than life, gazing out at her devotees and citizens enigmatically, lofty with a pride and presence surely far more than mortal.

This marvel, in effect, constituted the climax of the ceremony. The music had ceased. When the goddess disappeared a recessional would be played. Thus at any rate had the affair ended in previous years.

But Jethael (and the spirit which directed him, or which he directed) had not yet finished his performance to the Crowstone.

With his decades of trained sensitivity, Poron realized this by a glance at the boy's eyes and face (still enhalo'd). At once, and without the musicians, he began to chant one more reprise of the mode. This time he alone provided all ornament and melisma by his one lone voice, an old man's thin voice, but deeply and musically intelligent, bursting with unexpected improvisation and almost mathematical wit. Classical, erotic, the very summation of the Epodes and their ethos, complex yet unhesitatingly direct and commanding: the old dandy sang as if (Valamiel realized) this was to be his last performance in Suvyamara, and his best.

As a dancer, Jethael still stood at the beginning of his life. But the music which came to him from Old Age and Tradition brought out the most impersonal, hieratic and somehow intellectual dance Valamiel had ever seen any child perform. On other occasions Jethael had done more graceful and innovative things, but never had he expressed so fluidly a mastery of the pure, cool, tricky, androgynous Suvyamaran style. Such a dance might have come to him by sheer hard work at the age of eighteen or twenty. But Poron's voice *fed* him the form he needed — while the awareness-trance or seizure fed him inspiration. This symbiotic relation seemed (to Valamiel's now-trained taste) to epitomize the entire purpose of the art-religion of Qamar.

The aesthetes in the congregation must have agreed. They were fainting, some of them; and others were tossing richly-wrapped packages near the dancing boy's feet, and weeping with emotion.

The figure of the goddess had vanished, and the High Priest — though he maintained his episcopal dignity and theocratic stance — seemed somehow baffled. Even his back (which was all of him the monk could see) appeared to radiate surprise. On the altar the Crowstone still gleamed, black, radiant, animate.

Jethael's entire body was aglow with sorcery-light. The mask seemed to have come alive on his face. The green ribbons of his robe traced patterns in the air that were fraught with intense meaning. His bare limbs glistened with sweat.

At the very moment of the dance's climax a second apparition appeared.

In midair above the altar the form of a gigantic bird, wingspan about five feet, suddenly materialized out of nothingness.

Although the body of the bird shone like opals or quicksilver, anyone could see that it was a crow... a very old, ratty-feathered, piratical, raucous, mischief-loving, thieving, laughing, beady-eyed crow.

Scarcely had it flapped its wings once than it winked out of existence.

In the stunned silence which engulfed the whole Temple, a distant bird's-cry could be heard, not emanating or echoing from any one direction, but (it seemed) from another world.

Not the caw of a crow, however.

No one who has heard the cry of the chaosawk can forget it, but few have lived to remember. Birds as great as merchant airships, eyeless and albino-white, they haunt the Void of Storms between the Moons and never come to rest.

The battle-cry of the Thurenian Chaotes is modelled oh the heart-piercing sonic shriek of the chaosawk... and so, although Valamiel had never before heard the sound, he knew what it must be without question.

IN THE SUDDEN PANICKY MOVEMENT which overtook the congregants at Viridine Temple, all pretense at a dignified end to the Presentation ceremony evaporated in confusion. The Crowstone's

light had died out, and once again it appeared no more than a sphere of black vitrine. The High Priest snatched it up in his samite scarf and rushed out of the Temple, his patriarchal face a mixture of bafflement and anger.

Jethael sought refuge from the milling crowd and his press of admirers by jumping into the sacrosanct musician's enclosure and running to Valamiel's embrace. The halo was gone and the mask was off his face, which gleamed with sweat. His features were radiantly happy. "An astonishing performance, my dear child," old Poron said, kissing the dancer. "A pity to leave this place, just when the old days seem to have come alive again."

"Surely in the old days," said the monk (hugging his boy) "no crows flapped above the goddess' altar."

"No doubt the very essence of the Stone itself, called forth by Jethael's enticement. A fitting tribute to our duet, eh?"

"No doubt," the monk replied. "But perhaps something else, too..."

OUT ON THE TEMPLE FLOOR Sorolon and his nephews ducked under an arch to wait while the crowd thinned out. Marbreuse and Tharactus strode past them, not more than a few yards away, seeming not to notice the love-magician and his boys. The Chaethian Regnant wore a look of disdain and displeasure, a nakedly arrogant dislike of all and everything around him. Tharactus appeared slightly nauseous, clammy and sweating.

Silk the firelynx hissed and spat. His fur bristled and he dug his claws right through the shoulder-pad into Varo's skin. The little imp-boy seemed terrified suddenly. "That's *him*, isn't it?" he whispered to his uncle.

Sorolon's eyes followed the receding figures, his ugly face creased with unease. "Yes. That is the one. Marchion."

TIME PASSED.

MIDNIGHT HAD COME AND GONE at Noon Tower. Outside in the world all was silent, the sky overcast, dark pearly grey. Presumably at the Temple the Stone had been returned to the subterranean Treasury and the guardians now kept vigilant watch over

it. Presumably at Bell Tower Marbreuse had closeted himself with his zombies and the unfortunate Master of Boys.

An enormous amount of luggage had been shifted into the Garden. The boys owned little to take with them and most of the bales, bags, packages, trunks and chests seemed to belong to Poron. I thought the old man was poverty-stricken, thought Valamiel as he dragged the stuff through the closet door into the sunlit Garden. Where is the ancient fashion-plate, anyway? Can he have changed his mind again and decided to remain at Perpetual Benefice?

Most of the children were busy elsewhere, helping Sorolon move the last of his belongings and furniture out of Manticore's Tongue and into the magical refuge. Only little Anathael, still dressed in jade green, loitered with Valamiel and Zaek. "Isn't he coming with us?" asked the boy, sniffing.

"It's late, Anath. We have to go, Zaek and I, and finish our work. Poron is no doubt delayed by some mischance. You must come into the Garden with us now. But stay close to the Gate, and peek through into this room from time to time. I'll write a note for him now... 'Poron, wait *here!*'... in big letters, and leave it here on the table. That way, when he creaks up here at last, we'll be able to take him. If he shows up within an hour or two, that is."

Anathael agreed, and they left him huddled hopefully just inside the White Gate.

"Let's find Sorolon and get this over with *now*," said Zaek.

SOROLON OPENED THE BROWN GATE and peered carefully out into the almost lightless hallway, heavy and dank with buried air, deep in the second level of the Viridine catacombs. "No guards in sight," he whispered. Ducking back into the Garden he picked up a large bottle of cut onyx and jet and uncorked it. Holding his thumb over the flask's mouth he opened the Gate again, walked into the tunnel and put the black bottle down in an inconspicuous corner. He stood up, and at once a dense cloud of some unnatural gas began to seep into the air till the flask was empty. Within the smoke small sparks of varied light winked like fireflies. As Sorolon moved back toward the Gate these sparks began to separate and fly apart, each one separately encased in a tadpole-shaped lozenge of smoke. Quicker than startled

wasps the lights flickered away down the dark tunnel in either direction and vanished.

“Now what?” asked Zaek, when Sorolon had closed the Gate on this peculiar display of magic.

“Now we wait for those artificial dream-worms to burrow into the brains of every guardian they can reach... a painless process, I assure you. Even pleasant, as I can personally attest. Some twenty hours later (barring any counter-sorcery) they will all awake, refreshed but baffled.”

“How long till we go in?”

“About ten minutes, to be safe. And wear these amulets of Wakefulness round your necks against any stray sparks.”

SOROLON STRODE DOWN THE TUNNEL, lamp in hand, as if through his own wine-cellar. The monk and barbarian, unable to believe they would meet with no resistance, skulked along behind, swords in their hands, darting glances ahead and behind.

At the door which hid the entrance to the Treasury they found eight guards sprawled uncomfortably in their ceremonial armor and nestled in a couch of spears and pikes: undamaged but snoring like drunkards.

Valamiel opened his tight-fitting robe. Around his torso he'd strapped his thief's covey, which bulged with arcane devices. From one pocket he extracted a fresh new key five inches long. Stepping to the door he fit the key into the lock and tried to turn it. Nothing happened.

“Needs a bit of filing,” muttered the monk. While his comrades tried not to fidget he delicately scraped at the key with a tiny spike. Blowing away atoms of metal he re-inserted the key and turned again. Tumblers clicked. Val pocketed the key and turned the latch. The door flew open.

Ahead of them a wide and anciently worn flight of steps, lit by a few resin torches, led down perhaps a hundred stairs to yet another door. No guard appeared to inhabit this gloomy well, so the three men ran quickly down the steps.

As Val began to reach for the lock Sorolon hissed, “Wait!”

For a full minute he stared at the door, muttering under his breath.

As if baffled, he stopped. Again he muttered, this time (it seemed) in some different daemonic dialect. A minute passed. Again he fell silent.

"I can't understand this," he said at last. "It appears this door is guarded by no Spell whatsoever. Magically speaking... it's dead."

"So much the better. I'll have the relic sprung open in five minutes. Why so worried?" Valamiel began to produce tools from his marsupial pouches.

"There must be further, more sorcerous devices still to face," said Sorolon. "The High Priest would never trust the Stone to a mere lock."

"One problem at a time, please." Val wrapped a sheet of parchment into a cone-shaped funnel. The narrow end fit into the lock, and from a vial he poured half a *maen* of metallic dust into the paper-cone. Then a few drops of oil from a miniature hook-tubed can.

Now a long iron spike went into the lock. Val held it in place for a moment, and waited. He let go of the spike and struck it with his fist. It vibrated slightly but held firm. "Zaek, would you lend me your strength again? Push the rod — like this, away from you — slowly and powerfully, till something breaks."

Zaek's efforts were rewarded by a loud cracking and grinding which made them all glance apprehensively back up the stairs. But the guards snored on.

With a small distorted-looking crowbar, Val pried the entire lock out of the door in about two minutes of noisy cranking and cursing. Still nothing stirred.

He placed the mangled lock on the floor, and shoved the door. It opened.

AGHAST AND GAWKING, they looked *down* into a cavern almost as big as the Viridine Temple above them on the surface. A cathedral cave, stalagmited, shadowed (but torch-lit), vast, many-branched and dank with stagnant pools, old as the Moon itself. Before them a long narrow staircase led down the side of one wall into the depths, down to the floor of the cavern. At the bottom of the steps something stirred.

They were looking almost straight down on the large shape as it began to uncoil itself far below.

"By Varon," said the sorcerer, "it seems as big as three horses, perhaps four. What *is* it?"

"It appears vaguely familiar, somehow, though I've never seen anything like it in the flesh ...," said Val, turning white with fear.

"*On the flesh*. That's where you've seen one," Zaek laughed.

"What's the jest? What flesh?... Oh!"

"See how its scales change color, like a chameleon's? Now: it's spotted us! Notice... just as he said: no whiskers."

"What are you raving about?" Sorolon still had not guessed.

"The totem of a certain nomadic clan of the Chromatic Waste. Perhaps the grandfather of all dragons. That's why the locks are so easy, Sorolon. Who would face that, for a mere fortune in gold... or magic baubles?"

AS THEY CREPT FEARFULLY down the narrow stairs Val said, "Well? Answer your own question, then! Who'd be fool enough to dare that reptile's fangs and teeth? Surely not us, Zaek?"

"Our nomad friend told me how it's done, the first time I met him. Remember? 'Go for the eyes, or the open mouth.' If painted savage chiefs can kill the children of this monster, then a Chaote can kill the monster itself."

"You won't be needing my help, then?"

"Take heart, Val. It's too huge to climb these narrow steps. We'll stand out of reach, and try for its eyes with every pointed tool we can spare. Once it's blind we'll spear its throat with ease."

"A brilliant notion. My enthusiasm for the entire venture returns, enhanced tenfold by your magisterial self-assurance."

"Marbreuse must have had a plan for something like this...," Sorolon mused aloud. "Or then... perhaps not. It's all *quite* out of my usual line of work. Dreams and love are for humans (though no doubt dragons must dream!), and violence is for such as Marbreuse. I'll try to confuse the creature with some finger-bolts and magic fire-dust... but it may not help very much."

"Zaek... could you muster up a Chaote rage, perhaps?"

"Not necessary. Hunting skills. Not like war against men." The barbarian seemed to have reverted to some primitive type, hunter-gatherer, dawn-man, stalker, out-witter of saurian prey.

As they crept downstairs and neared the beast they could make out its impassive lizard features in a massive wattled bat-eared face. Fan-flaps bristled around its neck. Its twenty-foot-long nearly ship-

sized body undulated like a snake's, and its spiked and bifurcated tail added another ten feet. Four taloned stubby legs held it, tense and huge as it glared balefully up at the human intruders.

Unlike the boy-dragon's schematic and rather mythical tattoo, the real beast coruscated with not ten but a hundred colors in the flashing torch-light, some of them prismatic gleamings of armored scales, others shifting like a mirage across the entire great body: the chameleonic display of a beast born to wander Wastes of pure shifting half-unreal color — and blend into the landscape.

The beast stirred menacingly and displayed its two double rows of delicate curved pointed fangs. A yard-long fleshy tongue flicked out and the creature hissed.

"How beautiful!" said Zaek.

"I HAVE A DEVICE called a Spider, used to shoot long filaments of web-thread at distant walls or ceilings. A sort of blow-pipe, assembled from three tubular sections. A sharp metal dart is puffed through the pipe, with thread attached. For this attempt at blinding a dragon, however, I shall omit the thread and use only the darts themselves. Once I've screwed this together and loaded it, keep silent and still so the beast may cease to shift its head, and allow me to aim at it."

"Your fingers shake too badly. Let me," said Zaek. The monk handed him the loaded pipe and three darts. "If I get an eye, shoot some of your magical sparks at it, Sorolon. Now... freeze."

The dragon glared up at them lizard-wise with one bright apple-sized yellow-slitted eye.

phhhhht! thwack!

The dart embedded itself in the eye. The organ's baleful light went out, doused in yellow pus and blood.

The dragon snarled with pain and leapt at them, thrusting itself with its tail into the air. Its huge bulk crashed into the wall directly beneath them, dislodging several loose bricks. Its fangs snapped and clashed not three steps lower than their feet.

The beast fell back, snarling low with stupid rage, and prepared to leap again.

But Sorolon hurled down fistfuls of sorcerous fire-powder and bolts of green lightning. The electricity hurt it, the fire baffled it, and

the dragon danced backwards, trying to escape the weird flames and crackling rays.

“Wait! Let it attack again.” Zaek ordered.

Silence fell in the vast caverns.

The chromatic dragon turned its remaining eye on its enemies. It contemplated them without expression. The colors of its skin had locked into an angry fungus-patterned fiery purple-red, fierce and strangely erotic. The beast was a living gem of hatred.

Heralded only by the rasp of scales against the cave’s stone floor, the giant lizard ran and struck upwards again, as if at three flies on a wall. This time Val smelled its carrion breath, and the sound of clashing fangs deafened him.

When he looked again Zaek was flying through the air, jumping straight at the dragon’s head. Just as the venomous jaws snapped open again the barbarian landed on the scaly neck with all four limbs clasping desperately (like a shipwrecked sailor clinging to one huge broken mast in a raging hurricane).

With his sword Zaek stabbed at one of the membranous neck-fans, passed his arm through the hole, and (thus literally anchored) began trying to poke out the monster’s last eye — before it thought of a way to dislodge him.

The first tactic it tried was thrashing its neck from side to side. Zaek held on.

It tried mashing him against the stone wall. He grunted, but still held on.

Its huge jaws snapped again and again at empty air. “Stab it in the mouth!” Zaek screamed.

“Of course! Nothing easier!” Valamiel laughed hysterically.

“Quick, before it runs off with me!”

But the saurian had one more trick. It began lashing its long tail at Zaek, like a huge spiked whip. One of the points slashed his back, and he screamed with pain. Val ran helplessly down the stairs, waving his sword.

Realizing that the next blow of the tail might kill him, Zaek scrambled over the top of the lizard’s wattled scaly skull, plunged his sword into its eye, and was hurled up into the air like a mouse by a taunting cat.

The blind dragon lunged straight at Valamiel, four rows of dripping fangs snarling in mindless reptilian rage. The monk realized he had no chance to run back up the stairs. Without thinking he waited just till the last split-second...

... and thrust his long Hevvaenian sabretache into the dragon's mouth.

As blade pierced monster's gullet the dragon snapped its jaws. Its snout knocked Valamiel flying in the air. Its hundred teeth crunched down on flawless steel. Teeth and sword snapped into a thousand razor-sharp fragments, several of which penetrated the dragon's brain.

Even then, the creature needed twenty minutes to die.

ZAEEK PLUCKED HIS SWORD out of the dragon's dead socket and tried to clean it with a ripped-off shred of his own tunic. Val pocketed a few fang-tips as souvenirs, but left the fragments of his blade.

"You never did tell me the story of that heirloom sword of yours, Valamiel," said the barbarian, tossing away the bloodied rag. His back was scraped raw and he was bruised in several places.

