

ROSES FOR AVALON CH. 4

THE STRENGTH OF IRON

by

Clifton James Palmer

(purplebirdman)

"The strong do not suffer the world to move them, and the high general of Loraine took this to heart, carving out a ringed city for himself and his host, and when the hot wrath of heaven fell upon the earth, all flocked to the bulwark of Loraine, shuddering as the stars dashed their impotent ire against the iron walls, for not even heaven could raze what Sodon braced."

*Book of the Red Desert*, verse 857, Cephus bin Soolaimon

INT. APHAELIA ROOT ARCHIVES      NOON

A class of sheep and goat boys, moving two by two, crowd into the narrow elevators of the root archives. They gather by the golden pyramid of THE FIRST BOOK, waiting for all the elevators to arrive, whispering to each other excitedly, and then they are herded by BALTHIUS and a few older boys down spiraling stairs to the ROOT ARCHIVES themselves.

The root archives are a set of labyrinthine corridors and rooms, lit by torchlight, crowded with dusty scrolls, books, loose papers, relics; all various crystalizations of knowledge, meticulously cataloged and researched, with hundreds of years of notes beside each one. The archives hold the oldest and most precious knowledge of the LIBRARY TOWER, and many shelves and rows are barred with iron grates, the keys of which are held by senior librarians. Some parts of the root archives burrow down below sea level into the granite cliffs, through the glassy foundation of the tower, and spread under the city -- truly root-like, if the tower is indeed a tree of knowledge.

Now, nearly one hundred boys are being shown the root archives for the first time. The silent dark halls are filled with torchlight and the patter of little feet, hoofed and otherwise. Excited young voices murmur, respectful but unrestrained. There is so much to see here!

Balthius indulges his charges for awhile, patiently answering questions. He is in his mid thirties, with long dark beard, tastefully curling horns, wiry arms. He's been a father

to only one other class, and enjoys fostering the bright curiosity of children, so it is some time before he gets to the purpose of this trip: the graveyard.

At last, the children are herded into a strange section of the root archives. This section is vaulted, and opens up a bit; sconces are already lit, and there is no dust. The pillars are carved into figures; noble brows and serene faces, gentle repose, arms full of carved books and symbols, flowing beards and impressive horns.

Young Roshim, twelve summers old and already hefty, stops to stare at one particularly impressive figure, with broad arms and chest. The figure holds a tablet in one hand, and a lettering hammer in the other; his fiercely curling brow and expression seems as if he is going to engage in more than a battle of wits.

Young Cristio, same age, a waterfall of curling golden hair about his shoulders, stops, sees Roshim's attention, looks as well. Roshim points to the figure.

ROS HIM

That's what I will become, some day. I'll be like that.

CRISTIO

Perhaps he is your sire? You shall have horns like his, at least.

Roshim seems satisfied with this, turns his attention back to Balthius, who is gesturing for his students to come to the center of the vaulted room. A large brazier hangs from the ceiling and burns there, and like spokes on a wheel, the shelves and statues radiate around it. Balthius kneels on the floor, and his students do as well, forming an audience towards him, and wait for him to speak.

BALTHIUS

This is the graveyard of our people. In these shelves are your mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, grandparents and great-grandparents for almost two hundred generations. In these shelves, you will find all of your kin, and they shall speak to you in their own words. When you are older, you will be permitted to handle these books yourself, and read those words; I myself have transcribed older graves so that when the material perishes the words shall not perish with them.

Balthius pauses and one of his older helpers brings out an ancient-looking scroll, cracked and held together with embroidery, its rods ornate and beaded. He gently spreads it open on a reading-table, then looks around at the young faces surrounding him.

BALTHIUS

These are the first words written by my father's father, four times removed. He lived four hundred years ago, in this very library, when the tower was half its height. He wrote these words when he was twelve summers old, which I now read to you.

BALTHIUS

(reading)

My name is Narim Sho. I am a son of Aphaelia. My father took me to the graveyard today. He gave me this scroll to write on and said I was responsible for recording my own life. He told me one day this scroll will be in the graveyard, and one day it will lay alongside his own scroll where he records his life. He told me to write this: ONLY TRUTH LIVES FOREVER.

Balthius looks up at his students, and smiles.

BALTHIUS

The words of little Narim. And like Narim, you too shall begin to write your own books. You have learned writing, and reading; and now, you shall learn how to author.

He takes a small scroll out of his robe, shows it to the class.

BALTHIUS

Here is one of my journals I'm writing.  
You've seen many adults with scrolls like  
these, yes? One day this scroll will go into  
my own grave; one day I will rest upon this  
shelf among my peers, and then perhaps, some  
of you shall read me.

Balthius's helpers come out with trays of scrolls, small and simple, and child-size pens. Each child is given a scroll and pen and writing tray. Roshim takes his and runs his fingers along the polished wood edges of the tray, feeling the careful Aphaelian craftsmanship. He turns it over; the back of the tray is smooth. The tray fits perfectly to the foils of the scroll and holds it open; a blank page, ready and unspoiled.

BALTHIUS

Now come; I have prepared scrolls, and like  
little Narim, together we shall write your  
first day. You will write, I hope, many books  
in your lifetime; but THIS book is special.

Balthius makes sure everyone has their tray out and is paying attention. He raises his own pen, glittering in the torchlight.

## BALTHIUS

This is very important, you see; because to write, you must first think of something, and to think of something, you must know your own thoughts. This book will be your mirror; you shall see yourself reflected but darkly, and if you are fortunate, others will see you as well.

EXT. AT THE BASE OF CARCOS      MORNING

Roshim and Avalon make their way down the winding path of Carcosa toward the bay where they arrived, accompanied by an attendant to see them off. A large riverboat bearing Oidecalla's sigil is resting there, with many smaller boats and evidence of much traffic from the pilgrimage scattered along the shoreline.

They board the boat with their baggage, the gangplank protesting under Roshim's weight, and they are settled in the overlook and the boat is off in minutes. Roshim realizes the boat is carrying cargo; they are merely extra passengers. He hunches in his seat, watching the mountains of Carcos recede and the glittering wall of Miriah approach. Avalon is smoking his pipe, but beneath the wreath of smoke, his green eyes glitter intently, spending more time gazing toward his companion than the scenery.

They pass beneath the great riverward wall of Miriah, and Roshim sees it pass by with some regret, for the towering buildings and hanging gardens remind him of his home. Soon enough they pass and head south down the river, and the river narrows as it passes the flood plain and into a valley pressed upon by high mountains; Miriah disappears, and there is nothing but the steep rock and greenery of the mountains on either side.

Roshim settles back in his seat and looks toward Avalon, who stares at him steadily, expression unreadable.

AVALON

(softly)

And so we begin again. Another journey.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

One with a more satisfying conclusion, El be willing.

Roshim shifts. His clothes are too tight, and his swollen arms are pinched by the holes of his vest. He grumbles and sheds it, unpicks the lace of his pants and loosens them a bit. Avalon watches and notes all of this, taking bitter amusement in Roshim's unawareness of the gift he has been given, while curious to see how the blessing takes root.

Roshim sees Avalon looking at him, and shoots the other a stern glare. Roshim feels somewhat uncomfortable, and the slow realization that he slept with Avalon's father last night isn't helping. He can't help but see Oidecalla's eyes, looking back at him through Avalon's familiar face.

ROSHIM

(annoyed)

You've been staring at me all morning. Your manners have gotten even worse than when we first met, if that is possible.

Avalon blows smoke rings, and deliberately meets Roshim's eyes. Avalon's fiery hair is tied back, and rests over his

shoulder. It is getting longer, Roshim notices.

AVALON

Have I? I shall attempt to be more subtle.

ROSHIM

(sharply)

I would prefer you mind your own business.  
But if you won't do that, you ought to tell me  
what you are thinking.

Avalon leans forward suddenly, and Roshim sees that Avalon is still tense, just giving the impression of relaxation.

AVALON

What I am thinking, eh? I admit I do not know  
what to think, Roshim. My thoughts are rather  
shattered at the moment. I am...

Avalon hesitates, licking his lips, the frenetic light still in his eyes.

AVALON

I am terrified.

Roshim is taken aback at this rush of emotion. He wipes his forehead with his too-small vest, and gestures for the pipe.

ROSHRM

You have never spoken this way before.  
Terrified? Terrified of what?

Avalon passes Roshim the pipe. When their fingers touch, Roshim feels a physical tingle, like a static shock, pass from Avalon to him. He jerks slightly, and sees Avalon do the same. Avalon laughs in a convulsive burst, a slight hysteria in his voice.

AVALON

Oh, what a joke this is!

Roshim steadies, seeing how distraught Avalon is, and he draws on his strength. He feels calmer, and he reaches out for Avalon's hand, grasping it even as the other draws back a bit. There is no shock this time; Roshim's big hand squeezes Avalon's in a gesture of attempted comfort.

ROSHRM

Tell me what's wrong. Together we will overcome it. You have stood beside me; I stand beside you. You know me by now. Do you think I will not help you, should you come to me in need? Speak to me.

Avalon gazes at him, and Roshim sees an odd thing in Avalon's face: a deep hesitation, almost a longing.

AVALON

(softly)

You are not the boy who left Aphaelia with me.  
Even before you met the Lord, you have  
become... you are becoming something else.  
Perhaps...

Roshim takes a deep draw of the pipe, and passes it back to Avalon. They smoke in silence for awhile. The mist of the valley hangs overhead; the rush of water, creak of the boat, and the splash of galley paddles are the only sounds for a time.

Avalon stirs and licks his lips again, now avoiding Roshim's eyes. Roshim waits. Finally, Avalon gestures helplessly, and speaks.

AVALON

I'm afraid that you have come to know me  
better than most. I do not particularly care  
to be known. It comes with its own set of  
obligations. But now I see we must carry on  
together for a little longer, and that in  
doing so, I shall be laid bare before you--  
sooner or later.

Avalon slips out of his jacket in a sultry fashion, but his anxiety shines beneath the layer of ironic detachment. Roshim plays along to make him feel better, and shifts closer, puts a hand on his knee. Avalon's smile becomes more genuine, though

the envious fire is still smoldering in his green eyes.

ROSHIM

(growling)

You've been laid bare a few times already.

Avalon lays his hand on Roshim's and smiles, then grows more solemn.

AVALON

So, then-- we now go to the Lords, the fingers of the Hand of the Stranger, on your mad quest for answers. I cannot claim to know the mind of the Lord of Gold, certainly not-- yet it seems to me that he has intentionally put something in motion. Loosed you as an arrow from a bow, for you are afire, simply afire, with his grace and glory; as a vessel brims with wine, he has filled you entirely, and cast you towards the other Lords. What is this power he has given you, how shall it manifest? I do not know. But he has seen your determination to get answers, and he has decided to help you in a manner I have never seen nor anticipated. To what end? I do not know that, either.

Roshim scratches his beard. It is growing in, fast. He thinks, but cannot see a downside to what Avalon is telling him.

ROSHM

Do you suppose he lied to me? That he knows how to repair the Library's foundation, and chose to not tell me?

Avalon stares off down the river. He taps out the pipe.

AVALON

All Lords lie. It doesn't matter now, does it? You are on your way.

Roshim rolls his shoulders, sighs. He strips out of his old creaking leather travel pants and boots, and dons a sarong and sandals. He stuffs the old clothes away and sits back down. Roshim watches the river and trees roll by, and Avalon takes a battered pack of cards out of his bag and begins to play a solitary game.

Presently, a swarthy sailor climbs to the outlook deck and approaches them.

SAILOR

Ah, my friends. Welcome to our beautiful craft. Something to drink? Something to eat? Your patron has paid a generous amount to make your travel comfortable, so don't hesitate to take advantage of it!