The monk held his stomach and winced with pain as he stood up. "Well... obviously my father lied. It was a forgery. Otherwise it would never have broken."

Zaek laughed. "Now we can apply for chieftainship of little Dragon's clan. We've earned the right by killing this thing. We'll have to be a triumvirate."

They all laughed with hysterical relief.

AFTER THE DRAGON, the Crowstone proved easy prey. They found it immediately inside the first sub-cave of the great cavern, sitting alone on a pedestal under a glass bell-jar.

All around them treasures were heaped high. Chests of gold and uncut viridine. Goblets, necklaces, rotting sacks of sequins. Just the sort of clutter one would expect a dragon to be guarding. Val stared wistfully down the cave, thinking of the riches of a thousand years, the whole wealth of Suvyamara. He sighed. He turned to the Crowstone.

"Don't touch!" Sorolon ordered Val. "Not ordinary glass. Allow me..."

He took out his pipe and lit a bowl of his "Primal Matter".

Monk and barbarian exchanged raised-eyebrow glances.

Sorolon puffed. Muttered. Blew smoke at the glass jar.

The glass turned cloudy. Cracks split its surface. It broke into a hundred fragments with a loud *pingg*! The glass crashed to the floor, melted and turned to venom and burned holes in the solid stone of the cave, leaving greasy smoking evil-smelling stains.

Sorolon waved his hands over the Crowstone a few times, muttering daemon-words. Then he picked it up and dropped in his pocket. “Let’s go,” he said.

“You’d made an excellent thief,” Val grinned.

They turned and headed for the stairs.

THE DRAGON’S COLORS WERE DEAD, gone out like exhausted candles. “You were right, Zaek,” said Sorolon.

“Yes,” Valamiel added at once, “it certainly was a crime to kill such beauty.”

“I salute its spirit, and promise vengeance on the enemy of the Wastes where once it lived, the Regnant Marchion who walks with the dead.” So pronounced Zaek the barbarian.

UPSTAIRS ON THE SECOND LEVEL all seemed quiet as before. The guards still slept, the doors still gaped open.

But as they rounded the corner of the tunnel that led to their hidden closet-Gate back to the Garden they realized that something had gone amiss with Sorolon’s soporific Spell.

At the end of the hall, carrying torches, they saw standing a group of guards, and an old man with a long white beard: the High Priest himself!

“They’ve cut off our escape,” Val whispered.

“We must run through the long tunnel to Bell Tower, emerge and flee through your closet in Noon Tower, Val. It’s the only way back to the Garden — unless we attack these guards — or hide and wait for them to disperse.

“You’re right, Sorolon,” Zaek whispered. “No chance of hiding. Let’s go.”

The High Priest’s men saw them as they tried to flit across the tunnel-mouth and run for their last bolthole. Oh for a Cloak of Invisibility now! All they could do was run like deer — and by sheer good luck they lost themselves in the catacomb-maze and gained a

fifteen minute head-start on the High Priest, before one of the guards finally discovered the unlocked door and the long-disused passageway that led to Perpetual Benefice.

Even so, the three men ran quickly as they could through the claustrophobic intestine by the light of the thief's-eye lamp, puffing, saying nothing.

At last they reached the end of the long tunnel and began to climb the last flight of stairs leading up to the basement and bath of Bell Tower, safe inside the precincts of the Benefice.

"Why do I smell smoke?" asked Valamiel.

PORON THE ANCIENT DANDY had so far experienced a very confusing and frustrating evening.

After the Presentation ceremony he'd spent several hours arranging for his belongings to be carried to Noon Tower, then he'd gone to this rooms in one of the wooden servants' halls next to Bell Tower to pack a few last personal items and wait till midnight.

With some regret he'd decided to accept the mad monk's offer and leave the Benefice — despite his own decrepitude. He'd spent his whole life here, from boy to dotard. But he was, after all, a Transformationist. The entire span of his thinking existence had been devoted to the concept of Change. What did it matter to him where he practiced his art? Perhaps in the north he would experience yet one more renaissance — with the help of the Blue Rain boys and Jethael. What a meeting of cultures it would be! Sensual Suvyamara and free-booting shamanistic Far Thuren. Poron smiled with anticipation.

And little Anathael was perfect. A miniature dandy in the making. Narcissistic, spoiled, greedy, mad for pretty clothes — but still shy and sweet. Not a bad little dancer, either. Poron smiled again.

He hefted his last shoulderbag of this and that and walked out into the night.

Tharactus, Master of Boys, stood there holding in his hand — of all things! — a pistol. "Come with me, Poron, or I'll kill you," he said sadly.

They walked to Bell Tower. Tharactus waved him inside with the ugly weapon. He looked quite ill "Are you mad?" asked Poron.

"You must see... if I'm not alone... perhaps he won't dare... but those faceless creatures! ... You can't leave me alone. Protect me.

“You have the gun. Protect yourself, Tharactus. I have an appointment, and I’ll be late.” But the old dandy had to obey.

They climbed the stairs. They entered the stuffy vulgar office. They sat. The distraught Master said nothing. He started violently at every nightbird or creaking branch. He refused to answer Poron’s questions, ordered him to be silent, waved the horrible looking pistol. They waited.

Poron had no idea why. But they waited.

Time passed.

“WHAT’S THAT LIGHT OUTSIDE?” asked Poron. “It looks like flame...”

Tharactus jumped up and ran to the window. He flung open the shutters.

Perpetual Benefice was on fire.

Or at least Bell Tower was on fire. Tongues of flame licked around the windows. Tharactus staggered back, moaning, “*He* did it! He means to destroy us all!”

“Listen,” said Poron. “I am going to walk to Noon Tower and look for Valamiel the scrivener monk. Come with me if you like. Perhaps he can help you.”

“He’s one of them! One of us! The doomed ones who’ve fallen into that monster’s clutches!”

“I’ve no idea what you mean. However, we cannot remain *here*, that much is certain.” Poron stood up, straightened his robe and walked to the door. “Will you join me?”

Tharactus was not yet so mad as to refuse to leave a burning building.

Outside they could see that the wooden porticos and offices had begun to catch fire and crackle. But the fire seemed to have started on the top storey of Bell Tower. Slaves and half-naked boys ran hither and thither, crying with panic.

“Suvyamara will be destroyed,” said Tharactus in a petulant whine. He’d lost his pistol somewhere and seemed to have forgotten it. Poron turned his back on the holocaust and began to trudge toward the still-unburning night-shadowed far end of Perpetual Benefice, where the shape of Noon Tower could just be made out in the mist.

“Why should they help you?” sneered Tharactus. “He wants only power. Not old fools like you... or me.”

“I trust the monk,” said Poron, not knowing why he bothered to talk with this unpleasant slug. “He told me he’d planned an escape from the Benefice tonight. I hope I’m not too late to join him.”

“Escape? Escape from Noon Tower? How?”

“I’ve no idea. He asked me to meet him there at midnight. Some two hours ago now,” he sighed.

Tharactus suddenly looked crafty and mad. “I’ll escape... there’s still a chance... before he finds me...,” and he ran off into the night, laughing.

Poron shrugged. He readjusted the weight of his bag and followed the lunatic into the doomed park.

IN VALAMIEL’S ROOMS an upsetting tableau met Poron’s eyes.

Tharactus lay face down on the floor, the hilt of an obsidian dagger protruding from the small of his back. No one else was in the room, which seemed stripped of all furniture save a table and chair. Even Poron’s own luggage had vanished.

On the table a note told him, “Poron, wait here.” Not knowing what else to do, he sat down at the table and took out his sewing kit. He began to work on a bit of old watered silk. The light of burning towers outside made an excellent lamp.

A FEW MINUTES LATER Valamiel — along with a strange barbarian waving a sword and an ugly man in a sorcerer’s robe — burst into the room. They were dirty and torn, bleeding and burnt, exhausted and limping. Poron rose and bowed.

“I’m happy not to have missed you,” he said.

Valamiel pointed wordlessly at the corpse.

“Ah... not my handiwork I fear. It’s Tharactus. He seemed to believe himself persecuted by supernatural powers.”

“He was. Did you find him alone?”

“Quite. Well... shall we go?”

The three men glanced at one another uneasily. “Poron...,” said the monk. “Behind my closet lies a magical Garden. Once we enter we shall close off this entry forever. But... you may not like what you find there.”

“What do you mean?” snapped the barbarian.

“Nothing could be worse than... *this*,” said the old dandy, waving at the conflagration outside and stooping to pick up his bag.

... But once inside the Garden he began to wonder if he’d been wrong.

INSIDE, BROAD DAYLIGHT shone bright and clear. The air smelled fresh and clean.

Marbreuse — and two hooded zombies — awaited them.

“Ah, very good! You arrive at last... a bit late, but thoroughly successful,” said Marbreuse cheerfully. “I can smell the Stone in your pocket, Sorolon. Ah yes, you see I know your name: the swamp-mage, clumsy tailor, maker of spells to snare little boys for filthy appetites. Of course, you *did* achieve this Garden. I confess, a nice bit of work. Very useful, I gather, for easy travel over long distances. I shall enjoy it.

“Now, hand over the Crowstone. Then you and your pack of catamites may vacate this charming retreat, just as I promised.”

“Our plans have changed,” said Zaek. “We’re keeping it.”

“You never planned to let us go free anyway, did you?” asked the monk conversationally.

The Chaethian sorcerer laughed. “All Gates to the Garden are closed now, save that one behind you. In a few minutes the escape-route will be engulfed in flame. Call your children forth from the bushes where they cower, then give me my property and be gone.”

“No,” said Zaek.

Again Marbreuse laughed. “You simpleton! Have you not yet come to realize that throughout this whole affair all has gone according to my Will? I chose you to do my work. I tied you down through your unnatural lusts. I defeated your plans to betray me... no, I *used* your simple plans and bent them to my pattern. Of course I let you take the slaveboys from Fennelbank Hall yesterday, at the right moment (and gave you plenty of time to do it), lest you be distracted from my handiwork. You have faced the dangers of the Cave for me, and come through — scarred, but obedient to my desires. You are my puppets, and have been so from the start. Now your task is performed, I’ll release you... once I’ve attained the Stone. Give it to me.”

“No,” said Zaek.

“Philosophically you’re quite mistaken, Marchion,” said the ugly sorcerer. “You spied out our intentions, but did not create them in the first place. We have opposed you, in the name of love, from the beginning — and oppose you now. We accuse you of tyranny, slaving and black magic. The Stone is ours.”

“Ah, so you maintain the authenticity of your actions? You would match your lusts against my Will? You thirst for justice? Very well.” He turned to his two dark guardians and snapped his fingers. “Kill them,” he ordered.

PORON WOULD HAVE FLED, but even his phlegmatic irony did not free him from the rictus of fear that seized him then.

The two ghouls sprang on guard, as if suddenly given life. Their faces did not exist.

Valamiel reached into his robe and whipped out a very sharp scrivener’s dagger and began to sneak off to one side in uneasy steps, crouched like a crab.

Sorolon scrabbled in his pocket and took out the Crowstone. He held it pointed at Marbreuse. The Chaethian sorcerer laughed again. “You hold the Stone, but it will not obey you. It will obey me, once you give it to me.”

Zaek had been standing stolid and silent, sword in hand. He seemed to increase in size with each snort of breath. He glared at Marbreuse and the ghouls with blood-shot eyes. Flecks of foam appeared at his lips. He snarled. His hair seemed suddenly electrified, and stood on end in a blazing mane. He shrieked his Chaote’s battle cry: “Death to Chaeth ! Chaos!”

VALAMIEL BELIEVED THAT ZAEK in his battle-frenzy could handle one ghoul at a time, but not two. Therefore he intended to draw the second guard away and distract it, while Zaek finished the first. Then he would lead it back again and allow Zaek to polish it off as well. Swordless, he could think of no other reasonable plan.

He dashed across the lawn to the edge of the park and whirled around to face his pursuer. He waited till the range was optimal and hurled his scrivener’s dagger at the mysterious cowl of the ghoul’s hood — hoping to emulate Zaek’s technique at Fennelbank. But the

guard flicked his sword across his un-face — clink! — and the dagger flew away harmless into the air.

Searching desperately inside his covey for some sharp burglar's tool, Val backed away into the bushes. The ghoul ran after him.

As the hooded figure entered the park, and Val turned to hurl a pointed awl at his pursuer, suddenly...

... a boy leapt out of a tree onto the ghoul, kicked the ghostsword out of its hand, fell to the earth, scrambled to his feet and dived whooping into the shrubbery. Dragon!

Simultaneously another boy ran out of the bushes, scooped up the zombie's ghost-sword and tossed it to Valamiel, hilt first. Also at the same time he threw a short-sword with a ruby in the hilt. Kael!

Valamiel scrambled for the swords, and had them both in his hands as the ghoul leapt to attack him barehanded, fingers outstretched to strangle. Blindly the monk stabbed out with both blades.

Thus he learned how easily the Dead-Who-Walk are slain by their own hobgoblin swords. This one died on top of Val, and gushed graveyard rot onto his already filthy cloak. He staggered to his feet, cursing and retching.

MEANWHILE, MARBREUSE WATCHED with mild amusement as Zaek slowly destroyed the other zombie. In his battle-rage the barbarian could not be touched — and every second cut or slash or thrust found a mark. But the ghoul refused to die, or even to falter at wounds that would have slain a truly living man.

At last Zaek hacked off its head with one clean scything slice. Still wrapped in its mantle, the head spun to earth spouting gore, and rolled up at the feet of the laughing Regnant Marchion. As the twice-lifeless corpse collapsed and twitched, he said: "Excellent! Very instructive. The scum are completely expendable, of course. And look: Valamiel has beaten his as well! Fine hunting, both of you. But why do you not attack me now? And Sorolon, why not unleash some Spell? How odd! Are you paralyzed?" and Marbreuse roared with laughter.

Indeed, Poron realized with sudden sickening dread, the three men were paralyzed. It seemed they could move not even their eyelids — although their eyes darted, terrified, to right and left.

“Yes! A Curse of Immobility has taken you, has it not? And soon a similar curse will take all the lands round Chaeth. Men will die, and reappear as dark-hooded swordsmen. The Wastes will fall to my power. Then the rich valleys of the Oryx. Suvyamara. Then Old Qamar, and the northlands. And so on, my friends, till the Moon is mine. But why waste my breath? Soon you will all join my army and care for nothing anymore save my word.” And he began to walk toward the immobile Sorolon.

But just then a boy darted out of the bushes, ran to Sorolon and snatched the Crowstone out of his nerveless fingers.

At once the Stone blinked on with sorcerous light, as if the boy’s touch were flint to its tinder. Jethael held it up and faced Marbreuse. The boy’s aura glowed around him. It grew in an instant brighter, multicolored and strong, as if fed by the Stone. Jethael wore the mask of Jeth, and most of his Temple costume. He faced the sorcerer boldly, completely possessed by magical Will.

Marbreuse reeled back, snarling. He stretched out his hands in angry clawed sijils of Power. Bolts of lurid black lightning crackled from his fingertips, shot at Jethael and burst into sparks around his body-halo. The boy fell over backwards as if slapped, and nearly dropped the Stone.

Marbreuse ran at him, still blazing black lightning.

FROM NOWHERE (IT SEEMED TO PORON) a dagger flew through the air, spinning, spinning. Valamiel’s scrivener’s dirk. Who had thrown it? Spinning, spinning... and buried itself (a mere inch deep) in Marchion’s back; scarcely a mortal wound.

A voice, a high-pitched boy’s voice, shouted “Chaos!” Xiri ran out of the park, carrying yet another knife, prepared to die.

Marbreuse paused. He grabbed around behind him to pull out the dagger. It refused to budge. It stuck in his flesh — as if metal had been bonded to muscle and skin. Marbreuse winced with pain.

Jethael stood up.

Varonael ran out of hiding and took up position beside the older boy. Silk the kitten followed, hissing and spitting, fur standing in bristles of rage.

The two witch-boys faced Marbreuse — who was still struggling with the knife — and raised the black-glowing Crowstone in their four hands.

The giant Crow appeared in midair over their heads with an almost audible pop. It spread its wings of opal-silver-mist, and flew wickedly at the face of the Chaethian sorcerer. He screamed in terror.

Just as the Crow's talons closed over his face, he vanished into thin air.

The Crow vanished with him. Its chaosaw-cry rang faintly in the air, like an echo from nowhere.

The dagger tumbled to the grass and landed point down, stuck in the turf.

The Crowstone blinked off.

The lambent halos around the two boys' bodies flickered out.

Valamiel, Zaek and Sorolon fell to the ground, as if they'd been shoved and lost their balance.

A large number of boys burst out of the woods, shouting and cheering and screaming at the full capacity of their lungs.

Poron opened his fan and cooled his brow energetically. "A very strange beginning to a journey," he said, with all the bland calmness of an aged devotee of Change: civilized, slightly decadent perhaps, but after all... still alive.

14.

Tales From The Garden

WHEN RAVINAN AWOKE HE HAD forgotten nothing of what he had seen. He remembered the fighting, the miracles, the vanishing of Marbreuse, and the moments of confusion that followed it. He remembered:

... “Where is he?” asked Zaek. “Where did he go?”

“I can’t say...,” Sorolon began.