Roshim's stomach gurgles. He follows the sailor and returns from the galley with a generous helping of dried and fresh

fruits, meats, and bread. Avalon watches him eat, shakes his head, and returns to his game of cards. They both have a sealed jar of beer. Roshim's mood is improved after eating and drinking. He sighs contentedly, lounging on the deck, and watches Avalon play.

ROS HIM

As the sailors tell it, it is a week long trip by this boat to a port city called Epha, then we must disembark, and choose our way. Have you met any of the Lords? Tell me, for I do not know to whom we should go. We have plenty of time to decide, I suppose.

Avalon pauses, his hand grasping the tattered edge of a hand-drawn card. He sighs, flips it in his fingers, flings it down, then looks at Roshim wearily.

AVALON

It is not a city, Epha. It is a wall.

ROS HIM

(blinking sluggishly)

A wall?

AVALON

Yes, a wall. The outer wall of Loraine.

Roshim blinks again. He sits up. Slowly he recalls some lessons of his youth; the great iron fortress of Loraine, the

general Sodon, the war against heaven at the end of the First Age when the Hand of the Stranger stood firm against the tyrant god.

ROS HIM

(reverently)

The iron city...

Avalon snorts and turns over more cards. He fidgets.

AVALON

I have not been to the keep. I have been to Under-Epha, the city which you speak of. The wall is merely a ruin, of course. You shall only see a few vast pieces of the outer ring. Beyond that is the desert of Loraine, which was once a sea. I do not fancy crossing it, for I hear it is a long distance to the keep from Epha.

Roshim grunts, feeling excitement at the thought of seeing such a monument. He recalls more of his education, and Cristio's fascination with the early history of the world that taught him scattered facts via osmosis.

ROSHM

Were that Cristio was here, he could tell us the exact dimensions of Loraine, but in his stead I recall it somewhat; three walls plus the keep wall, the outer walls separated by twenty-one thousand cubits each-- so that's sixty-three thousand cubits from Epha to the fortress. Nearly a week on foot, I'd reckon...

Avalon groans and rubs his foot in sympathy.

AVALON

We shall need good boots. Those thin sandals shall not save your feet!

ROSHM

(in wonder, not listening)

I will see the general himself, perhaps... it is a strange thing, isn't it? That the Hand of the Stranger did not build a single kingdom after the war, I mean. Why, they worked together to repel the wrath of heaven; even Aphaelia was born of their cooperation. It is odd that they each went their own way sometime later.

Avalon flips a few more cards, and laughs. He gestures back toward Carcosa.

AVALON

(scornful)

How can you say that, after seeing the ruins of the kingdom of gold? Threats may bring disparate visions together, true, but I would say the Hand of the Stranger's shared vision was to push back the Tyrant, not to establish a particular social order... they each shared an ambition for power.

ROSHIM

(uncertain)

They waited together, for the Stranger's return, for the promise of the Stranger's grace--

AVALON

(sharply)

That is what my father-- what the Lord of Gold would say. He never would accept responsibility for the fracturing of the Hand, because in his mind, all he does is right; indeed, I am quite sure that all the Lords share this obstinacy, for that is the price of ambition, the ambition to establish a kingdom on this earth, which requires one to root and fix oneself to a set of principles. But see here!

Avalon upends his deck of cards, spilling them on the floor.

He grips Roshim's forearm and gestures towards them with his free hand, speaking in a low, passionate voice, looking Roshim in the eye intently.

#### AVALON

(intently)

Look at the cards. Without a game in your mind, they are structureless, raw material, chaotic. They do not hold meaning; they simply ARE. So too is the world. It is meaningless to us, man and angel alike, until it is put to some kind of order. We impress our vision, and divine structure emerges! As the formless firmament birthed the world, so our vision births meaning to things. But now I ask you this-- how many games can be played with this set of cards? Dare you answer?

Avalon unclenches from Roshim's arm, and sits back, calming himself. He spreads his hands as if holding up the sky, kicking at the cards contemptuously.

## AVALON

How would you feel, to be told that one card game is better than another? Or that there is only one true game to play? Rather a matter of taste, I'd say! Order is not sacred. It is an expression of will, and that is the least sacred thing in this world. So I do not care a whit for these Lords and their kingdoms, set in their ways! Changeless, eternally withering Order! Pah, can such a thing be even called life?

Avalon seems taken aback by his own outburst, and sits back down heavily. He begins gathering up the scattered cards. Roshim is taken aback too at his companion's emotional instability.

After awhile, Avalon speaks again, eyes on his cards.

## AVALON

Of course the Lords would never share a kingdom. They cannot grow together. It is as I told you before; they have crystallized in their ways, they were brought together against the Tyrant, and when that threat was passed, they split apart, despite the promise of the Stranger. And yet even so, when you arrived to him, the Lord of Gold chose to grow... perhaps, perhaps, there remains a possibility of change. But whether that change will be to our liking, we shall see.

EXT. THE CITY OF UNDER-EPHA      DAY

We see a succession of events: Roshim eating a lot on the boat, trimming his beard and hair, Avalon trimming hair on his back; Avalon reading, Roshim sculpting a bit of wood into miniature figures, including Avalon and Cristio and Rami; Roshim writing in his journal; Roshim playing cards with Avalon.

The boat docks at Under-Epha, and Avalon and Roshim get clothes made for the journey. They stay a few nights while their boots and cloaks are tailored; Roshim goes out to see the ruins of the great wall; the tailor is flummoxed when Roshim has outgrown the measurements of a few days ago. Roshim starts banging his head against things, misjudging his height. In the end they have to stay a few more nights while the tailor makes boots that can be easily adjusted for size.

It turns out to be impossible to find a caravan to the iron keep; for years, irregular visitors have come from the keep to bring food back, and it is rumored that the iron keep is on military lockdown of some kind.

Avalon and Roshim seek local guidance, and find some old-timers who explain the route to the iron keep. Roshim draws a map in his journal, roughly marking out distances and landmarks; we get to see his detailed notes on their journey.

Finally, loaded down with goods, with Roshim towing a sand-cart and harnessed like a beast of burden, the two set out

on foot across the salt plains in desert boots and sun cloaks.

EXT. THE IRON DESERT      DAY

The red sand is scabby with gray stone and crusts of alkali, and the sun blazes ferociously in a cloudless sky. Roshim's massive size and pulling the sand-cart does not hinder him, and Avalon struggles to keep up sometimes as his companion's great strides eat up the kilometers. Roshim's beard grows out more; it is too much of a bother to shave. The straps from the cart's harness strain against his muscles, but they hardly leave marks on his skin.

On the first day they make slow headway, resting under their cloaks in the midday, traveling in the morning and evening. Early on the third day, they find a great rocky ravine, stretching from horizon to horizon, with a few slabs of decomposing iron sticking out of it, like rotting teeth; the remains of Isha, the first inner wall.

Roshim examines the curve of the remaining iron slabs; he charts the approximate circumference of the wall while Avalon stands by curiously, watching Roshim do some math in his journal.

ROSHIM

There must be quite a lot more wall, buried  
under the sand.

Avalon shakes his head when Roshim looks at him.

AVALON

I have no insights to offer. I do not know  
this place.

They stand silent awhile, looking at the skeletal remains of  
the massive wall, hearing the hiss of sand.

AVALON

Let us camp under the concave side of the  
wall. It will be a relief to have a bit more  
shade when the sun rises. We shall rest; and  
I must tell you something that has been on my  
mind.

EXT. UNDER THE SHADE OF ISHA      MIDDAY

They make camp, stretching their sun cloaks out to block the dry wind and sunlight, using the iron slab of Isha as a third wall and ceiling, with the sand-cart holding up the cloth of the sun cloaks. As the sun crests, the shadow stretches out over them, and feels cool. Roshim leans against the iron wall; it is still cool on this side. He lays his great head back, horns thumping on the iron. Avalon is stretched out, soaking his forehead. They each drink from the great tankard of water on the sand cart, Roshim carefully measuring the water into wooden cups.

ROSHIM

What did you want to tell me?

Avalon opens his eyes and sits up. He is wearing nearly nothing out of the sun, and Roshim's eyes wander over that sleek body lustfully, too tired to do anything. He is dressed only in his boots.

AVALON

We must talk about your gift. No, not the gift between your legs. The grace of gold. Tell me; do you feel it?

Roshim spreads his legs and lets his cock hang. It's bigger now too, and he rather enjoys the weight. Avalon has started to look intimidated by him; that is sweet too in its own way.

ROS HIM

I feel... something. I know I am larger, heavier than I've been; yet I feel light on my feet, and I do not tire as easily. You now struggle to walk with me, when it was the other way around not long ago. I feel I could sprint up the slopes of Carcos!

Avalon grimaces. He does not like being reminded of his own relative weakness.

AVALON

Do you see me, perhaps? Without your eyes?

ROS HIM

I still see you, when I dream, sometimes. Though you have not spoken with me in my dreams since that first night at Carcosa.

AVALON

That's not what I mean. Do you see me when I am in another room, or across the city? A light, perhaps? Or a yellow cloth?

ROS HIM

I do not.

Avalon hums to himself, uncertainly.

AVALON

Well, I do not know what to expect. Let me know if you begin to see me without your eyes.

ROSHM

That would be nice. You disappear so often now, I should like to know where you are at all times! How often I did not know where you were in Epha.

AVALON

Yes, true enough. Well, lambkin, let me say then; to me, you appear as a flame, even if my eyes are closed. Of course, I saw you before; now, I could hardly miss you, even from a distance. And if I can see your gift, then rest assured there are others who can.

ROSHM

The Lords? They will see... what?

AVALON

They will see two flames, yellow and gold, walking side by side, and as for what they will do... I believe the Lord of Gold's apprehension is the best we can hope for. I tell you this now, we must be careful. Power is a threat, whatever the intent of the wielder, and this power cannot be hidden from a Lord.

EXT. KEEPWAY ROAD      MORNING

At first, the red desert looks nearly the same; the rolling red dunes, the scabby rocks, the hard blue of the sky above. But after a week, Roshim feels like he can read the mood of the land: the hazy gleam of morning that means a hotter day in the sun; the gentle blue of shade underneath a crumbling ridge of dark rock promising an easy rest; the rocky gravel that the sand-cart struggles to move over meaning a difficult long day.

Roshim learns how to tie his sun cloak well, to shield his face and eyes from the gusts of sand and wind, from the burning heat. His huge gleaming body is mostly exposed, his horned head shielded, rough harness around his upper body; more than once, he sees Avalon looking at him with a mix of fear and fascination. Though Roshim feels the burning heat, the lack of water, he does not feel easily tired, and instead finds himself slowing for Avalon, who begins to look pale and weak as the hot hours drag on.

At last, the ruins of the third wall, Eka, block their path. Unlike the other two walls, this one is a bit more intact, at least directly in front of them; they are forced to travel the circumference and in doing so, discover a wrecked gate, and the remains of a roadway. They pause under the shade of the gate, where Roshim tries mightily to recall the name but cannot, so he settles for checking his measurements again and attempting to estimate the remaining distance to the keep. The sand-cart's vast tankard of water is growing light, and he has begun to worry slightly.

As they rest in the shade, he glances sideways at Avalon's drawn face. His normally talkative companion has been quiet for days, and seems pensive.

ROSHIM

We must be getting close. I think... a day or two. Damn this desert.

Avalon doesn't respond right away, his gaze fixed on the desert horizon, a wet cloth over his head, as he often does during their rests. Slowly he faces Roshim.

AVALON

I cannot see the Lord's light, though I do not know why. But I can feel him; I know we draw near. We are close, now.

Roshim heaves a sigh and rolls his shoulders in a burst of nervous motion. He fiddles with his hammer, polishing the relief absently.

ROSHIM

This heat is oppressive. Let us hope the iron keep offers some respite.