“Is he alive? Will he attack again?”

“He may be alive or he may not be. The Crow may have caught him. Or perhaps he escaped — although he may now be lost and wandering between Dimensions. In any event, I am certain beyond doubt that he cannot return here. You see, the nexus he sought was turned against him... I’m too exhausted to explain it. Suffice it to say that no one could violate the laws of magic involved.”

“Let’s get rid of these twice-dead corpses,” said Zaek. They dragged the ghouls to the White Gate and opened it. Flames licked through the doorway, as if a furnace raged on the other side. They heaved the corpses through, then the severed head, and finally even the ghost-swords (much to Sorolon’s regret).

They sealed off the White Gate forever. Now they were locked in the Garden till they chose to let themselves out again.

“We can begin to move the garden (if I may use so primitive an expression) at any time,” Sorolon explained, once they had all gathered — even Silk the kitten, still trembling. “But... I have a

suggestion to make. I am exhausted. So are Zaek and Valamiel. Jethael, Varonael and Xiri have expended much energy — magical and physical — to save our lives — not to mention Dragon and Kael, who defeated one of the Dead-Who-Walk. I would go on to praise the bravery and love we witnessed here, if I had the strength. Only one thing I must say now, since I may never see it so clear again. Marchion was almost correct. He manipulated and tricked us, the three adventurers, me and Zaek and Valamiel. He had us beaten at the end, totally beaten. He made only one error: he assumed that children are powerless...

“Now we must rest,” Sorolon continued — and indeed he seemed scarcely able to stand upright. “The Garden is no longer in Suvyamara. We are nowhere on Qamar. We are safe and alone, protected by our Garden Gates, and by the Crowstone as well. So let us quickly unroll some blankets and retire to our favorite corners of the Garden. Then with your permission I will send forth a Spell of Healing Sleep. Night now approaches. We shall rest deeply all tonight, all tomorrow and again the next night. Wounds will heal, ugly images will be distanced. When we wake I have many fascinating new theories to explain just how we managed to achieve all this, and what we ought to accomplish next. But for now” (he yawned) “I propose to retire to Green Gate with my nephews and young fellow-sorcerer Varonael, and find some blankets and a tree to sleep beneath (against sunburn while I rest). In ten minutes I’ll uncork this bottle of peaceful repose.”

He brandished a cloudy green and onyx flask.

Everyone agreed.

Zaek and Xiri retired to Black Gate, which had become their favored camp.

Dragon and Kael made their way to the Red flower-tree and rolled up beneath it in one blanket.

The Blue Rain contingent preferred to avoid the White Gate, scene of such recent horrors, and moved ensemble to Blue Gate, where they dispersed themselves around and about the shrubbery in comfortable piles of coverlets and pillows.

Poron and Anathael chose the Yellow Gate, and lay down to rest.

With a *pop* heard round the Garden, Sorolon uncorked his Spell. No one even saw the sparks of light...

AS THE SORCERER HAD PROMISED, they all slept deeply and dreamlessly for a starry night, and a warm fine day, and another starry night. The Garden seemed to gather its full strength again and expel every lingering influence of the vanished Marbreuse and his zombies. Soon only peace remained. Birds slept. Insects alone buzzed for a day, then gave way to fireflies and more stars. At last the vapors of the Spell were dissipated with the freshness of dawn.

SO WHEN RAVINAN AWOKE he remembered everything — but only as one recalls past adventures. All the bad parts seemed transformed into a story. All the good parts were still with him.

Ravinan woke second of all the enchanted sleepers (he was lazy, true, but not *sleepy*). Silk the kitten was first aroused, but stayed near his master — except to chase one last revelling firefly.

The blond blue-eyed chorister lay comfortably thinking. A very special feeling crept into his soul. Somehow he knew that today, if he wished, he could be *invisible*. He could wander about the Garden at will, seeing everything he wanted to see, and no one (not even Sorolon) would realize he was there — unless he wished to be seen. He knew that he would still be able to behold his own body perfectly well (how awful not to, like Zaek at the Water Fly Cafe!). But he was certain without the slightest doubt that he himself could spy on every event of the day in perfect secrecy.

Where had he acquired this wonderful gift? He was no sorcerer. Perhaps the Garden granted wishes... and Ravi loved to peep and spy... only on his *friends*, of course... and watch the crazy sometimes-rather-awful games they played. Yes... perhaps the Garden enjoyed the idea of an invisible Ravinan, free to indulge this harmless vice for one day without restraint, and had decided to lend the boy its own magical eyes, to record and enjoy its own pleasures.

Who can say? Ravinan watched the first peep of dawn and heard the first hungry bird awake (I can steal fruit, he thought, and skip breakfast). Quite invisible — save to himself — he got up and stretched. He could wear whatever he liked, or go naked. He compromised. He wore a powder-blue vest and his favorite powder-blue slippers, and nothing else. He set out to see what he could see.

SOROLON WAS SETTING UP HOUSE at Green Gate. His nephews were frying smoked fish and boiling porridge. Varonael and Silk were eating hugely, joined by some of the Blue Rain boys: Venyamin, Michchi and Daevaen.

After breakfast little Venya and Daevaen sat naked in the grass, playing with toys. They laughed and were happy and beautiful; the Garden saw them through Ravi's eyes, and blessed them (or so it seemed to him).

Varo and Silk wandered off into the woods. Sorolon, the nephews and Michchi bustled around helping each other and being terribly practical and useful and dull. Poron wandered up, already fully and gorgeously attired. He ate quickly, collected a few necessities and a plate of food, and vanished again.

Ravinan found the domestic scene unbearably dull. He decided to find out what Poron was doing... Old enough to be Anath's great-grandfather! Ravi grinned and shadowed the old man along the path toward the Yellow Gate.

ANATHAEL WAS NOT A LAZY BOY — but a sleepy one. Even without recourse to magic he could sleep away half a day without difficulty. When awake he danced, ate, played, sang and indulged himself in mischief, like any eleven-year-old of Perpetual Benefice. But when asleep he slept with passion. He curled up into a foetal ball as if embracing the god of sleep, and if he were naked (which he *was*, in fact) you could see between his soft ivory buttocks. Pillows half covered his head, and his thumb hovered near his mouth. He drooled slightly, and breathed soft as snow.

Poron bustled around the clearing, elegantly dressed in a robe of ancient pink-on-pink watered silk, his favorite fabric. (Even Ravi knew it was nearly as expensive as firesilk). His old cheeks blushed with rouge, his lips seemed naturally red, and his (handsome) old eyes were outlined in blue and ashgrey. His white hair was hidden by a turban that matched his robe. A ceremonial fan dangled from his wrinkled wrist, and his fingernails were painted. A fascinating sight: never had Ravi seen him quite so elegant. The old dandy whistled, stole fond glances at Anath's nakedness, and unpacked a few of his bags.

Ravanan gaped in wonder. Out of the cases and boxes spilled piles of neatly folded clothes, all of them in official Perpetual Benefice styles, all boys' clothes — that is, all androgynous pantaloons, vests, slippers and capes, loincloths and kilts, jewels and bangles. Costumes from the Viridine Temple, scores of them — in just these few bags. Every piece ancient, flawless, colorful, rich, fabulous and rare. (What could the *other* cases be hiding?)

Poron was nearly penniless. Everyone knew that. Where had he obtained this vestryful of vestments, this treasury of costumes? Perhaps he'd been squirreling it all away for decades, a gift here, a discarded button there, here a minor theft, there a mislaid bundle of laundry. Enough to outfit an entire corps of dancing boys. Antiques dating back hundreds of years, but scarcely used. Watered silks, firesilks, plush velvets, long black cases of necklaces, masks, cloaks, furs, hats, fillets and ribbons, bits and pieces of ancient lace, silver buckles, gold chains... the inventory seemed endless. —

A full-length mirror stood in the park, propped against a tree. A dressing table had appeared, littered with combs, brushes, vials of cosmetics and attars, tiny boxes of pins and brooches, pots of rouge and jars of ointment. Poron sat down and adjusted his robe. "I know you've been half-awake for minutes now, my hibernating creature. Up then, and to your ablutions!"

Anath stirred. He grumbled. He knuckled his eyes. He stretched and yawned. He blinked. What a beast he is in the mornings, Ravi thought.

Without a word to Poron he stumbled off into the bushes to do his morning business, splash in the stream, dry himself with a fluffy purple towel, and finally — awake and beaming — stride back to Poron's embrace.

"I'm so glad you came with us, after all," said the ivoryskinned brown-eyed boy, perched on old Poron's lap. "Will you brush my hair while I eat breakfast? What would we have done without you to teach us? And who would give me presents and nice clothes?" ... and so he chattered and gobbled on, while Poron carefully combed and brushed the bangs till they gleamed dry and smooth and shiny as chestnuts.

"I'll choose some really special things for you today, child, to celebrate our journey. Now, slip out of the towel and we'll start to dress you up."

Anathael the apprentice dandy agreed with glee. Sprightly and fresh, plump-buttocked and round-bellied, slender-shouldered and girlish-legged, all ivory and cream, Anath was naked. His little penis soft and elegantly pointed, velvety and smooth.

Poron decided against scent.

He began by plucking a single white jasmine blossom, and tying it with a bit of thread to a lock of the boy's hair, just above the ear. The lobes of Anath's ears barely peeped out from under the neatly clipped fringe of brown. Poron found two tiny ear-studs made of prism-crystal chips mounted on five-pointed stars and slipped one into each delicate lobe. There they sparkled in the morning sun, jaunty and playful, yet with a touch of night's mystery.

Rummaging in a jewel box, Poron discovered an ancient-looking choke-necklace of smoky-quartz beads in graduated sizes, with a single enormous blue moonstone pendant. As this gem closed round his slender throat, the boy began to tickle his own groin with absent-minded fingers.

Now the old man produced a string of thin bangles of varying sizes, which he untied and began to slip around Anath's upper arms. The circlets were carved of pure white opal and they gleamed and sparkled like moonbeams. Three of these went around each thin upper arm, three around each wrist, and then (Anath's bare feet thrust in the old man's lap) three around each ankle.

"That's enough jewelry. More would detract from your innocence."

"Couldn't I have just one more... for *here*?"

Smiling indulgently, Poron chose one last little ring of opal, which opened on a silver hinge. This he gently and carefully placed around the boy's penis and testicles, then closed it with a click. At once the little ivory wand sprang erect, the egglets expanded in their pink sack, and Anath sighed luxuriously.

"And now," said Poron in slightly-quavering voice, "the clothes..."

From a heap of garments he chose a long loincloth, a narrow scarf of antique thin watered silk, peach-on-peach. He passed it between Anath's legs and covered the jewelled genitals with one layer of tissue-thin fabric beneath which the shape of the hidden glans remained quite clear. The rest of the scarf he bound around the child's

narrow waist and round tummy and clipped it closed with an amethyst brooch.

Now he unfolded a pair of pantaloons, crinkly watered silk, white-on-white, but so ivory with age they nearly matched Anathael's skin. The garment was woven so thin that the peach-colored underwear could be seen through its pattern, and the shape of Anath's buttocks. The pants-waist came up nearly to his nipples and the legs were scandalously short, floppy and loose. Poron tied the drawstring in a bow and tucked it inside the pants.

He picked out a pair of slippers and a sleeveless twentyone-button vest in matching tint: shiny brown-on-brown watered silk, almost the precise shade of Anath's hair, and patterned like rich tapestry. The last few buttons of the collar Poron left undone so that the chestnut-cream silk parted to reveal the pendant moonstone. The gem seemed to glow darker and more intensely blue next to the cloth, and the boy's soft skin took on an exotic luminescence, as of precious alabaster. Anathael was perfect now (Ravi realized): an icon of exquisite loveliness, every shade and jewel and texture matched.

"Couldn't I try just a little cosmetics?" the child pleaded.

"Most boys don't need them," Poron lectured. "The advantage of clothes and cosmetics is that, with their aid, one may seem one's *true age*. I for example have dressed so cheerfully and carelessly today because I feel a rejuvenated sixty or so, able to appear a trifle shocking — antique perhaps but interesting. Whereas you are (bless me) but eleven, and have no need of any such sophisticated devices to perfect your nakedness with clothes.

"However... if I may say so, dear child... exquisite as you are, it's true that your lips could be just a touch more full and colorful. So..."

Poron reached for a pot and removed a tiny blunt brush, red with some cosmetic tint. "Hold still now... this stuff lasts for three days." The old man painted the child's lips.

Anathael stepped to the mirror to admire himself. Poron stood behind him, parchment-hands resting on the child's shoulders. "I'm so beautiful... a work of art," Anath grinned happily.

As he gazed at himself and postured, the child rubbed his double-silk-clad crotch. Soon the delicate fabrics were tented by a tiny bulge. Pulling aside the loose tissue of the pantaloons, Anath tugged his cock

out of its peach-bloom confinement. “Careful, my sweet, those pants are older than I am!”

“I’ll wear the trousers later, then. I’m too excited by how pretty I am...” Anath carefully unbuttoned the bottom twelve buttons of his vest. He gently undid the bow of his drawstring and allowed the moth-wing-thin trousers to float like thistledown to his ankles. He stepped out of them daintily, picked them up and handed them to Poron.

Anathael sprawled on the blankets, admiring himself. His belly was bare but his waist still tightly bound in silk. The brown vest opened on his throat and the slippers made his long legs seem deliciously bare. His opal-ringed penis stood out from its nest of wrinkled peach-blossom like the stamen of some precious orchid.

“Give me a present,” crooned the little boy. He jumped up and began rudely to rummage in Poron’s jewel-case.

“All that you are wearing is yours, then, greedy one. Remove your paws from my chest of toys!”

“Oh Poron! What’s *this*? How awful! How impolite!”

“That’s not for infants to play with. Give it back at once, exquisite monster.”

The “toy” Anath had discovered was (Ravi thought) terribly scandalous. About five inches long and carved of ivory, it represented a young boy’s erect penis. The glans was smooth and blunt, the shaft slightly curved, the veins and tiny folds of flesh quite cleverly and realistically depicted. Some anonymous craftsman had given this sweet dagger a hilt of two ivory plumlets in an ivory scrotum, every wrinkle incised with loving care. The whole device was finished with a handle of silver and topaz.

Anath stole it away, giggling. “What’s it *for*, Poron? Who gave it to you? Can I have it?”

“My dear, it’s an exact rendering of... my organ, made when I was perhaps a year older than you are now. My lover ordered it carved as a jest. It has sentimental value. Play with it if you like, but don’t lose it.”

“I know what to do with it,” Anath smirked. He sprawled back on the bed. Sneaking glances at Poron, giggling, he coated the little ivory bone with spit and pretended to fellate it.

With one finger he pulled and loosened the peachy loincloth away from the hidden target of his pink anus. Slowly, holding the topaz handle, Anath eased the bone device into the widened crack of his

rectum, till it vanished up to the hilt in his sheath. Cold ivory balls met warm pink scrotum: four eggs. Pulling and pushing (little finger daintily crooked) he plunged the thing into himself, giggling — and masturbating vigorously with the other hand.

Ravinan's cock had been stiff as a nail since he awoke. Now, watching Anath, he began to pull it in sympathy as he gazed at the perversely elegant scene: an old dandy, watching a little dandy bugging himself with an ivory toy — both of them dressed like figures in a strange lost book — androgynous, ceremonial, mysterious, the old one poised in erotic contemplative subtlety, the young one in pubescent writhing of hips and kicking of slippered feet in the air... as Anath pushed the old man's memories into his sweet bowels and whooped with delight.

... "Oh...", Anathael yawned. He hid the damp ivory penis under his pillow. He stretched out and sighed, rubbing his rubbery (opal-decorated) twig. He curled into a ball and tucked his feet under the sheet. His buttocks thrust out for Poron (and Ravinan) to see, still wet with saliva, the sphincter swollen and pink with pleasure. "I'm going to take a nap," Anath murmured. "Wake me for lunch."

He stuck his thumb in his mouth and drowsed back into unconsciousness. Poron sat in the sunlight, smiling at the exquisitely half-dressed dreamer... the old man soaking up sunlight, and sighing happily.

RAVINAN STROLLED OFF, busy scheming ways to charm Poron into giving *him* some presents. The strange play with mirrors, gems and ancient fabrics excited him. What if we all dressed that way, and danced? People would probably *pay* to watch us.

He wandered back to Green Gate to check on Sorolon. After all, he'd long since watched Anath playing with himself a hundred times (though never with such a toy). But the amiable sorcerer still seemed mysterious and new to him.

Everyone had drifted away from the now quite elaborate camp except the magus himself, his two older nephews, and Michchaeris. The dark slender dancer from Blue Rain Tower, with his tousled black hair and tanned adolescent-muscle body, closely resembled the two nephews — (even in the fact that he loved his little brother!) — and perhaps for this reason Sorolon had taken a liking to him.

Michchi might lack the talent of magic, but he was practical, helpful, cheerful, loyal... and obviously already fond of the ugly man, fond enough to be sitting on a rug in front of him and doing something which quite surprised the invisible spy.