AVALON

I despise deserts. Too hot during the day;  
too cold during the night, and ever thirsty.  
If you were not here to pull the cart, I  
should never step foot in this place. Bah!  
Let me have some grease; my lips are cracking.

Roshim hands him a tin of grease, and Avalon dabs his lips  
and nostrils.

ROSHM

I am surprised myself how suited I am for this  
place. If you should need a rest, you can sit  
on the cart. I don't mind the weight. I feel  
like I could travel twice the distance!

AVALON

(annoyed)

I'll carry my own weight for now. Save your  
strength. This is not the place for  
overconfidence.

Despite this warning, Roshim cannot help but feel strong and  
empowered. He has been enjoying this sensation, this new  
feeling of Avalon not being able to keep up with him. He makes  
a fist, feeling the cords of muscle in his forearms. Avalon  
sees this and rolls his eyes.

Suddenly, Avalon tenses, and draws the wet cloth off his  
face. He stands, wrapping his sun cloak around his face, to

minimize the glare of the sun, and scans the sunken road before them. Roshim strains to follow Avalon's gaze, but sees nothing.

ROSHIM

What is it?

AVALON

Two figures, on the hill above the road. Where the rocks are thickest, there crouch two men. They are wearing cloaks the color of sand. I believe they are watching us. I believe they have been, since we came through the gate. I saw naught but the motion of one of their cloaks in the wind.

In the direction Avalon indicates, there is a large rocky outcropping that emerges from the red sand, a vast hilly range of broken gray stone. Two men might easily hide themselves in it; indeed, many more than two men could be hidden in the rocks.

ROSHIM

Bandits? Watching the road?

AVALON

(with irritation)

Of course not. There is no traffic on this road; we are in the midst of a desert. Perhaps a watch from the iron keep, but... quite far, isn't it? Yet they are hiding. Strange indeed!

Avalon pauses, his long lean body tense. Roshim strains to see, but cannot; he sighs and gives up, trusting Avalon's keen eyes, and watches his companion.

AVALON

Well, then! One of them is coming this way, down to the road. The other remains hidden. Roshim, I believe we are being greeted. Ready yourself; he carries a sword. Do your best to appear intimidating, but do not threaten him.

Roshim draws out his hammer, and lays it across his knee. He stays seated. Soon he sees the hazy heat-warped figure approaching, wrapped in a sun cloak the color of the red sand. The man is large, but hesitates as he gets near enough to see Roshim's size. Still, he draws closer.

The cloth across the man's face hides his expression, but he does not act hostile. He approaches and enters the shade of the gate, standing ten meters from the sand-cart. Avalon rises, his long braided hair gleaming, and extends his empty hands.

AVALON

(loudly)

Peace be with you.

MAN

And also with you.

AVALON

The desert is hot today. We have a bit of water to share. Would you drink with us?

The man hesitates again, staring at Roshim, who remains seated, hands on his knees. Roshim bows to him; the man bows back stiffly. They sit together and pass a cup of water; the man removes his face covering, showing a dark-haired young bearded face that is well-weathered and handsome. His gaze is keen and difficult to read, with a wry intelligence and tilt to his head that implies both observation and amusement.

KENDA

I am Kenda. Thank you for sharing your water. Who are you, and what is your business here on this lonely road?

AVALON

We are traveling to the iron keep, from Under-Epha. Our business is with the Lord there; my friend is a scholar, and he has questions that only the Lord can answer. I am Avalon; he is Roshim.

Kenda raises his eyebrows, eyeing Roshim's bulk and scars with some disbelief. He smiles and leans back.

KENDA

A scholar? I am also a scholar, in my own way. Roshim, what does a scholar like you study?

ROS HIM

The nature of the world and the gods themselves.

Kenda seems startled at the deep bass of Roshim's voice and the strange accent. He eyes the horns, the straps of the harness across Roshim's big chest.

KENDA

Well, I am a scholar of the nature of men. My master does not abide in the iron keep, but he is interested in those who have business with the Lord there. The keep is some distance hence; in the spirit of one favor for another, let me introduce you to my master. It is no more than a day's travel. Come and refresh yourselves, for the road is unfriendly to travelers, and I shall protect you.

Though his words were civil, Kenda's bearing makes clear that the road would not be open to them. Roshim bristles, but Avalon lays a hand on his massive shoulder, and smiles at

Kenda.

AVALON

We will be honored to meet your master.  
Forgive my companion; he is young and in a  
hurry. We will go peacefully. I expect you  
know this land well, and you have much you can  
tell us, about Loraine and the iron keep, for  
we know little.

Kenda relaxes, and smiles back, dark eyes glimmering. He  
leaps lightly to his feet and makes a gesture; atop the hill,  
Avalon sees the hiding figure slip out of sight.

KENDA

I take no offense. Pardon the interruption in  
your journey, Roshim. This will not be a long  
detour, but these times are precarious, and it  
is better to be cautious. I cannot tell you  
all that I know, for it is to my master to  
decide what ought to be revealed, but I can  
say this-- for all the hostility of this  
desert, you may prefer it to the halls of your  
Lord of Iron.

Following Kenda, Roshim and Avalon make their way up the  
hillside, and stop at its crest, between two great crowns of  
gray rock. The rocks are crumbling into gravel, and the  
sand-cart protests as Roshim drags it fitfully along, his shoes  
digging great grooves into the ground, but he hardly feels the

effort. Kenda looks a bit surprised at this show of strength, his eyebrow arched, but says nothing.

Atop the hill, Roshim can see the dunes are broken by many crests of rock; the whole area is full of ravines and great slabs of broken stone. There are so many caves and crevices in this place, one could hide an army! This unfriendly terrain stretches off into the distance, rocky ridges riding above a sea of sand.

A second figure appears beside them, face also concealed by cloak. Kenda exchanges a low conversation with this figure. A third man emerges, and gestures for Roshim to leave the sand-cart concealed between a stand of rocks. Roshim hesitates, and looks towards Kenda.

KENDA

Leave it. It will be guarded until your return tomorrow.

ROSHIM

Very well.

Roshim unshackles himself from the cart, and shoulders his pack, and it is taken to its hiding spot. He leaves the harness straps on, as they help bind his sun cloak.

Thus they set off single-file, Kenda and his companion ahead, two more men behind them, down into the rocky terrain. Squeezing between a split in the rocks, Roshim and Avalon feel

an immediate coolness, as the sun is hidden. Roshim throws back his sun cloak, showing his horns; one of the men mutters and laughs.

KENDA

We shall need to take a path that you can squeeze through without breaking those fine horns of yours, friend. Come! I expect you have not eaten well nor drunk well in some time. This desert is not friendly.

Through a maze of rocky corridors they navigate, dipping in and out of caves. Roshim sees a fossil or two, the stratified rocks; evidence of the sea that once was there. The sky is glimpsed in blue flashes as the ground slopes; the great walls become smooth, sedimentary rock, still mostly red, but shot through with green and blue layers.

Roshim cannot keep track of the direction they are going, or where they are facing. He tries to remember the direction of the sun, but that too fails him. Kenda encounters a knot of men, wearing sand cloaks the same color as the desert; one or two large demimen, swarthy and thick-necked, fall in line behind them.

EXT. CAMP OF THE CHILDREN OF IRON      TWILIGHT

At last the narrow ravine opens up. Kenda guides them to an underhang lit by the light of the sun and pockmarked with cave entrances, standing three or four stories tall, cut with handholds and footholds and rude stairs. A brazier burns near the base; though sunlight reaches the upper part, the lower is in perpetual shadow, and the rocks are cool to the touch.

A great cloth or carpet is hung across the lowest entrance; Kenda raises this and goes inside, ducking a bit. Roshim and Avalon follow; Roshim's horns catch on the cloth and Avalon has to help him. Inside, the floor and walls are carpeted, and the whole space is dimly lit by shaded lamps; a few pieces of furniture make it seem like a meeting hall, and many men turn to look at them, crowded around a long low table upon which sputters a bright oil lamp, scraps of parchment, maps, and books. The cave continues for quite a way back; in the rear there is a long stand full of weapons, swords and shields, many spears, bits of armor, and a great bronzed helm with massive horns like a bull's.

Kenda makes his way to the table. Roshim and Avalon are herded behind him by the swarthy demimen.

KENDA

Where is the master?

An older man smoking a long pipe takes it out of his mouth to respond.

OLD MAN

(staring at Roshim)

Napping. He was making rounds. What have you got for us here?

KENDA

He'll want to speak to these two. I found them on the keepway by the gate. They say they were making their way to the keep.

The old man coughs a bit and gets up. He goes to the back and under another hanging cloth, which conceals another smaller entrance. Roshim sees a well-furnished chamber behind, a glimpse of a personal space.

Soon the cloth flies up, and a massive demiman lopes out, followed by the old man. The demiman is built like a gorilla, with a bull's neck and lion's mane; his arms hang low, corded and covered with long dark hair, as are his shoulders and chest. Sinewy muscles flex in his bare torso, and his eyes glitter keenly like red stones under heavy brows. In the presence of this massive demiman, Roshim feels the sort of physical intimidation that he has nearly forgotten.

The demiman yawns and shakes his great dark mane of hair; yellow fangs flash for a moment amidst his bearded jowls. He stares at Roshim and Avalon in a predatory way, but those reddish eyes are alight with intelligence as he saunters up.

DEMIMAN

Welcome! Who are you two?

Avalon bows, his long braid slipping over his shoulder. The demiman eyes him skeptically, then looks at Roshim with a bit more interest.

AVALON

I am Avalon. He is Roshim. We are traveling to seek answers of the Lord of Iron.

Some of the onlookers smirk and look at each other meaningfully. The great demiman grins openly.

DEMIMAN

Answers? Well, the Lord is quite busy these days, and at the best of times is not inclined to give answers. Where are you from? What questions compel you to cross such an unfriendly desert?

Before Avalon can respond, Roshim steps forward. At his movement, the demiman instantly faces him, lithe as a snake. Roshim is surprised by this alert stance, and hesitates, but speaks.

ROS HIM

In my bag, there is a letter of introduction, signed by the elders of my people. We are from the far west, from the great city Aphaelia. I seek the wisdom of the Lords; long ago they constructed the foundation of the Library, and now, it has cracked, and we do not have the gnosis to repair it. So I was sent out to find the Lords, and to receive their wisdom. The letter says as much.

The demiman leans close, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. His grin is not friendly, but seems good-natured.

DEMIMAN

Ahhh, so then... another offspring of the Iron Lord. Another one of his ambitions. Remarkable! I have never heard of this before! Has anyone here?

Around the table, a murmured negative from the crowd.

ROS HIM

I do not lie.

The demiman's eyes glitter like rubies with hearts of flame. He fixes Roshim more firmly in his gaze.

MALEKI

Oh, I do not doubt you, traveler. Very good!  
I am Maleki. The Iron Lord Sodon is my  
father. But my men are weary, as I can see  
you are; let us eat and drink together to your  
satisfaction, and then you shall answer my  
questions, to MY satisfaction. Come, come!  
Where is the food?

At Maleki's command, the low table is cleared and food is brought; heaps of coarsely prepared meat and vegetables, fried in a slurry, and great vessels of cold water with chunks of vegetables floating in them. Roshim and Avalon eat and drink without speaking, for the food is good and spiced well, and quite a relief after the desert. Maleki laughs aloud at their expressions, and slaps his belly jovially, and shakes his mane.

MALEKI

The desert makes this mean feast feel like  
plenty, does it not? Eat well! Drink well!  
Kenda, bring our wine, and let us get  
comfortable.

The hall fills with more men, trickling in from the outside, all together eating and drinking with the odd glance at the newcomers, talking in voices that grow less hushed as the wine circulates. Maleki's laughter can be heard over everything, and the mood grows rather jolly; his large fangs bare in a grin that is equally ugly and charming, and Roshim is surprised to see Maleki wink at him salaciously.