Sorolon seemed to hold court on a kind of soft-cushioned throne of green and grey velvet-plush, almost a small couch. As always, he was clothed in the garb of a country gentleman — but this time his dull-wine-purple robe was flung wide and his rough linen tunic and kilt disordered and undone. Standing up like a red tree from between the man's legs, his marvellous wand stretched taut, well over a foot long, and thick as Ravi's forearm.

On either wide-spread adult knee a nephew perched; this seemed to be a favorite device of the sorcerer's, for it allowed him to kiss them both, separately or at once, while they hugged him and licked his cheeks. Simultaneously, of course, he could masturbate them both while they returned the favor — for the giant phallus was quite long enough for two boys' hands to rub and tickle at the same time.

However, it seemed that Michchi must have begged and obtained a special treat — for Sorolon never asked a boy to perform any act of love unless the boy himself first suggested it. Ravinan had never beheld his tower-mate at any sport quite so indelicate (unless one counts incest, which none of them did). Michchi knelt, back arched and buttocks taut, between the man's legs, holding the immense penis in both busy hands, and trying to fit the almost apple-sized glans into his wide-open mouth.

Ravi regretted missing the beginning of this show, which had started him at his voyeur's hand-held prey again. It seemed that the quartet were about to reach a major resolution of their mingled sighs, whispers, giggles and moans. Sorolon's younger nephew Valvaen tore open all the man's buttons now, exposing his rather hairless chest, pot-belly and thin-bearded groin. The two boys caressed their uncle's nakedness and pressed their penises against him. Michchi's tongue snaked around the engorged and bulbous glans, big as a child's fist, trying to wet it enough to slide all the way between his lips. At last he succeeded (looking like one of those snakes who unhinge their jaws to swallow live victims without chewing). Unable to move up and down, he contented himself with rotating his tousled head to left and right,

while rubbing and jerking the stag's vast pizzle as vigorously as he could.

Michchaeris seemed unprepared for the result of his ministrations, and Sorolon was too ecstatically preoccupied to warn him of impending catastrophe. The man's whole body bucked off the chair, and a sudden flower of white petals burst into bloom around Michchi's distended lips. The power of the explosion must literally have dislodged him from his precarious suctioning grasp, for his head flew back as if slapped, gouts of sperm on chin, cheeks, lips and nose.

Sorolon's wand sprang upright and exploded again, sending a fountain of jissom three feet in the air, where it broke into sticky spray and fell in a hot rain upon the three boys and the man himself. Undone by this, Esteva added his own small oblation to the puddle growing on the sorcerer's stomach.

Michchi had been playing with himself all this while. Now he staggered to his feet (Sorolon still spouting and groaning) and tried to find a place to relieve the impending ejaculation which already seized him in helpless spasms. As he fell forward onto the man's lap, his thin six-inch-snake spouted another three copious jets of white jac into the deepening soupy swamp.

The three who had climaxed collapsed in a heap in the capacious chair — but Valvaen, the girlish younger nephew, had still not found his fulfillment and was bouncing with excitement. He pushed Michchi off Sorolon's lap, and bent his head till he could bury his face in his uncle's soft belly. There he began to lap up every drop of sperm he could find — whole tongue-loads of it, like a cat with a spilled bottle of cream. Michchi (fallen back on the floor) grabbed Sorolon's half-wilted war-club and squeezed it like a great marrow-bone, till the last string of albumin oozed out onto his tongue.

RAVI LEFT THEM IN A gradually subsiding heap of bodies still draped and drooped upon the great chair, Sorolon kissing the exhausted Michchi with avuncular gratitude. The whole event had transpired too quickly for Ravi to finish his own auto-manual project... and now he was in some pain. Still, he had no intention of pausing in his research. Somewhere in the Garden, no doubt, he would discover yet further vistas of delight. I wonder what Kael is doing now? he smiled. How lucky of him to fall in love with a daring and worldly

boy like Dragon — and be loved in return. Yes, it would be interesting to spy on those two lunatics, who were far less polite than old Poron or the magus of Manticore's Tongue. No doubt he'd find them somewhere in the Red park.

And so he did.

THE "SAVAGE" AND THE REDHEAD were already long awake. At dawn, before rising, they made love for an hour, hand-to-hand, deliberately never reaching an end. They arose, they breakfasted on bread and fruit, they washed themselves in the stream and spent an hour fixing a real camp for themselves. Then... they began to fight.

Kael demanded lessons in the mysterious martial arts of the desert nomads. They stripped to their loincloths and wrestled on the lawn. Dragon would have preferred gentler games, but Kael of course was in dead earnest, having decided that the two of them must be warriors and fight along with Zaek and Xiri in the wild north.

The nomad boy let Kael attack him again and again. Each time the redhead found himself tripped, thrown, knocked off balance, or simply unable to touch Dragon at all. He couldn't understand it, and Dragon wouldn't reveal any secrets. "Figure it out yourself!" he taunted.

Kael was not really angry — but he was only half pretending. He'd discovered that his Namebrother liked to see him fume and flush and spit, strut and boast and keep on trying to connect with one hard punch. Dragon leapt away from him laughing, calling rude names and love-names, pinching and slapping and darting away again untouched. Finally gazelle-like Dragon simply bounded off and ran away from him... and they chased through the park, and a full whooping circle of the central fountain... before Dragon finally let Kael catch him.

Snarling, spitting, giggling, they came to rest — with Kael on top. When he could breathe again the redhead growled, "I've cut my knee, damn you."

Dragon licked sweat from Kael's chin.

Kael punched him in the ribs. Dragon spat. Kael pinched. Dragon squirmed, pretending escape. The redhead unleashed a flurry of rabbit-punches, bites, five-finger pinches.

He realized that Dragon no longer resisted him. Instead the dark-eyed boy was gasping and panting as if making love, half in mockery but half sincere (for his loincloth jutted against Kael's stomach).

Suddenly embarrassed, Kael stopped "fighting" and blushed. Dragon had found some antimony and lined his great black eyes with almond shadows. His face was flushed with heat, so that his cheeks appeared rouged.

"Submit," said Kael, grinning.

"Want to throw me in the thorn-bush, devil-brother?"

"I like it better when *you* win, actually."

"Oh no. Today... I'm the girl and you're the man, Kael. How you blush! Haven't you ever done it?"

"Lots of times. Even to Val, once! But..."

"Very few men have ever taken me that way. I'd offer it freely, but usually find some trick to weasel out. With the Mad Poet I discovered I actually liked it — but he had other tastes, and only rarely asked for Dragon's Tail. It seems to me a special pleasure, for real lovers only."

"Let's take a bath first, then."

THE CAMP THEY'D SET UP consisted of a rough tent or pavilion, made all of red and orange blankets hung every-which-way from overhanging boughs, unroofed, but floored with more red cloth. Already the tent was a mess of clothes and weapons, dirty plates and unfolded sheets. Give them a week and they'd turn it into a Chromatic nomad's rubbish-strewn kaleidoscope of gypsy-litter.

In fact it seemed to peeping Ravinan that these two must already have paid a begging visit to Poron's "shop", for somehow they had acquired a pair of antique nomad's robes, and draped them over their naked shoulders. Poron must have at least two samples of every boy's-costume on Qamar, marvelled Ravinan. The desert robes had floor-trailing sleeves and opened down the front with a hundred buttons of pink crystal. The fabric was a marbled miasma of desert-mirage-pure chromaticism, an eye-twisting dazzle that perfectly matched Dragon's chameleonic tattoo; and turned Kael into a savage-looking handsome warrior-boy of the Wastes as well. Into their dripping locks they'd woven crowns of red roses, and Kael wore slippers of crimson velvet

with a rose stuck in each. But all the fabric and blossoms failed to out-dazzle his hair.

Kael was polishing his ruby-hilted sword. Dragon slowly prepared a pipe of vhang (for as certain devotees of the Mad Green God attest, it enhances by infinite degrees the pleasures of passive anal intercourse — and he intended to enjoy this deflowering to the hilt).

“What a strange hilt your toy sewing-needle has, Daemon. It looks rather like your...”

“It’s Val’s jest, I suppose. At Perpetual Benefice they don’t call my thing a sand-lizard, but a red rooster. So when he saw this fighting-cock-and-ruby hilt, he thought of me.”

“I prefer your lizard,” said the nomad, puffing like a shaman on his opal pipe.

“Let me try some,” Kael demanded.

“It’s only for grown-ups.”

“Well, if I’m grown-up enough to be your man, why can’t I do this as well?” Kael pointed the tip of his swordlet (the one of steel, that is) at Dragon’s tattoo. “Hand it over, Chief.”

The pipe made Kael cough. After one puff of Sorolon’s special pastille, he began to giggle, already kite-high*. The two boys gazed deep and close into each other’s eyes; their giggles subsided; they tried to outstare each other — or crawl into each other’s hearts on beams of sight.

For a long several minutes they stared, unmoving. Suddenly Dragon had to blink, and Kael *attacked*, as if to strangle him... and kissed him so fiercely the whole tent billowed and shook with their tumbling bodies.

They rolled out of their robes, red rose petals flying here and there, and wrestled to a clinch. Kael lay on Dragon’s belly, bit ; the gold rings in his nipples till the teats stretched, and then licked every visible line of the tattoo, biting and sticking his tongue in the beast’s

*“Kite-high” (*gnesfaeth*) a term that refers to the vhang-trances of certain Chromatic shamans, who send their souls up the strings of huge high-flying kites on windy journeys to other Dimensions.

right eye (which was Dragon's belly-button). He kissed his way by stages down the tattoo, over the stiffened and disproportionate genitalia, and thrust his head urgently between Dragon's thighs.

The nomad boy stuffed pillows under his own hips, so that the redhead could comfortably tongue-lap and ream his anus (curiously tiny, no more than an asterisk-dot). Dragon rolled over on his stomach for a while as well, so that Kael could see the dragon's bifurcated tail and writhing coils while he mouthed slender buttocks and thrust his slurping tongue into the tiny crack. "Turn over again." Kael panted. "I want to be able to take you and kiss you at the same time."

Acrobatic-agile Dragon embraced his red Daemon with legs and arms and tongue, and prepared to receive the sand-lizard in his innards.

"Ouch!"

"What's the matter?"

"It doesn't fit right at *all*. Ow! Oh... this never happened before. You freak, you're killing me!"

Kael laughed. "Shall I take it out?"

"No! Rape me."

So... with Dragon screaming loud enough to wake any last sleeping inhabitant of all the Garden — half faking his agony for Kael's amusement, but genuinely pained by the misshapen rod — the redhead rammed as viciously as he could into the nomad's posterior, kissing him at every downthrust, gasping for breath, then stabbing again. All the while he frigged his victim's bone, which seemed only to swell and leap with joy despite Dragon's theatrical moaning and pleading.

AT LAST RAVINAN RELEASED his flow of jac, trying not to cry out as he did so (not that those two would hear him!). Inside the tent Dragon's milk was spilt all over Dragon's tattoo; Kael was eating it, and rubbing his own half-stiff still-slick cock; and Dragon was pretending to weep with humiliated pain, obviously happy as a lord.

Ravi had sprayed all over one flap of their tent. I wonder if my jissom is invisible too, he thought. But the warriors were in no condition to notice mysterious stains on their pavilion wall. In a mess of broken roses and kaleidoscopic color, they embraced and called

each other such silly names that Ravinan nearly laughed out loud, and had to run away.

THE GARDEN ARRANGED THAT VALAMIEL wake before Jethael and thus find time to arrange what the monk considered a suitable bower for love while on-route to wherever they might be going (not that he cared a whit if the journey ever ended!) and prepare food and lay out clothing for the arousal of his prince. From the trees he suspended a scalloped half-tent of pale blue silk which he'd filched from Sorolon. Beneath it he spread out pillows and sheets of white linen and plum embroidered velvet. Every comfort he could imagine he arranged on a table of ebony, like a devoted valet awaiting his master's breakfast bell.

When Jethael had bathed and dried himself, he chose to wear his firesilk slippers and scarf of firesilk, which he tied round his waist and groin like a diaper of corruscading light. Then, frowning, he kicked off slippers and tore off sash and announced, "Completely naked!"

So naked he ate his butter-and-fruit compote and drank a pitcher of milk. And the monk asked, "Which Jethael are you today? Sorcerer, Transformationist, Avatar-of-Jeth, dancer, warrior or little boy?"

"Today is like a holiday, don't you think? I'd rather not be anything grand. But not just a little boy, either."

Valamiel reflected that although Jethi had not changed physically in the slightest he somehow had about him a new more mature air of self-command. Still innocent? Yes, but... more complete, more totally *himself*. Still growing? Of course, but... already ten times more alive than anyone else in the world. A child? Not quite... something else... a human boy on the first day of his perfect flowering of beauty? Yes, Jethael's *beauty* had grown.

And also: a certain part of his anatomy had grown quite rapidly — pale white and blue-veined, tipped with a complexity of violet-brown translucent flesh — between his slender legs. "Val, we haven't really totally made love since that last time in the Garden. Today I feel something telling me that we're free to do whatever crazy thing you like — or I like. I'll be your king-in-bed all day today, and we'll never stop till sundown. All right?"

... So they fell into the bower and wrestled and laughed, kissed and aroused each other for an hour, till Valamiel slipped over into the

madness which allowed him to ask any pleasure of Jethael, and know that it would be granted with trembling and eager generosity.

At this opportune moment Ravinan poked his invisible head through the bushes and prepared for his role as spectator of these new mysteries. Val and Jethi never failed him. In some ways, he thought, they're the biggest lunatics of us all.

THE MAD MONK LOOKED UP from his prostrate position in the sheets and beheld his angel from a new perspective. Jethael's feet stood firmly on the ground, one at either side of Valamiel's unpillowed head. The powdery-pale body rose above him, standing straight as a miniature colossus on its island, child-phallus jutting erect far above. Even father: soft smiling eyes and impish grin, five feet from Valamiel's adoring upward gaze. The boy appeared a king indeed from this groundling view... "the master of my every horizon," Val said.

Gracefully the boy now bent his knees and lowered his body in a dancer's pose: torso upright, hands on hips, knees pointed out and slowly bending, lowering the naked thighs ever closer toward Valamiel's impatient passivity. At last, with a bit of help from the monk's shaky fingers, the entire of Jethi's genitalia disappeared into the open waiting jaws. Still' the boy lowered himself, till he settled the entire weight of his body, centered down on Val's face, and wriggled himself to fit his penis neatly into the man's larynx and lodge his testicles between teeth and undertongue. And then, sighing with delight, he rested.

Then, slowly and carefully, he began to turn his entire body around (penis grinding into its socket), till he looked down the length of Val's body. Delicate ankles pressed against the man's hot ears.

Slowly as dancing, the boy lifted himself till his cock sprang free of the monk's lips. Then even more slowly he slid forward and pressed his buttocks down, prying them open with his own hands so that Val could suck and lick the rectum; then he lowered all his weight again, till he felt the man's teeth press against his sphincter-ring.

Valamiel had asked him to sit entirely on top, and not worry about hurting. "You're so light I could lift you on my tongue."

So Jethael daintily raised one foot (balancing himself now with fingertips on the ground) and slid it onto Val's belly. Then... slowly

lifting himself on both hands, he raised the other foot and settled its heel against the monk's rigid erection. Incrementally he eased up on his hands till only his fingertips connected him to earth. One at a time he clutched Val's shoulders with his hands. He was now entirely seated — enthroned — on human flesh.

Ravinan watched in awe. Neither of them moved for what seemed five minutes (although Jethi quivered with pleasure as a tongue dug into his intestine). Val's hands groped and found the child's wet groin. Jethi's feet splayed and kicked and pedabated the man's cock with soft pink toes.

In this precarious position Jethi climaxed... and tumbled over backwards, jerking and crying from his perch, onto the sheets and pillows.

"If a horse throws you, get back on," said the smiling swollen-lipped monk.

Gasping for breath, Jethael re-mounted. This time he sat down on the man's groin, facing him. Resting his back against Val's upraised knees, and straddling the adult erection with his thighs, he allowed the monk to seize both his ankles at once and lift them into the air. Jethael's weight (and wet thighs and buttocks) now pressed down onto the man's genitals with the full weight of the boyish body.

Val propped his head up on a pillow and began to kiss, bite, toe-suck, ankle-lick and otherwise half-devour and orally devote himself to Jethi's feet, the beauty and smallness of which cannot be sufficiently praised. However much the boy squirmed with ticklish delight, so much did the scrivener moan with a joy that only an entire landscape could understand and enjoy, as it felt the punishing weight and tasted the toes of such an exquisite colossus.

At this very moment Dragon and Kael, nomad robes open on sunny (slightly sticky) nakedness, burst into the clearing, bowed politely, giggled and jumped into bed with Val and Jethi.

DRAGON (WITH A NOMAD'S FASCINATION for kinship) discovered that the four of them were related by "blood", or mystic brotherhood of some sort. "And just to cement the clanhood," said Valamiel, "I'll kiss Kael's knee — since it offers such a splendid opportunity to deepen our ties. Your entire body seems bruised, red rooster. I dare not ask by what hand..." (True to his fears, he found

himself unable to resist an open bleeding cut when offered with such smiling wincing amusement as Kael displayed).

“I have presents for you three: enough dragon’s teeth to make three shaman’s necklaces. Genuine, I might add.” He spilled them, evil pointed fangs, upon the sheet.

Dragon, needless to say, appreciated the gift most of all. “And I haven’t thanked you for my other present, the chieftain’s pipe.”

“If not for your lucky advice, Zaek and I would no doubt have been eaten by these,” said Val — as if the whole affair had passed a year ago, rather than only a few days. “Then of course... well, we *all* owe each other our lives, not to speak of our love.”

“Val and I,” explained Jethael, “love Kael in a very special way. And today is a love-holiday. So please — both of you — stay with us and play.”

Dragon kissed Jethi, who blushed (and stiffened) with pleasure. Then he kissed Val, who reacted in very much the same way. “Did anyone ever tell you you’re handsome, Val?” he asked, fluttering his mock-seductive dark eyelashes.

The monk laughed. “Never. Jethael says I’m ‘beautiful’ — but that’s because I reflect a bit of his own true beauty back at him when he looks at me. Actually I’m quite homely.”

“But you love boys, more than anyone I’ve ever met, I think. You love us so much you seem handsome to us.”

“Wise Dragon. Very flattering.”

“This is *not* the Water Fly Café,” said the nomad boy with a frown.

“I believe you — oddly enough — and promise to revise the inner image of myself to better express your perception of it.”

“You talk like someone I used to know: a Mad Poet. I never understood him either.”

“Val is the Mad Monk,” Jethi laughed. “We’re all mad here in this Garden” — the radiant boy pulled Dragon and Kael each by one hand “and free to do what we like!” — and they fell four together in the sheets, laughing and kissing (gently, at Jethael’s slow rhythm rather than with the fiery madness of the Red pavilion) while unseen blond Ravinan watched, fully alert and erect, from behind a nearby bush.

JETHAEL PERCHED AGAIN on the landscape of Val's stomach, legs open wide, while Dragon suckled his pale cock. The nomad boy played with the monk's penis simultaneously. Then Kael took over Dragon's role, while Dragon let the man suck and blow his enormous adolescence. "Contemplating your tattoo and trying to fit this pizzle down my throat: an aesthetic delight of unique dimensions." Clearly the scrivener was transported into a bliss indistinguishable from dementia. "I only wish," he added, "that I could swallow it whole."

Between Kael's biting lips the sensitive Jethael climaxed again, violently dislodging them all from position and tumbling on top of all three. In the midst of their tight and caressing embrace he snuggled close to Val and whispered something in his ear. The monk listened, smiled and spoke:

"Dragon, since I cannot take you completely in my mouth (even if you were flaccid!) and since I want you to ravish me as totally as possible, and since Jethi wants us all to spend ourselves at once... I beg you..."

"You want to play the Jigsaw Game?" asked the former boy-slavewhore, "Would you like me as *jig* or as *saw*?" he laughed.

A strange arrangement, thought spying Ravinan: Kael knelt doggy-fashion on the grass. Jethael inserted his little twig in the redhead's big brown pucker. The monk knelt behind Jethi and slowly slid his turgid bolt between the child's delicate white buttocks.

"It looks too big," said Dragon. "Doesn't it hurt you, angel?" But Jethi shook his head, grinning at the endearment.

"Well, I'm going to hurt Val, I promise you."

Dragon spat on his hand. He maneuvered himself into position, weapon on guard.

But Dragon didn't hurt. Or rather, all pain was transmuted: the monk felt himself filled as totally as he could ever be, as if his *inner* had been created expressly to contain Dragon's outermost adornment.

"Have you ever been fucked this hard before?"

The rare usage of a word only a courtesan could know threw the monk into poetic (as well as sodomitic) transports of sheer bliss. "Fucked" by a fourteen-year-old lunatic (with more than an inch for every two years)... and jammed into his own sweet catamite, Jethi's ass the smallest and sweetest in creation... and Jethael himself wedged between the man's penis and Kael's churning rectum...

“Dragon... spit all three of us like roasting birds... blind me from behind with your prick... prong me and plant me, dig into me and delve deeper, seed me with dragon’s fire and sweet venom... Jethael, my god!...”

... and thus muse-ridden, the poet-monk of boy-buggery felt himself cracked and split and inundated...

... in the same instant that Jethi’s tender bowels convulsed around his strangled manhood...

... and the human chain thrust forward as a single eight-legged entity, once, twice, thrice: noisy as a lair of angry lynxes... poised, utterly rigid...

... and collapsed like a jigsaw puzzle thrown by a petulant child to the floor, every piece slipping out of every sperm-wet socket, falling in an unreadable random heap of disconnected anatomy...

But:

“It’s not fair!” Kael complained. “I didn’t shoot *my* jac.” And like a berserker he pounced upon the monk, found the man’s semengushing anus. Panting and laughing and scarlet in the face, he raped Valamiel in ten thrusts and spent himself into that bruised and swampy hole, ululating like a desert daemon.

RAVINAN’S INVISIBLE MILK dribbled between his fingers. He sat in the grass behind a rose-bush and rubbed his slick belly, trying to catch his breath.

ZAEEK’S CAMP WAS THE FIRST to have been established in the Garden, but already it seemed the most primitive. Adult and boy, they preferred it thus, for the Chaote clans make something of a cult of Nature untouched by city-man’s clutter. A small fire burned on a bed of crushed onyx. A few weapons, bowls and tools and neatly folded bedrolls. Zaek and Xiri had already shaken off the complexities of Suvyamara and were half-way to Thuren. Soon they’d be lost on purpose amongst the wild green peaks, standing-stones and pines, rushing streams and unscalable valley walls, the sudden mists and lightning-storms, the untamed deer and savage bears, the lyrebirds and hawks of the north.

For Zaek too, this morning, the past was passed. A few lingering aches and scratches... those were of no import. The *furor amoris* had

driven him near madness, and to feats of absurd strength, but he wished to cling to none of these accidents. Nor did he refuse to think of them. He let them be.

Even the unbearable pain and nostalgia he'd felt the first time he'd seen Xiri dance had become for him now a good memory, part of his total self. All that existed for him was the present — he cared nothing for future success, only for the *doing*. The future does not exist, therefore one cannot be attached to it. *Now* exists. And *Now* is Xiri. With the entire fabric of his being he attached his soul to the boy's soul, and watched him naked at his morning bath.

Both of them remained naked and dried themselves in the sun, for they agreed with Jethael that nudity best suited the Garden's environment — at least by day. Sensing the holiday mood that had gripped the whole morning (like Silk the kitten chasing its own tail), they gave themselves up to sheer boyishness, pursuing each other and laughing, catching each other and embracing, two forest-spirits, elder and younger brother.

They climbed to the top of a tree but still couldn't see over the Garden wall. "Climbing trees always makes me excited," said golden-haired handsome Xiri. And the bough waved as they kissed, swinging them in the air like human-shaped flowers.

RAVI NOTICED THEM SLIDING down the tree and decided to watch and follow these wonderful barbarians for a while. He scarcely knew them. How beautiful they were, though. Bigger than life, somehow. The blond spy pitied anyone who tried to separate those two again... or rather, he didn't pity them at all. Death to Chaeth! thought Ravi, quite overcome by the martial (yet sylvan) attraction of the Chaote lovers.

And lovers they were, without a doubt. No thought of battle distracted them now beneath their sunlit tree — unless it might be bed-battle, the war of sweet love. Their hairless bodies gleamed with the sweat of play and passion. They curled together in the double-fish design for a while, kissing each other's legs and genitals; then embraced again lip-to-lip, running fingers through each other's hair.

Thus were they entangled when Varonael and Silk out of nowhere walked up to them, Varo naked (but wearing his firesilk slippers) and the lynx-kitten unleashed (but wearing his viridine collar).

In the Garden, no one simply talked. They embraced, and then conversed while embracing. Zaek and Xiri gathered the witch-boy and his pet into their golden arms and greeted them with kisses, petting and stroking of fur and long black pig-tail. With frank and serious interest Varo touched their smooth groins and muscled thighs.

Xiri already knew of the imp's role in his rescue, but now Zaek explained it all over again, so that Varonael could bask in their admiration. The Chaote spoke at length of Varo's visits to him at Black Gate, with food and good cheer. "Without that I could never have survived the ghosts and goblins all night," the barbarian smiled.

"Of course you could have!" said Varo, blushing.

"But the one thing that helped most of all was that strange dream... Xiri! I suddenly remembered: the first thing you told me when I woke up: you also dreamed of making love with me once. When? What day?"

They tried to pin down the exact moment. It seemed to them they might have dreamed the same dream. Certain details matched: they both recalled, for example, that the scene took place at Water Fly Cafe.

"Varo, tell the truth: did you send the same dream to both of us at once?"

"Well... it might have happened that way. I'd only seen Xiri in my own dreams, not in waking-life. So I couldn't really reach him. But he was... I don't know... 'tuned to your resonance', Sorolon calls it."

"You mean," asked Xiri, "that you could be inside our minds while we sleep?"

"Not really. It's more complicated than that. I can do it if you let me, and if you're a good dreamer. Zaek trusts me, and he dreams very well. So I... influenced him. If you dreamt a true dream of Zaek, you must also have a touch of magic in you."

"More than a touch." said Zaek. "He dances as a Transformationist."

"Well, that explains it then," said Varo.

"Oh, of course," Xiri nodded ironically. "Now we understand completely!"

They were reclining on the grass in such a way that Zaek could slip Varo's tiny shoes off his feet; and kiss one foot, almost

reverently; and the imp pressed his other foot softly against Xiri's penis.

"Varo," the speculating dancing-boy wondered, "could you make us dream at the same time while we're awake and making love? I mean, so that we're *inside each other's heads*, me and Zaek, while we embrace?"

The witch-boy meditated for several moments. "I don't know. Never tried. Maybe. Sort of. But I'd have to, um, go inside you. You'd feel me there, along with each other. I can't describe it any better."

"Varo, you're a very strange boy," Xiri declared, bending to kiss the imp's cheek. "I feel like you're inside us already."

The small love-sorcerer made them lie down together, with Xiri resting on the man's body, face to face. Then Varo began to caress them.

(Silk rubbed up against them too, as if already aware of his duties as a familiar.)

While Varonael caressed (tiny soft fingers like snow), he chanted in an unknown daemon's tongue that sounded like the Garden's own lullaby. A soft green glow appeared around his head, and his eyes were those of the wisest of Eternal Children.

As he chanted the lovers opened themselves in complete trust, as if in the hands of a benevolent deity rather than a ten-year-old — and rather eccentric — boy.

They stared into one another's eyes, believing with barbaric simple-heartedness that they could love each other to the very depths of their souls, as well as bodies (which are one and the same, say the Chaote shamans). And so, believing they could, they did.

Zaek sat up and Xiri slid easily into position on his lap, poised for deepest penetration... and never once did their eyes part, even when they kissed.

Varo filled his hand with his own honeyed saliva, and salved the great glans of Zaek's erection. He helped the two meet, penis to anus, and caressed them (still chanting, crooning) as their bodies flowed easily together.

Atoms of consciousness mingled between the minds of Zaek and Xiri, and they could feel that Varo had let loose their soul-flow with his voice, his sweet smell, his enchanting presence, his butterfly-

fingers against their skin. The two were one, and the one was with them. Lover, Beloved, Love: all one.

And for half an hour it was so.

When Zaek and Xiri peaked on the wave of that unending tide where the universe never ceases to pour forth in an unending flow of orgasmic and continually-creative bliss, their oneness was perfected in such a way that henceforth for them all moments of love would find a way to that Source, always fresh and always perfect: that split-second which lasts forever because it has evaded Time altogether: victorious and all-conquering, Love triumphant in the agony of two bodies, two hearts joined by the Avatar of Varon, boygod of Love.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Varonael held Silk close to him and whispered in the kitten’s ear.

And although the Chronicle has more to tell, it can tell nothing more than this.

RAVI WAS SO SHAKEN by the aura of greatness that surrounded the three of them that, although he remained stiffer than bone, he forgot to touch himself. As Zaek and Xiri fell asleep together under Varo’s soothing hands the blond spy began to feel a tinge of melancholy. He’d witnessed the skies open, so to speak, and others taken up in glory. But he’d been left behind.

Varo picked up Silk and tiptoed out of the clearing. “Oh hello Ravi. Did you see that? Wasn’t it wonderful?”

“Yes, I... but wait! Can’t you see I’m invisible? I mean, how can you see me when I’m invisible!?”

“Oh! Sorry!”

And Varonael and Silk walked away.

But Silk and Varonael turned around and came back again. “You need to be touched now, Ravi. Me too,” said the imp. And he bounced into the blond spy’s soft lap (with its one very hard handle). “What a nice penis you have, all blond and creamy. May I drink your milk, Ravi?”

So Ravinan decided not to be invisible any longer. Silk wandered off after a dragonfly.

“Let me kiss yours at the same time,” Ravi pleaded. And before he closed his lips on that tiny delicacy he added, “I think you’re the nicest boy in the world.”

IN THIS FASHION, and in other ways, the morning and afternoon passed by — as if they lasted a hundred years — but also as if they lasted but a few minutes. For that is the nature of magical time (which has given rise to those legends of men who spend one night with the Paeraen and emerge to find a century vanished while they danced). After the warm day, desert-hot but shady-cool, there came like welcome news the rich gold desert light of approaching evening. A pink luminescence, the color of the inside of a child's thighs, suffused the unseen horizon. Those whom love had exhausted awoke refreshed.

Sorolon, after his one indulgence with the now-adoring Michchaeris, indulged himself in the further pleasure of planning a party. With the help of Poron's treasury and perfect taste, and the assistance of his two older nephews and the four "attendant angels" of Blue Rain Tower, he set about cooking and arranging and thinking and rushing about like a distracted host, dreaming up one delicacy after another and cursing at the hired help (who were all naked). Near the central fountain they laid out deep-textured carpets over the lawn and set up a charcoal brazier on the marble lip of the tank. Cushions and pillows, embroidered and brightly colored, now littered the carpet, and a table of cooked and still-uncooked food stood next to the brazier. Musical instruments were laid out along with jugs of dreamwine and pitchers of sherbet.

At last he deemed the preparations complete. As the sun sank he sent his friends to wash and dress and invite the other inhabitants of the Garden, "even the fireflies". Frowning and sure he'd forgotten *something*, he sorted through his luggage and waited for his guests to arrive.

PORON HAPPILY ACCOUTERED ANYONE who asked, a magician himself in his own chosen field of costume, and managed to find something to suit each individual boy. Anath's brown-on-copper and translucent white had been restored to pristine presentableness, and he followed the old dandy everywhere, a shy and decorative acolyte.

Ravinan found a perfect dancing-suit of powder-blue on pale egg-shell-blue watered silk, but it was made for a slightly smaller boy. The pantaloons fit skin-tight and revealed half his buttocks, and he was able to button only the top button of the vest. This accidental effect,

however, (said Poron) suited his rather voluptuous pubescent fairness to a high degree. “Take these sky-blue slippers sewn with turquoise, and this star-sapphire on a gold chain for your throat. Here are gold chains for ankles and wrists. Now comb that river of blondness and weave yourself a crown of violets.”

Michchaeris and Daevaen, he decided, should appear as larger and smaller versions of the same person. Dancing-suits of dark wine-purple-on-violet silk, with slippers to match. Necklaces of amethyst pendant teardrops. Yet more amethyst drops around arms, wrists, and ankles. Crowns of white roses for dark tousled hair. (“Don’t comb it — just tonight, I mean. It adds a charming savage touch,” Poron told them).

The old dandy sent Anath with a gift for Xiri. The exquisite envoy found the barbarians still in their camp. “Poron says he discovered these Thurenian clothes, and thought you’d like to have them.” A boy’s tunic in ancient style, pure white linen embroidered all over with a naive flower-pattern in many colors; open-throated, short-sleeved and very short; bound with a red chamois silver-coin-studded sash. A choke-necklace came with it, made of pure unfired gold nuggets, just as they were found (centuries ago) in some Thurenian streambed. Wearing Val’s gift — the Boy’s First Hunt Crown with its jasper flowers — Xiri was transformed into the image of a violet-eyed northern adolescent, dagger at his belt, the sylvan Prince of Springtime. “You must go barefoot in this costume... Poron says so,” Anath pronounced, and then scampered away in a flash of opal and moonstone and ivory-pale legs.

Poron himself made a trip to Blue Gate to offer Jethael a costume for the evening. “It’s the most amazing coincidence,” he wheezed. “I had to bring it at once. Look:” ... and Poron held up a dancing robe, ankle-length, trailing long sleeves, made of his own favorite ancient white-on-white silk with pearl buttons. On the back was embroidered in silver thread a stylized but still unmistakable *crow*, with eyes made of opals. “Extraordinary, no?”

“Poron, where the devil did you acquire all this stock of costumery and fetishes? All this while we’ve believed you poor as a Temple-cat!”

“Well, Valamiel, I *am*. One cannot eat clothes and jewels... and one certainly cannot *sell* them! Nearly every piece has been worn at

least once, either by me or one of my special friends. My sentiment forbids me to dispose of them, except as gifts. Now, Jethi, if I may advise you: this jaunty yet sensual robe will match well with firesilk, but if you chose to wear that most precious of fabrics, any jewelry would only mar the effect.”