Finally, with a massive meal inside him, the tables are cleared of all but the wine and fruit, and great cushions are laid out for lounging. Maleki gestures for Roshim and Avalon to come join him in his personal chamber, so they follow, with Kenda and a couple others; the bulk of the company remains in the main room, smoking and talking loudly among themselves.

Maleki's private chamber has a great bed and sunken seating area. He makes a good host, and encourages them to lay out and be comfortable, and does not sit until they are all served fresh flagons of wine.

At last, they are settled together, and Maleki glances about, under his heavy brows. Kenda sits beside him; Roshim and Avalon across from them, with a handful of other men. One stands by the door with a long knife, his weapon unobtrusive, but clearly visible.

MALEKI

(looking at them both)

So, my father did not send for you?

ROSHIM

No. We did not plan to come this way at all;  
we came down the river from Carcos.

Maleki looks hard at Avalon, who nods in affirmative. The demiman snorts.

MALEKI

The old temple? The Lord of Gold, eh?

ROSHIM

He would not help us, but sent us down the river when I told him I would ask the other Lords.

Maleki is staring at Avalon. He takes a great drink from his flagon without taking his eyes off Avalon. Roshim does not like how Maleki is looking at Avalon, but Avalon is smiling placidly.

MALEKI

(to Avalon)

And what are you, then? My sight may be dim, but I am not blind. There's a bit of light in you.

AVALON

I am a guide to Roshim. I am of gold.

Maleki laughs loudly and crudely, showing his great teeth. He slaps his knee. Kenda smiles wryly.

MALEKI

What is a child but a slave of their father?  
So, he sent you, did he? Well, why? Why come  
here? The Lord of Gold has never stepped foot  
outside his kingdom, since before my time.  
Why is this man  
(gestures toward Roshim)  
of such concern to the Lord?

AVALON

(evenly)  
None know but the Lord himself. I am not  
privy to my father's will.

MALEKI

They say the Gold Lord is subtle in his  
designs. Or so I am told. I do not know if I  
believe it. My father does not speak well of  
him. But now, something occurs to me,  
half-recalled. Does the Gold Lord have many  
children?

AVALON

There are none but I.

Maleki's eyes widen incredulously. He leaps to his feet,  
and Roshim starts; but Maleki is staring at Avalon intently,  
with no aggression. Kenda pats Maleki's hairy arm, and the  
latter sits back down heavily without breaking his stare. The  
atmosphere has shifted abruptly to tension.

MALEKI

(breathing heavily)

Then... you are from the... you were there.  
In the first age. Were you not? You are the  
yellow dancer of Carcosa?

Roshim glances at Avalon, who is still for a moment-- then relaxes, raises his hands palms out, fingers relaxed. He shrugs, and briefly Roshim feels as though he can see THROUGH Avalon's slim body, and sees the impression of a coiled length of acid-yellow cloth--

Kenda's sword flashes, and faster than Roshim can react, the man strikes towards Avalon, whether to merely threaten or to inflict hurt Roshim cannot tell. As the blow falls, Maleki turns toward Kenda, as if anticipating it, as if to stop it--

Kenda's sword misses Avalon and his swing strikes the stone floor with enough force to shatter the blade. The man slumps over, his eyes wide and unseeing. There is a rushing sensation in the air, as if a great wind.

Avalon leaps to his feet in one graceful motion, and Maleki catches Kenda's body before it strikes the floor. Roshim staggers to his feet as Maleki glares up at Avalon, whose hands are curved into strange defensive shapes, his green eyes narrow.

MALEKI

Enough, enough! Return him, if you would!

Avalon stares at him, and there is another rush of wind-- but Maleki laughs mirthlessly, and stares back. The men around them stand, and Avalon seems to give up. Roshim is ready to fight, but Avalon glances at him and shakes his head... the men relax as Roshim lowers his fists.

MALEKI

(softly)

Enough. I apologize on his behalf; now return him. He is a fool, but he is my fool.

Avalon bows, gestures with his slender hands. Kenda sputters, and his eyes light up. He coughs and sits up in Maleki's arms. It takes less than a second for him to recover, and he grunts, standing on his own. He glances at Avalon and Roshim, angry, but not threatening. He picks up the shattered hilt of his sword, and sits back down, and drinks wine.

MALEKI

What did he show you?

KENDA

A starry void. Warm water, up to my ankles. Three broken pillars on an island, and an empty horizon. I waited there for some time. Above my head, I saw silhouettes of stairways, bridges, towers. I did not know the stars.

MALEKI

(to Avalon)

The causeway? Eh? You've seen it? I should not be surprised.

ROSHIM

What happened?

Maleki looks at Roshim, surprised. Roshim looks at Avalon, who looks almost apologetic, but defiant.

MALEKI

My captain, in a rather foolish display of bravery, thought he was saving my life by striking your companion down. However--  
(turns to stare at Kenda)  
--this was discourteous, unwise, and unnecessary. The dancer may be able to strike me down if I am unprepared, but I assure you, captain, I am anything but. Apologize to our guest, and explain yourself. This is not the time for foolishness.

Kenda reddens and stands, and bows to Avalon stiffly. Maleki gestures for everyone to be seated, and they do so.

KENDA

(urgently)

My Lord... this one must be here on behalf of the Lord of Iron, to slip his knife into your ribs. Why else would a child of heaven find his way here? Sodon in his desperation has summoned one who could destroy you, who could slither his way into your mind and destroy the spearhead of our cause. It must be so!

MALEKI

My friend, I see your reasoning, yet you do not see my heart. I know my father, and he would let the iron keep be overthrown before he invites one of the host to help him, for he would have it in his mind that the host would be here to usurp him. No, for all his past subtlety, he would not risk it, for that would be risking weakness to his present mind, and that he will never abide.

Kenda does not meet Avalon's gaze. He grumbles, but seems to concede to Maleki.