“I’d really prefer to go naked and save the robe for when I do sorcery,” the boy responded, kissing the rouged and withered cheek.

“You’ll catch another chill,” Val protested. “It’s true that no clothes ever created can match your nakedness, for the gods are the only perfect tailors. But for tonight, adorn yourself as my king.”

Now, thought Poron, have I forgotten anyone? Perhaps Sorolon’s boys?

But Sorolon’s family maintained its own house style. His older nephews were dressed in forest-green silk tunics which opened down the front with buttons of jade. The boys had unbuttoned them all, to show off loincloths of jade-tinted brocade that matched their slippers, and large necklaces of emerald beads. Their hair was tied back with green scarves, and jade pendants hung from their ears. Varo, of course, wore firesilk and attached his lynx to himself with chain-and-collar. So Poron declared them all perfect, and went off to find the one he’d saved for last, because it would prove such a pleasure to dress him: Venyamin.

The nine-year-old’s mass of spun-gold curls and ringlets, his strange slanting eyes and golden skin, reminded the old man of amber. When he managed at last to catch the creature (conveniently already stripped to the giggling buff), he realized that this child — even unadorned — was perhaps the most exquisite of them all (except Jethael). If the children of the Paeraen could be seen, he thought, would they appear so? “Where are your people from, dear boy?”

“I’m an orphan. I never knew my family. Someone once said I look like the folk of the Vanish Isles.” (Which lay in countless numbers, scattered over the distant eastern horizon of Qamar, so distant and wild that Suvyamarans still drew maps that claimed “Here be Monsters”... the Vanish Isles... where the Paeraen had made their last stand against mankind before vanishing forever into myth...)

Poron wrapped the boy into a loincloth of thin russet velvet. Over this he drew a pair of pantaloons, flimsy, loose, high-waisted and short-legged, made of pale yellow-on-yellow pleated silk. The color of

the loincloth could be seen beneath this diaphanous stuff, and the curve of tiny buttocks. Next, Poron unearthed a suitably miniature vest and slippers, thin velvet in a strange palomino tint with amber buttons on both shoes and blouse. Around his neck, a choker of uncut amber beads. For the sun-colored curls, a coronet of unopened rosebuds, the palest of pale yellow. “Must you spoil the effect by dragging along that stuffed animal?”

“Oh, but if I don’t he’ll miss the party!”

For mischief, Venya doused himself and his floppy toy pet with scent, a complex blend of musks and wild blossoms, and so for the next three days went about smelling like a flowerbed after a thunder-shower.

THEIR BANQUET WAS SIMPLE, since their supplies must last them a week, at least. But the Garden’s abundance of fruits had served as well, roasted, boiled and combined in compotes, punches and sherbets, or stewed in sauces for cold meats and cocoon-cakes (wrapped in wine-soaked cloth to keep fresh). Bread and butter and cheeses in plenty, and some tiny smoked birds grilled over charcoal and served on fresh herbs. After their day of pleasurable exertion — so pleasant that some of them had forgotten lunch entirely — the Garden’s inhabitants ate with more-or-less silent and serious attentiveness, reverent as all Qamarrians at a well-laid table. Poron tucked large napkins around Anath and Venya’s necks, to preserve his finest creations from spillage and crumbs.

Valamiel and Jethi found Venyamin so wonderful to look at (and smell) they made him sit with them, fed him with their fingers and caressed him.

When all had filled themselves (even Varonael), Sorolon arose in his best country-squire after-banquet manner and said, “Tonight is for celebration, not serious talk. I know some of you must still have questions to ask about recent events, or speeches of praise to deliver for the braveness and love we have all witnessed. I myself, of course; am overflowing with theories to explain almost everything. But we shall be here for a week, and another night will serve for a formal meeting — and lecture by me, which will be compulsory for all!

“Tonight however I propose that we combine business and pleasure in a way most agreeable to our tastes. You see, we wish to

travel to Far Thuren. The Garden does not ‘move’, but the intra-Dimensional hyperplanar coordinates... well, in brief, we wish to move the Garden to Thuren... in effect. To accomplish this we must expend some energy. Magical energy.

“I suppose that Jethael and Varonael and I could simply sit down with the Crowstone for a few hours and work up an appropriate Spell. But that seems to me too much like work: a fisherman’s seaside holiday! I propose another method: music and dance. The Garden was created for these arts as well as for love. And the energies of these arts can be harnessed to our Will.

“Nothing special need be done; all may dance and sing as they like. However, I suggest the following loose arrangement, with your permission. My three nephews excel at music, and so I believe does Dragon. Poron must chant, of course, and direct the music. Jethael and Xiri should begin the dance, and then the Blue Rain boys might join them. As for Zaek, Valamiel and myself, we shall behold your creations, and supply the audition and appreciation of your grace... a most necessary and important rôle.”

THE CEREMONY OF AUDITION took form spontaneously. Dragon began at once to strum upon the zerbai that very same tune which had been played at the Water Fly Cafe one night long ago, while a chance-met monk and barbarian watched a slaveboy dance: an old air of Far Thuren, lilting and sensual. Xiri leapt to his feet at once, dancing as he had danced that night, proud, simple, charismatically erotic, innocently seductive. In his northern costume and Hunt Crown he seemed now more pure (almost virginal), like a boy in his first love, his first hunt of the heart. Nostalgia vanished from his face, and the wild magic of the Chaote shamans took its place: graceful, free and joyous.

Jethael danced to this tune as well, in the slower cooler Suvyamaran style at first, but then picking up Xiri’s almost boisterous spirit of improvisation. Soon the two began to dance in each other’s embrace, spinning each other and laughing, trying to leap higher and spin faster... At one point Xiri caught the smaller boy in his arms and swooped him off his feet, aloft, into the air; and Jethael reached with his outspread arms into the starry sky, as if to launch himself in flight.

Varonael began to play the tune they now called “Jethael’s Pavanne”, the musical Key to the Garden. A simple melody (once its odd dissonances were mastered). Poron and the other musicians were soon adding their lines of improvised harmony and melisma to Varo’s reed piping. Now Jethi led Xiri in the dance, as if seducing him into the sinuous complexities and androgynous posturings of the Suvyamaran manner.

But they danced for happiness, not magic. They brushed against each other softly while they moved, smiling in each other’s eyes, and soon the dance seemed to take on a new hybrid style of its own, Suvyamaran began to meld with Thurenian. Poron whispered excitedly to Valamiel: “It begins already! The seeds of a whole new style of Transformation!”

The duettists needed to pause for breath. In their place Kael leapt up, strutted to the floor in his Chromatic robe, which he took off, whirled around his head and tossed into the air. He wore his favorite scarlet silk dancing-suit and slippers, red roses in his lion-maned headpiece, and carried his ruby-cock short sword in his hand. At once, Dragon began to play a dance of the desert nomads in the nasal repetitious off-beat aggressive modal and monotonous style favored by the clans of the Waste.

Kael jumped, kicked, slid, tossed his sword spinning in the air and caught it, ululated wildly: a redhead’s dance of battle and crazy love.

“Did Dragon teach him Chromatic folk-dancing?” asked Val.

“He’s making it up as he goes along,” Poron guessed. “Another marriage of cultures, it would seem. How virile, yet how erotic. Nothing quite so charming as a pretty boy with the heart of a fighting-cock, boastful, head crammed with romantic fantasy, and scabs on his knees: a scarlet bantam. What must he be like in bed?”

“Just like that,” Val answered, gazing at the cavorting flushed wild-rose-scattering dancer’s long coltish legs and flashing feet.

Now the other dancing-boys could no longer bear to sit still. Led by Ravinan, all of them jumped up — Michchi and Daevaen, Anath and Venyamin. Jethael and Xiri too joined in again, and circled Kael in a round dance, till all hands were linked. Kael whirled one way, the laughing children the opposite way, till the heads of the audience were spinning like errant Moons.

Now Kael joined the circle, puffing and grinning, and the children shouted for Jethi and Xiri to take the center places. The musicians struck up a softer tune now, an old Suvyamaran lul-labye set to a three-beat dancing measure, sweet and exciting.

Dripping with sweat and smiling ecstatically, Jethael and Xiri slowly (still dancing) stripped off their soaked garments and tossed them playfully to Val and Zaek.

Naked now, they linked arms.

The circle of children opened into an arc, so that a chorus of slow-dancing boys stood behind them, facing the audience and musicians.

Poron softly sang the words to the old song, as the minstrels counterpoised their own sensual rhythm.

*My heart is yours
My only child
Asleep or awake.
In dream
You hold me
By invisible cords:
A cat's-cradle of love.
Waking, you hold me
With arms much stronger
Than any story
Or ancient tale.*

Slow and close, the two dancing princes gazed at each other and their penises stirred and stiffened. They embraced as they danced.

Varo, now naked as well, leapt to his feet still piping and skipped around them in eccentric orbit, Silk chasing his bare feet.

But the effect of this scene on the three lovers — Zaek, Valamiel and Sorolon — was not simply desire and love and worship of the beauty they beheld. Instead they wept, all three, and grasped one another by the hand... and wept.

LATER, WHEN ALL OF THEM had tumbled into a single great heap of boys and men upon the carpets and pillows, each lover embracing his beloved (and as many more sweet children as possible), gazing up at the stars, Sorolon said:

“The Garden is moving now (if I can put it so crudely). We’re on our way. You see, the geometry of infinitely curved space...”
But Varo stopped him with a kiss.

Appendix

Translator's Terminal Word And Brief History Of Qamar

ACCUTE SCHOLARS OF QAMARIAN CULTURE (if any such beside myself exist in this Galactic Sector) will by now long since have realized that *Crowstone* is a translation — a “free version” to be more exact — of *The Chronicles of Valamiel the Scrivener* (1). The language of the text is a dialect of Algolian, the *lingua franca* of the Gas Giant System, already widely in use in the days of the Suvyamaran Empire; but the style is archaic and the monk's antiquarian predilections led him to pepper his memoirs with rare words in older Qamarian dialects — to such an extent that even a present-day inhabitant of that Moon needs a dictionary to read and enjoy the CVS.

Before attempting to describe the means whereby this obscure text was rendered into Galactic Standard it will be necessary to offer

(1) Hereafter referred to as CVS. MS Col. XXVI R 5320, Suvyamaran Lib. of Viridine Island; MS Q542, ff. 40-572-741, Old Qamar City Hist. Arch. The text exists in numerous manuscripts but has never been edited or published. The above-mentioned most complete redactions stem from a hypothetical lost lithographed edition, which was in itself reputed to be incomplete, and which is last listed as extant in Vorramin's magisterial *Bibliography of the Anarch Dynasties*, a treasury of forgotten and possibly apocryphal titles reputedly burnt in the destruction of Zalmox Keep, A.Q.10491.

offer a few glimpses into the topography and history of Qamar; for such is the extent of the human Oikumene in this age that few of my readers will have heard of Algol, and perhaps none at all will recognize the name of its fairest Moon.

A twenty-five volume *Universal Travel Guide* published on my own home world four years ago contains no separate listing for Qamar. The entry on Algol reads:

A star (of such-and-such coordinates, type and size) with but one major satellite, a Gas Giant of singular strangeness. Physicists have yet to explain why the Giant is nearly invisible to the naked eye, or how it distributes a breathable atmosphere around itself to such an unimaginable extent. The Giant is circled and surrounded in turn by a roughly uniplanar Ring of Moons, said to number one hundred and eight (plus innumerable asteroid-sized fragments), of which seventy-two are or have been inhabited. The rotations of the individual Moons give them normal gravities and a denser atmosphere than the empty space between them. But this "empty space" is by no means a vacuum: storms of wind rage in the gulf or "Ring" between Moons, and make possible the unique multi-lunar civilization of Algol.

In ancient times anagravitite was discovered to exist naturally in the Algol system. Crude lighter-than-air wind-powered ships were constructed and used to travel the Ring between Moons. By this method, circumnavigation of the Gas Giant might well consume some twenty or thirty years of uninterrupted travel fraught with unspeakable danger. Each Moon therefore developed its own culture in relative isolation, but trade and even war between the Moons was known as long ago as 3000 B.A. (Archeological evidence cannot support the Algolian mythical chronology which claims a much earlier date.)

Algol fell to the Asterium early in the fourth century of the Rediscovery but gained no economic advantage from anagravitite, since an industrial synthesis of that valuable substance proved relatively simple. Today only historians of science remember that Algol contributed this boon to humankind.

During the Asterium the Moons of Algol constituted a remote colonial outpost of little importance, but the struggle against the Cosmocrats never ceased, springing up on one Moon as soon as it

was repressed on another. Algol was one of the first systems to adopt the cause of the Oikumene, and the revolutionary period saw increasingly bitter fighting in the whole sector until the fall of Cygnus III in 720 A. A.

Aside from pleasant landscapes and quaint pre-Rediscovery customs and remains, Algol offers little to interest the tourist save its night sky, which is certainly worth a visit for star-gazers. Perhaps nowhere else in the universe can one see the heavens lit by thirty or forty Moons at a time. Conditions are still primitive on many of the Moons, however, and decidedly dangerous on others. (One Star)

There follow directions on how to journey from Cygnus to Algol, a dismally complex and costly operation, and a short bibliography of (largely useless) references. Anyone who has actually visited Algol will find this entry laughable, and anyone who knows Qamar will sigh with relief that the Universal Guide has overlooked it, lest tourists descend in droves and spoil this secret refuge.

A history of the entire Ring lies beyond the scope of this afterword (2). Suffice it to say that Algol is one of the several thousand worlds known to man which claim the origin of homo sapiens. In fact seven of the Moons (excluding Qamar) claim to have given rise to the human species. Nowhere in Algolian myth does any hint of an extra-systemic origin of life appear. Thus Algol fails to throw any light on the vexing mystery of the diaspora of Man, known since Rediscovery to include a myriad worlds.

Qamar does not claim to be a birth-place of Man. According to its myth, the Moons were once inhabited by non-human sapiens (the “Paeraen” of CVS). Man himself appeared on Qamar from another Dimension, not from another planet. The first humans were all demigods, a panoply of archetypal figures familiar to any student of comparative culture: sorcerers, tricksters, warriors, culture heroes and heroines, prophets and the like.

(2) Readers unfamiliar with Algolian are referred to Renshaw’s *Rise of the Oikumene*, which has an excellent chapter on Algol and the rôle of Qamar in resistance against the Asterium; but earlier periods remain as yet unstudied by non-Algolian historians, aside from a maddeningly pointless entry in *Ency. Gal.*, Vol. 1/24 (fourteenth edition).

“Archaeological evidence” to the contrary notwithstanding, the Algolians themselves believe anagravitite to have been used for inter-lunar travel as long ago as 10,000 years before the Rediscovery. On Qamar, the Age of the Ring put an end to the “dreamtime” of prehistory, and the Qamarian calendar dates the present year as 11412 A.Q. (3).

Civilization arose with agonizing slowness on Qamar to replace the hunting-gathering era of prehistory. Towns appeared at first largely in the rich flat western alluvial plains of the Moon’s single enormous continent. Between the River Qamar itself and the River Atryx numerous town-states grew up. These agriculturist communities pushed the hunters into the northern hills of Thuren, and south to the valley and delta of the Oryx, where another civilization began to take shape. Difficult as it may be to believe, these “primitive” cultures were already trading by airship with nearby sectors of the Ring.

By the time Qamarian historians began to write of their world (about 7000 A.Q.), it was widely but sparsely populated. Old Qamar City on the Western coast claimed the largest population and greatest prestige, and began to enlarge its power into the Astryxian plains. Suvyamara followed a similar course in the mid-south. Across the Chromatic Wastes (a refuge of nomadic tribes even then), yet another civilization grew around the exquisite inland sea and lakes of Anyaen, with hegemony stretching south into the mountainous Peninsula of Gnaeth Vor. Even in the distant islands of the south dark tribes were said to seek pearls; even in the Hyperalbine Waste to the far north, men had long since penetrated (and forgotten they’d ever lived elsewhere but in eternal ice); and in the lost Vanish Isles, which stretch endlessly over the eastern horizon, a few strange and even monstrous outposts of humanity were known to survive.

Qamar is, by Algolian standards, remote and relatively poor in minerals or other valuable resources. Except for one brief war with the Vellhorn Empire, Qamar was never invaded by any other Moon.

(3) Equivalent to 788 After the Asterium and 66 of the Oikumene. (A.Q. stands for “after the founding of Old Qamar City”. B.A. and A.A. mean “before and after the Asterium (or Rediscovery)”. A.O. means “after the founding of the Oikumene”).

The traditional date for the construction of the Viridine Temple in Suvyamara is 9910 A.Q. The hegemony of the delta grew slowly into an empire of sorts, with tribute-paying client-states as far away as Chaeth to the north-east and Phoro to the west.

By 10800 A.Q., Suvyamara had long since passed its prime as a true power, and held onto its sovereignty by tradition rather than real force. The delta was far less thickly populated than it had been even a century before, and the cult of the sea-goddess Suvyamara no longer drew pilgrims in vast droves from as far away as Old Qamar. According to his own reckoning, the scrivening Maervaeinite monk Valamiel of Saendeb arrived in Suvyamara from somewhere else in the Ring in 10810, the year in which *Crowstone* takes place.

THE CVS IS WRITTEN IN AN arcane, poetic and purposefully difficult — one might say totally disorganized — fashion. Large portions of it are missing altogether, and much of the rest is presented in a style that may be called (on any world where certain historical-cultural conditions prevail) “medieval”. A mere scholarly translation of the text might have proved more interesting to the learned few than the present free adaptation; but the sheer tortuousness of Valamiel’s style would preclude a wider audience (despite the manuscript’s attraction as a pornographic gem). Therefore, making use of as much of the CVS as proved amenable and practical, and fleshing out lacunae with genuine scholarship wherever possible, I have attempted to present the Mad Monk as he himself would no doubt have chosen to be remembered in our distant age: as the hero of a romance.

The reader will at once demand to know if the actual and historical Valamiel himself claimed to have entered a magical Garden, or been involved in sorcerous affairs so totally incredible as the duel for the Crowstone. The answer is yes: not only have I taken all sorcerous elements from the CVS, I have in fact omitted a number of miracles, coincidences, prophecies and other occult bric-a-brac which would strain the modern reader’s patience — even if *Crowstone* be thought of as mere fantasy or pure romance.

Chromatic dragons are real, and in recent years have been exhibited on Qamar in travelling zoos. I have seen one with my own eyes, though no more than a fourth the size of the Guardian of the

Viridine Treasury. But what of the Garden, the Stone, the Transformations, the whole world of magic Valamiel describes?

Some centuries ago, despite the existence of (in effect) faster-than-light interstellar travel, many scientists would have claimed that anagravitite was fairy-tale poppy-cock. Now that everyone knows it exists, it can be “explained”. I would not dare to suggest any personal experience of the existence of sorcery on Qamar, lest I be called to produce evidence. But I will say that yesterday’s alchemical transmutations are sometimes today’s hydrogen-ion-transceivers or tachyon-gates. As Renshaw put it in *Rise of the Oikumene* (p. 307):

The black mountains, deserts and snowy wastes of Qamar were reputed to be the haunt of sorcerers, able to perform such miracles as calling down chaosawks from inter-lunar space to attack their enemies. Naturally the Cosmocrats of the Asterium refused to accept the existence of any spiritual or scientific force unknown to them, and persecuted all so-called magicians as heretics.

How then are we to explain the destruction of a Class IV Asterian battleship by precisely such a 'legendary beast', not far from the Keep of Far Thuren, witnessed and attested by Asterian survivors, during the first years of the struggle on Qamar? Coincidence?

Asterian colonial records on Qamar contain references to 'psychic plagues' and outbreaks of 'bad dreams' which afflicted missionary and administrative personnel in remote regions of Qamar. Rumor attributed these weird tactics to rebellious sorcerers and shamans. Who can say? Whatever the truth of the matter, the Asterium clearly never managed to control the whole Moon, except on paper. Apparently the Cosmocrats simply dared not set foot outside their centers of power in Old Qamar City and Port Vor. Why not?

Renshaw offers no answer. “Remember,” he concludes, “the year is 489 A. A., not ten thousand years ago. Qamar is still a very strange place, and personally I have no opinion at all...” (p. 309).

I bow to superior scholarship. I also offer no opinions about Qamarian sorcery.

The reader will again no doubt wish to know if the CVS constitutes my sole source for what must be called the pornographic sections of *Crowstone*. Again, the answer is yes. Valamiel in real life

was every bit as salacious and boy-mad as the hero of this romance. He delighted in cataloguing the acts of love he most enjoyed, showing a distinctly non-Qamarian boastfulness about his own peculiar tastes. Presumably his Maervaeenite background and subsequent heresy left him with a desire to be shocking. He also fills the pages of *CVS* with long love poems, in which all the children mentioned in *Crowstone* are praised at great and elegant length and their sexual adventures immortalized. Once again, although some readers might have preferred otherwise, I have actually *deleted* and ignored some of the riper passages of *CVS*, lest the present work be seen as merely an excuse for “solitary vice.”

Nevertheless, the sexual content of the work (even in the original) seems to me not only perfectly harmless but also enchanting. “Thank Chaos,” the thousand thousand worlds of mankind no longer stifle their humanity under the puritanical Gnostic Dualism of the Asterium. The yoke of cosmic dread has at last been flung off, and we are free to breathe the air of existence again. Less than a century ago the author (and publisher) of this work might have been hunted down by Cosmocratic Death-troopers and forcibly brain-wiped. In this historical context, the *CVS* can be seen as a document of great psychological and revolutionary force, despite its “decadence” — nay, because of its eroticism. Valamiel knew almost nothing of the shame which has ruled us for seven centuries, and his Qamarian friends knew even less. His love affairs are all “pro-life”, if I may coin a phrase, and he makes it more than clear that love is for him the highest human value, the best “proof” of the oneness of being. His tirades against slavery and usury sound fresh to those of us who can still remember the forced levies and MetaBanks of the Asterium. Valamiel was a rogue and an invert, a thief and a ne’er-do-well. But he seems to have understood the nature of Joy, a thing only recently re-discovered by the Oikumene.

Indeed, I first tracked down the *CVS* not for its erotic content, but to discover more of the origins of the strange Anarch Dynasties, which played so vital a role in Qamarian history between the decline of Old Suvyamara and Old Qamar City, and the Rediscovery of Algol by the Asterium. The teachings of Chaote barbarian shamans of Far Thuren seem to have given rise to the Dynasties. These doctrines survived intact and later came to provide the impetus for the struggle against

Asterian colonization. Therefore, I reasoned, the origins of the Anarch Dynasties would throw light on Qamar's role in the revolution and founding of the Oikumene.

I sought out the *CVS* because it was said to deal with the founding of the first Anarch Dynasty in Hraelle. Indeed, much of the later sections of the *CVS* recount the adventures of Zaek, Tryptarch of Hraelle and prophet of Chaos, legendary first Anarch of Qamar. But I found the earlier chapters of the text much more fascinating. These dealt with affairs in Suvyamara, before Zaek's return to Hraelle, when he and Valamiel first met as penniless wanderers in a cafe at Spiridon Gates called the Water Fly. Here I found at last the inspiration for more than a monograph on a colonial uprising. Here, despite its damaged and inchoate condition, was a work of art.

Moreover, I found as well a character I could identify as sympathetic to my own, almost a friend separated from me by Time. I too had grown up on a world that knew little of magic and love, in the bosom of a family still deeply influenced by Asterian gloom. I too rebelled, set out a wanderer through the worlds of Space, drifting from job to job and planet to planet, till some chance-overheard remark sent me to Algol. I too am a scholar of sorts. And I too discovered on Qamar that Cosmic Fate had not condemned me to a life without love, without true pleasure.

Ancient Suvyamara has nearly vanished in the millennium which has passed since Val and Zaek shared that first bottle of dreamwine. The entire course of the River Oryx has shifted to the south, and deposited an entirely new delta-land, where an entirely New Suvyamara now is built, already decrepit with age, a minor sleepy provincial trading port of no great beauty or importance.

The old delta described in *Crowstone* is now gone, replaced by a low flat peninsula of useless impenetrable marshland, impossible even for archaeologists to investigate with any precision (4). Along the

(4) My map of old Suvyamara is taken from a manuscript version of *CVS* (Saendeb Colonial Office Records, Cat. 43Q., ff 710-711) with emendations based on textual evidence.

coast a few tiny villages of fisherfolk eke out a living. One last vestige of the ancient city remains: the southern half of Viridine Peninsula is now Viridine Island. A Temple still stands where once Jethael danced and the Crowstone flickered into life, but the modern structure is made of wood, not green viridine. (The only piece of viridine to be seen is the altar-stone, supposedly a relic of the original Temple.)

Around the Temple a town of sorts survives. A weekly fish-market and a few pilgrims provide a *modus vivendi* for some of the last self-proclaimed descendants of the waterfolk, the theocratic clans of the goddess, now reduced to perhaps twelve or fifteen thousand souls in all, and only four thousand on Viridine Island. Their houses are no longer towers but low wide-veranda'd bungalows. Their women no longer keep to strict seclusion but still wear green half-masks to symbolize their divine status (5). Old Suvyamara — if this last remnant deserves the name — is a terminally somnolent backwater outpost of a provincial port, with only a small unimportant library (attached to the Temple) to justify a scholar's vague interest in its obscurity.

The library happens to contain a very important manuscript of the CVS (6), the rumor of which drew me from the subtleties of Old Qamar City, and at last lured me into the unknown wilds of the Moon of Qamar. I spent the next two years on Viridine Island.

Vital family affairs finally called me back to my home world, and forced me to leave Algol altogether. Otherwise, no doubt, I should have settled there forever, never left Qamar at all, and never have written this book.

(5) I doubt that seclusion of women ever reached the proportions depicted in the CVS. A society such as the scrivener describes is economically unviable. However, he saw himself in a world made up of men and boys, and I have allowed him his vision. The influence of the Anarch Dynasties changed the role of women greatly on Qamar. A sort of matriarchy still prevails in remote regions today, and women in general keep to the shadows only in shadowy Suvyamara.

(6) The so-called *Viridine Redaction*. SLVI MS Col. XXVIR 5320.

Qamar in general lived through the Asterian gloom and emerged still relatively untouched. Moreover, the revolutionary fervor of the Chaotes insures that Qamar today remains a world where the individual is free to realize his potential unchecked by puritan oppression. But of all Qamar, one place in particular still retains a special affection for the love which so inspired Valamiel the scrivener monk. In that respect, Old Suvyamara has not changed at all.

In the Viridine Temple of sea-rotted wood (which must be such a poor copy of Jethael's emerald spires), boys dressed as girls still dance for the goddess — a mere five or six at a time, and without much of the Transformational glory which once illuminated their art (7). The Eye of the Goddess no longer shines, but the beauty of her small acolytes seems as fresh as any poem in the CVS.

On the beaches of Viridine Island and along the coast, one may meet with boys whose hair boasts the strange amberblack color of Jethael's tresses, or is bound into a single long queue, like little Varo's. The descriptions of facial features in *Crowstone* owe as much to my own observations as to any research in libraries.

Gone are the silk robes, the rare jewels, the splendid meals, gorgeous rituals and lace-ruffed aesthetes of Sorolon's city. The boys now wear colored linen kilts, flowers in their hair, perhaps amber beads on cheap imported "irridium" chains around their necks. They are poor and illiterate. They like to fly kites and to dance. And any boy between the ages of ten and sixteen who does not take a lover is considered either too dull or too ugly to be loved at all.

Eventually these children grow up, marry and produce more children — and perhaps seek out boys to love in their turn. But while they're young they expect to be thought attractive, and appear rather hurt when some off-world stranger refuses to enjoy their favors. Sometimes they remain loyal to their lovers — but nothing seems to stop them from being generous to a fault.

(7) Transformations are still performed in Old Qamar City, and reportedly in the Hyperalbine Wastes and Vanish Isles as well. Much of my technical reconstruction of the rituals is based on dances I saw in Old Qamar City.

If the cautious, shy, repressed off-world tourist cannot at first bring himself to believe that these chance-met children are actually offering their love, he can seek out the last vestige of Suvyamara's ancient decadence, a large decrepit wooden shed on an isolated beach just outside the village called the Silver Pipe Café. There one may meet boys who are too lazy to fish for a living, or who have been orphaned, or who prefer to live away from home and enjoy the relative ease and luxury of the cafe existence.

Vhang and dreamwine are served to customers on low reed-matted couches. An ancient zerbai plays even more ancient tunes. Children young as nine clean the pipes and carry braziers of glowing coals from couch to couch. Other boys, slightly older, dance on a small stage, almost naked, to the eerie pulsing rhythm. In exchange for some small gift, or sometimes just for affection, any one of these boys may choose to accept a customer's advances (or refuse them, if so inclined). The children are their own masters, paid to entertain and serve pipes, not to be taken to bed. But Suvyamara boys are generous, madly curious about off-world visitors, and insatiable in their capacity for lazy pleasure. Even the most agonizingly church-ridden tourist cannot remain shy for long, once he's fallen into their sweet hands and been invited to walk outside and contemplate the Ring of Moons.

On the royalties from *Crowstone*, I intend to return to Suvyamara. There remain more volumes to be written... and the Silver Pipe Café never closes its doors.

HAKIM BEY

Nev Brooge

Terra, Mar 10, 66 A. O.

More Reading

If you have read and enjoyed Crowstone you don't need to be convinced that love and friendship between men and boys is as healthy, normal and beneficial as that between men and women, or men and men, even when sexually expressed. The fact that in many countries of the world powerful lobbies are working to paint such relationships in the worst light possible, and to torture, imprison or kill one or both partners in a man/boy affair, does not alter this truth; it only points to the inherent fear of the life force in Western society and the brutal lengths to which some people will go to repress it (and often, incidentally, make a lot of money in the process).

P.A.N.

Some four years ago an important decision was made here at Spartacus. It seemed that the gay power centres in the English-speaking world had abandoned at least one important aspect of the fight started at Stonewall for real sexual self-determination. "Gay rights" were quickly limited to adult sexual rights: minors had none. Boy-love "was not a gay issue". Men who loved boys were thrown to the dogs, and the dogs were turning out to be an impressive and vicious breed indeed. One only need mention Los Angeles cop Lloyd Martin and New York garment district charity swindler Judianne Densen-Gerber as the two most famous anti-child-love propagandizes of the time. We decided that boy-lovers deserved something better of their gay brothers than what the American and British gay organizations and publications (always with the exception of Boston's G&y Community News) were willing to give, and so we started a small boy-love magazine and called it PAN after the naughty, and sexy, young satyr of Greek mythology. (Later, under pressure from PAN Books, London, the name was changed to Paedo Alert News.)

PAN grew and flourished. Since it was only a small sideline of our work at Spartacus, it suffered from an erratic publishing schedule. Our aim was to put out 5 issues per year, but more often than not PAN turned out to be a quarterly journal. Yet from the start it attracted some of the best writers and thinkers — and photographers — in the boy-love world: writers such as Dr. Edward Brongersma, the distinguished Dutch jurist who, with Dr. Frits Bernard, is probably

more responsible than anyone for the liberalisation of law and social attitudes in Holland. We also printed international news of direct concern to boylovers; in this our enduring contact with the travelling gay world was a great help in the constant flow of letters and news clippings on which our reportage was based.

Editorially, we never hesitated to call a thief a thief, a liar a liar. Since PAN was small, since it had no ties whatever to either the New York Jewish cabal which controls the media in America or the strange bedfellows (gangsters and right-wingers) who run the press in the United Kingdom and France, we were quite free to tell the truth absolutely as we saw it. We have never stopped for a second to worry whether an attack on Christian sex mores would alienate us from our Christian readers, or a refusal to genuflect before the liberal ideas of what constitutes “child exploitation” would lose us our “liberal” readers. Only boy-love publications advertised in PAN so we didn’t have to worry about offending advertisers either. We may be wrong in what we write (we hope we’re not very often) but we have the almost unheard-of luxury in the publishing world of being able to be absolutely honest.

Prices of P.A.N., as of August, 1983, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): For one copy: AUSS 4, OSch 60, BFr 160, CANS 5, DKr 30, IR£ 3, FMk 20, FFr 30, Drch 250, Lit 5,000, Yen 1000, HF1 8, NZS 5, NKr 30, Esc 350, Rand 6, Ptas 400, SKr 30, SFr 8, £ 2.25, USS 5, DM 8; all other countries USS 5. *For 5 copies (one-year subscription):* AUSS 20, OSch 300, BFr 800, CANS 25, DKr 150, IR£ 15, FMk 110, FFr 150, Drch 1250, Lit 25,000, Yen 5000, HF1 40, NZS 25, NKr 150, Esc 1750, Rand 30, Ptas 2000, SKr 150, SFr 40, £ 11.25, USS 25, DM 40; all other countries USS 25.

Now, it was becoming evident as the great paedophile witch-hunt begun in the late 70s continued that, as the Government increasingly circumscribed his real-life contacts with youth, there was an increasing need for good tasteful, healthy fantasy material for the boy-lover.

At this point it should be interjected that we simply don’t believe in the basic good hearts of the child victimization lobby: We don’t believe that these virtue vendors are nice people who just

misunderstand the phenomenon of man/boy love, who are really trying to make the world better and a safer place for children. They aren't. There is too much evidence that they aren't. Some are thieves, some have even landed in prison because of their thievery; a few are religious fanatics, but the majority are simply opportunistic lower-middle-level professionals who know they can't make very remarkable careers out of their own original work and are quite willing to jump on any bandwagon of hysteria which comes near their desks. They overlook the human misery they cause in their race to gain a favourable mention in Time magazine or plug themselves into more government grant money. At the very best they are proto-sadists. If anyone has doubts about the extremes of reportorial dishonesty to which the press will go in these affairs the recent "Etan Patz/NAMBLA connection" scandal in New York (exploited by *Time Magazine* with full knowledge that such a connection didn't exist!) should open a few eyes; and if one simply disbelieves that Phd'd sociology professors are capable of scientific dishonesty, one need only read David Finkelhor's book *Sexually Victimized Children* published by McMillan in 1979.

At any rate, by the time PAN had been going a couple of years the virtue vendors were winning victory after victory. The prison population of boy-lovers in the world had at least doubled since Martin, Densen-Gerber, Groth, Katz, Locker, Salzmann, Kaiser and many lesser cops, do-gooders, social workers, DAs, and journalists had started work — and the press had seen to it that paedophile prisoners were regularly tortured and raped by other prisoners with the *planning and approval of the prison authorities*.

But the virtue vendors weren't content just to torment incarcerated boy-lovers; they had their hearts set on making life as miserable as possible for those who were still free. Everyone with an ounce of sense will realize the paedophile uses erotic photos of boys as a harmless substitute for the real thing — a safety-valve accompanying solitary masturbation to help him obey the laws which criminalize the sexual contacts he would otherwise make. But even this pleasure had to be denied the evil boy-lover, and a rationale developed for its suppression. The "child protectors" came up with one quickly enough: the act of photographing a boy engaged in sex (or

even carrying an erection) permanently traumatised him — just how this happened was, of course, not explained.

So the war began against “kiddie-porn”. Boy-porn photos and films were the first to go: through stepped up prosecution under hoary old laws, the enactment of new laws (not just in the US and England but in Scandinavia, too), and finally through the spreading of incredibly inflated figures about its extent and cash value not just in the gutter and right-wing media but even through reports issued by the United Nations.

But the written word was harder to attack. The men of the media had to guard their own privilege to print whatever they liked, true or false, constructive or sadistic; any enforcement of “reportorial responsibility” could be turned against them. They had cried “freedom of speech” too long and too hard to be able to easily burn our books. So the last refuge of sanity many boylovers had was fantasy — their own and those of others which they could read.

Now in PAN we had also published short fiction and had come to know, at least through correspondence, a number of authors who worked with the boy-love theme. We had in our files a number of pieces which we couldn’t put in PAN because either they were too erotic (if the virtue vendors can’t burn books they certainly can magazines) or too long. So our first venture into book publishing was a series of short story volumes.

The Panthology Books

PANTHOLOGY ONE. These love-stories, tales of adventure and comic sketches show men who love adolescent boys coping with their very special place in society with intelligence, humour, fantasy and a characteristic gentleness quite contrary to the picture usually painted of them in the media and by professionals. Settings range from golden age Islam of the Arabian Nights, to Imperial Rome, to contemporary England, Italy, Greece. The writing ranges from the vital realism of Steven Wood’s camping stories to the mystical poetics of Hakim. Some of the boys are idealized — but most are shown in all their prankishness, and with a few of their warts.

PANTHOLOGY TWO is another collection of boy-love stories by many of the same authors who made their boy-love debut in *Panthology One*. There is a tale about a junior karate expert, an American trans-continental truck-driver and his lover-boys, a boy-vampire, a boy from outer space, a very unusual Boy-Scout patrol, the unexpected legacy of a detested uncle, a summer trilogy filled with the languid eroticism of the long vacation, an unusual assignment given to a British public school master, a tropical rent boy who exploits his tourist till he falls in love himself, a commercial relationship between a man and a boy — with a twist.

The Panthology books are collections of honest, optimistic fiction on which to hang a happy dream. They are not very ambitious, don't try to establish a new boy-love ethic (although we would put up Hakim's short pieces against any boy-love poetry being written today). They do show a remarkable range of paedophile experience and longing, fantasy and desire — and a total absence of the sexually brutal and sadistic elements which seem to characterize so much written heterosexual erotic fantasies.

Prices for each book, as of August, 1983, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): AUSS 8, OSch 110, BFr 300, CANS 9, DKr 60, IR£ 4.50, FMk 40, FFr 50, Drch 500, Lit 9,000, Yen 1800, HF1 16, NZS 10, NKr 50, Esc 620, Rand 8, Ptas 700, SKr 50, SFf 13, £ 3.50, USS 8, DM 16; all other countries US\$9.

The PANTHOLOGY series continues. We expect to bring out a PANTHOLOGY THREE around Christmas, 1983.

The Boy and the Dagger

One of the pieces in PANTHOLOGY ONE which attracted much favourable response from our readers was The Tale of Ahmet, a rather long story by Asger Lund. Now it happens that Lund also writes novels, and one of these is THE BOY AND THE DAGGER, a historical romance about an orphan boy and a swordsman on a secret mission for his former lover, the Duke of Magdeburg. Their meeting in a lonely inn saves their lives — and starts both a tender love and a

trail of adventure which leads from Germany to Reims, to Paris, to Spain to North Africa. Along the way they fight many battles, meet the brilliant church politician Julien de Montferrat, Bishop of Reims, rescue a 15-year-old count from his enemy's prison on Paris and plot with Henry of Navarra against his great adversary King Philip II of Spain and the evil Inquisition.

Lund has taken the form of a teen-age boy's adventure novel and made explicit the boy-love element which often seems to lie just below the surface in so many examples of this genre. It is, of course, no more an attempt to reveal the truth of late 16th Century European life than, say, the "Loon" books of the 1960s were depictions of American Pacific Northwest Indian culture. Like the stories in the Panthology collections, it is fantasy, healthy, erotic and full of fun. There are some 15 exquisite black and white illustrations drawn by Lund's long-time associate Richard Steen.

Prices as of August, 1983, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): AUS\$ 8, OSch 110, BFr 300, CANS 9, DKr 60, IR£ 4.50, FMk 40, FFr 50, Drch 500, Lit 9,000, Yen 1800, HF1 16, NZS 10, NKr 50, Esc 620, Rand 8, Ptas 700, SKr 50, SFr 13, £ 3.50, USS 8, DM 16; all other countries USS 9.

The Asbestos Diary & Vice Versa

In the 16 years since *The Asbestos Diary* burst into our lives, Casimir Dukahz has established himself as the Vladimir Nabokov of *boy-love*, the one writer on the subject who can entertain, arouse and very nearly kill you with laughter all at the same time. You will find in this book no wrestling with guilt, no vision of Armageddon. Woven into a love-story is a string of "tall tales", that distinctly American invention — part myth, part exaggeration, part satire, part lie. Casimir suffers blackmail, mayhem, overcharging, cuckolding, competition, police brutality, rejection — but gets a lot of loving, too, and incidentally disproves the famous quote of Dr. Albert Ellis that "boys are lousy lovers". Paperback.

Dukahz's second book, *VICE VERSA*, has the same magic. Woven among the many adventures the irrepressible Duke has with

his boys all over the continent is his account of the continuing, and humourously deepening, affair with 13-year-old Amar: “His low clear voice, golden as his hair, its boyish timbre playing on the ear like spoken music. His eyebrows’ delicate arch, the thick lashes, black as sheened ebony and startling contrast to the amarillo flame crowning the young head. The large eyes whose expression is grave but whose power is azure, almost indigo. The small sharp teeth...” The original 1976 hard-cover American Coltsfoot Press edition.

Prices as of August, 1983 for THE ASBESTOS DIARY, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): AUSS 10, OSch 160, BFr 450, CANS 11, DKr 80, IR£ 6.50, FMk 50, FFr 70, Drch 600, Lit 14,000, Yen 3000, HF1 25, NZS 12, NKr 70, Esc 850, Rand 12, Ptas 1000, SKr 70, SFr 20, £ 5, US\$ 10, DM 25; Other countries USS 11. *Prices as of August, 1983 for VICE VERSA, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe):* AUSS 20, OSch 280, BFr 800, CANS 21, DKr 130, IR£ 12, FMk 80, FFr 110, Drch 1100, Lit 24,000, Yen 5100, HF1 40, NZ\$ 25, NKr 110, Esc 1400, Rand 23, Ptas 1770, SKr 110, SFr 35, £ 10, USS 20, DM 40; South America USS 21; all other countries USS 20.

We are preparing a third Dukahz novel for publication in the autumn of 1983.

Kit

For centuries, in the West, Christian churches provided the intellectual basis for societal disapproval, and often murderous condemnation, of men and women who were unconventionally sexed. In recent years that role has been taken over by the mind-doctoring and mind-examining professions — without much change in thrust as far as paedophiles are concerned. Psychiatry, which in its infancy was a radical profession, is now comfortably conservative; the followers of Freud have swapped the heady adventure of exploration for houses in suburbia, membership in the local golf club and, most insidious of all, government grants to carry on safe therapy or safe research which they guarantee will come to approved conclusions.

There is little fiction which illuminates this threadbare world. Psychiatrists, by and large, are not gifted with the kind of imagination which can craft a novel, and novelists seldom know much about psychoanalytic theory and the workings of a mental institution. In *Kit* Alan Edward tackled this challenging theme. It was the first serious work of extended fiction which we published.

Kit, his 12-year-old hero, had lost his parents in a car accident which may or may not have been a suicide; a few months later he is declared “autistic” and sent to an asylum in the English country. There an assortment of quarrelling eccentrics, each wedded to a different social, political or psychiatric system, tries to bring him back to mental health.

It also happens that shut up in the Adult Unit of the same hospital is a 34-year-old bachelor by the name of Paul Baxter. Baxter is not mentally ill, although he does have his hours with a psychiatrist, but has been put there in lieu of a prison sentence, for he is a convicted “child molester”. Paul and Kit meet and, through the natural therapy of love and sexual pleasure, the boy begins to recover — despite the efforts of the hospital staff.

It is a measure of the author’s talent that episodes involving the psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists and nursing officers are very nearly as interesting as the love story itself. Alan Edwards uses the little power struggles of the staff, their conflicts in philosophy, inability to understand pubertal sexuality and the mental landscape of a boy approaching adolescence, to examine current social and psychiatric myths, and he does this with both wit and tension. Baxter argues his defense of boy-love with a wonderfully conservative yet sensitive psychiatrist. The “case conferences” over Kit often attain a high level of comedy as each participant pushes his or her pet theory or tries to take credit for the baffling improvement in the boy’s mental condition. By such careful construction Alan Edward avoids the trap of a polemical novel and casts his ideas into the turbulent waters of human interaction. It is fascinating to watch. More importantly, it makes these scenes in *Kit* great fun to read.

But the ultimate success of any such book must rest upon the love story, and here it is that *Kit* is strongest. The mental images of a truly psychotic person are probably not very interesting. Kit’s stream of disturbed consciousness in the early part of the novel is interesting,

and colours as the boy first becomes aware of Paul Baxter and then finds himself falling in love. The great flood of warmth as their love seeks and finds sexual expression is so intense, and magically described, that it threatens to blind the reader to all else.

The idea of love as therapy is as old as the hills, yet psychoanalytic theory holds that the therapist must be impersonal, a sort of blank screen on which the patient can project distorted images processed from his infancy in order for them to be corrected: love, then, actual and sexually expressed, would be fatal. There is a touching scene near the end of *Kit* where the boy and his psychiatrist come dangerously close to expressing affection, when the man feels the danger and withdraws. Paul Baxter doesn't withdraw and that, Alan Edward is saying, like Robert Frost before him, makes all the difference.

Prices as of August, 1983, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): AUS\$ 8, OSch 110, BFr 300, CANS 9, DKr 60, IR£ 4.50, FMk 40, FFr 50, Drch 500, Lit 9,000, Yen 1800, HF1 16, NZS 10, NKr 50, Esc 620, Rand 8, Ptas 700, SKr 50, SFr 13, £ 3.50, USS 8, DM 16; all other countries USS 9.

The Sexual Aspect of Paedophile Relations

If *Kit* skillfully probes the deficiencies of the mind industry in coming to grips with man-boy love, Theo Sandfort's *The Sexual Aspect of Paedophile Relations* reveals the potential strengths of honest psychological research into this phenomenon.

Someone several years ago remarked that in the United States alone there were over 1000 separate laws proscribing various kinds of consensual sexual contacts between people. At a conservative estimate, one quarter of these laws probably specifically criminalize sexual contacts involving minors. Now, one would have thought that considerable research would have established the harmfulness to boys of the activities one could so easily go to jail for. That simply isn't so, for until this research was undertaken (with the financial backing of the Dutch government) no one had asked the obvious question: how do boys involved in sexually expressed friendships or loves with adult

men, who have not had problems about them from police, social workers, psychiatrists, etc., really feel about those relationships and the sex they participate in?

Not that there has been a scarcity of papers theorizing about how the boys *should* feel — humiliated, coerced, defiled, made homosexual, frightened, angry, alienated, terrified forever of grown-ups. Such feeble attempts as have been made to talk with sexually active boys have been laughably slanted to reinforce the stereotypes: researchers have interviewed victims of real rape and generalized from this to *all* juvenile sex contacts with adults (which in many countries are called *statutory* rape). They have gone to the court records and read confessions wrung out of unhappy boys after hours of brutal questioning and assumed that the evident misery of the boys at that time characterized every second they spent in bed with their adult lovers. To say that these papers are inaccurate is an understatement. They are willfully mendacious, social propaganda disguised as professional work.

That is what makes Sandfort's research so important. Sandfort is a young Dutch social psychologist who received his "doctorandus" degree (candidate for a doctoral) at the Catholic University of Nijmegen two years ago and is now a researcher at the State University, Utrecht investigating paedophile phenomena.

Holland is one of the few countries where such research is possible. Although sex with (and for) anyone younger than 16 is, technically, criminal behavior in The Netherlands, the consequences of discovery are in practice rather mild compared with those in the English-speaking world. Usually apprehended boylovers don't go to jail, and if they do it is after repeated incidents, or where coercion or violence was used; sentences are short (6 months would be excessive). Thus there tends to be less fear in paedophile relationships. Boylovers have formed sociopolitical organizations; boys loved by them have dared to talk about their feelings on the radio and carry signs in demonstrations; police, at least in the larger cities, tend to question the quality of a man/boy relationship in which they suspect (or even know) sex takes place before they attempt to break it up and punish the adult. This is one of the main reasons why Spartacus and its Coltsfoot Press division are located in The Netherlands.

Sandfort was thus able to assemble a research group of 25 boys between the ages of 10 and 16 who were much more representative of younger partners in long-standing man/boy couples than has ever been gathered before. These he studied in light of something called “valuation theory” and its derivative techniques which allowed him to objectify as much as possible the youngsters’ feelings about various important areas in their lives, including the paedophile relationship and the sex which entered into it.

It was Sandfort’s objective to study paedophile relationships and not sexual acts, and a relationship, at least one outside of the family, implies a willingness on the part of both participants to continue it. A one-time sexual episode does not constitute a relationship; there must be a certain consistency and continuity of human interaction. The question which Sandfort does not try to answer (but which would be very interesting to know the answer to) is how representative this sample is of man/boy sex in general; to what extent can we generalize from the experience of these 25 boys? While there will be disagreement as to how typical a relationship of one or two or six years may be, few paedophiles would doubt that the overwhelming majority of sex contacts (even those lubricated by money) proceed with the wholehearted consent, and evident enjoyment, of the younger partner.

And that, certainly, is the major conclusion this book comes to: 100% of the boys liked (most of them loved) their older partners and found the sex, at the very least, fun.

The Sexual Aspect of Paedophile Relations is a scientific book and makes no compromise with popular writing. It is not difficult to understand, for no mathematical concepts are discussed, but readers looking for smooth writing, a sort of Carl Sagan approach to science, will be disappointed; in translating it from the original Dutch we made no attempt to “prettify” the prose. But through the carefully worded text the honesty of the investigation comes through loud and clear (Sandfort always takes great pains to qualify his claims and point out weaknesses in his research), and through the numerous quotations from the boys one gains a very clear idea of what their experience really was like.

Prices, as of 1 April, 1983, including packing and postage (airmail outside of Europe): AUSS 13, OSch 200, BFr 600, CANS 15, DKr 100, IR£ 8.50, FMk 60, FFr 80, Drch 850, Lit 17,000, Yen 3500, HF1 30, NZS 17, NKr 90, Esc 1200, Rand 16, Ptas 1350, SKr 90, SFr 25, £ 6.50, USS 13, DM 30; all other countries USS 14.

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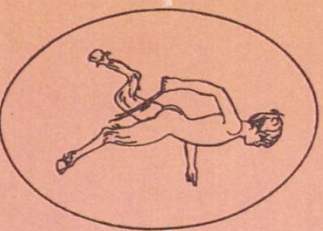
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Qamar, fairest of the 108 moons orbiting the gas planet of Algol. Here a strange and wonderful civilization has developed. In Suvyamara, a city sinking sadly into the sea, boys of the Viri Temple dance the Epodes — and the citizens among other deities, Varon, the boy-love god.

Two strangers meet and defeat a band of air in a boy-bordello: a scrivening monk (and professional thief) from another Algolian moon and a long-haired, kilted warrior from the northern mountains of Far Thuren. So begins a gripping and erotic adventure of dance, spells, magicians, ghouls, dragons, rescues, abductions and seductions...

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The interweaving of the fates and loves of these men and boys, the drama of their epic quest to find and steal the power-bestowing Crowstone, makes this probably the grandest boy-love sword and sorcery novel ever published.



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CROWSTONE

HAKIM



The Chronicles of
Qamar:

CROWSTONE

a sword and sorcery
boy-love tale

by HAKIM