MALEKI

In addition, before I was cast from his sight, he has long resented the glory of gold, and particularly, the first child of the host-- the yellow dancer has been a curse on his tongue since I heard it. The Lord of Dreams, indeed! How my father resents every moment he sleeps, and how mighty the walls he built in the causeway to prevent the encroachment of the dancer! No--

(to Avalon)

I do not think you work with my father. Indeed perhaps I should warn you of him, if you are unaware of his particular ire; had you passed the gate of the iron keep, he would certainly kill you.

AVALON

(softly)

I was told he resented me.

Maleki eyes Roshim's confused face slyly, shifting his gaze between the two of them. Maleki runs his tongue over his teeth, chuckling.

MALEKI

Oh, he does, he does indeed. Now! Kenda, keep your peace. This may be an opportunity, if you have not already squandered it. Let us see where this goes. Come! More wine!

Avalon is still as the wine is served. Roshim sees a self-consciousness in the slope of his shoulders. Roshim wonders what Avalon has been keeping from him, a familiar resentment of this closed-offness rising up inside him.

#### MALEKI

Let me speak plainly. My men and I are preparing for war against my father. Ten years ago, I was his commander-in-chief, captain of his army; he feared me, and my growing strength, and believed that I would challenge him. The men loved me more than they feared him, and this he could not abide. So he made plans to have me killed; my spies warned me in time, and I fled into the desert, along with my lieutenants. I had no designs against him, then, but since then, my men have grown to a fighting force, bolstered by the deserters from the keep. As the years go by, Sodon has become a paranoid brute, suspecting everyone, even his own children, of plotting his downfall, and more flee the keep every day rather than live under his tyranny. I will deliver justice, for my siblings and the men who remain loyal to the keep; I swear, by the strength of iron!

The men around him nod, roused by Maleki's passion. Maleki stares at Avalon keenly, searching his face, then gazes at Roshim with the same intensity.

MALEKI

(passionately)

Have either of you yearned for justice? Have you felt the lash of the tyrant? Why, you--  
(to Roshim)

--I see your body tells a story, of many wounds, and many troubles in your service. For whom do you labor? For whom do you expend your strength? A tyrant king, who uses you to suit his own purposes, manifest his own kingdom? Or perhaps a family, these elders of yours, who need someone young and strong to shoulder the burdens they have decided ought to be carried? This world reeks of injustice, and those with strength grasp at power!

Maleki turns his head, and draws his mane back, showing a vast scar on his neck. He bares his teeth, and his rolling eyes blaze with pure hate. His breath reeks of wine.

MALEKI

(angry)

Here is the fruit of my labor! I served my father Sodon for decades! I trained legions, and I asked nothing in return but respect and a place at his side! And yet, when my father feared for a moment that I had the strength to stand against him, he sent me to die in a pointless war, and when I did not die, he attempted to carry out my death himself.

Kenda pats Maleki's arm, and the latter subsides a bit.  
Maleki points at Avalon.

MALEKI

It bothers me that you have no scars, dancer.  
It means you do not fight, for all those who  
fight bear scars; and yet, I see that your  
eyes are eyes that have beheld many victories.  
This is troubling. Perhaps I should kill you.

Maleki eyes Avalon, brow furrowed, and the room grows tense  
again. After a moment Maleki laughs, slapping his knees. He  
turns to Roshim, sees Roshim's stern expression, shakes his  
head, and looks at Roshim with amusement.

MALEKI

And you! You look like a warrior, but you  
talk like a scribe. You both make an odd  
pair. Very amusing. I see a bit of grace  
upon you as well, dim as my sight may be. You  
bear those scars on HIS  
(points to Avalon)  
behalf, do you not?

ROSHIM

No. I bear them on MY behalf.

MALEKI

Well, my mistake! You appear the type of fellow who throws that great body of yours in front of others, eh? How can you say you do so on your OWN behalf?

Roshim thinks of Cristio and Rami. Roshim remembers the first day they received their journals, when Balthius told this was a first step on their journey to live at the Library forever. Roshim imagines the Library graveyard, and his own book nestled there, along with Cristio, and Balthius, and all his friends, tended by the next generation. He thinks of Balthius's classroom, his allfather's kind eyes and long beard going from brown to gray.

Roshim speaks, halting at first but gaining confidence:

ROSHIM

In the hills above the city Aphaelia, there is a rice paddy, and a great set of windmills, pumping water from the grand aqueduct to raise the fields. Higher still, along the green side of the mountain, there is a place young men go to make love, a great field of wildflowers, with a cold mountain spring in the middle, where you can overlook the ocean during the day and the stars at night. For nearly two years I have had only my memory, the memory of the faces of my friends and lovers to comfort me. But I do what I do for that field, for in my mind it is ever bright. When I return home, it will be waiting for me. How could I not raise my arms to defend it?

The room is silent save for the burning brazier. Some men smirk and look at each other. But Maleki's face is solemn. He scratches his chin and gestures toward Roshim, turning to face his men.

MALEKI

Look well, ye wretches, upon a well of true strength!

Maleki leans forward, licking his tongue over his teeth.

MALEKI

(slyly)

And yet, Roshim of Aphaelia, my father also has something to lose, and so do I. Can I let you go to him, after all we have spoken about here?

KENDA

They did not take the straight path here, and I will lead them out through another way. They do not know where we are. Unless the dancer has some witchcraft to find out.

MALEKI

(impatiently)

He is not a god, Kenda. Right now, in this room before me, he is helpless. He has no secrets I do not share as a child of the host.

Maleki drums his fingers, thinking. He stares at Roshim and Avalon, slurps some more wine.

MALEKI

So, you both! Listen well. If you enter the iron keep, I do not think HE will allow you to leave alive. Not only is Sodon wary of the grace of gold, but he is anticipating my assault. Why, if he knew we were speaking now, nothing could dissuade him of the idea we are colluding against him!

AVALON

And who is to say we will not? I see a glimmer of a thought in your eye, child of iron!

MALEKI

(eagerly)

Ay, child of gold, you mark me well! Fine; since you are already spoilt by passing through my company, you must admit this to him, and claim to have be accosted, and act terrified! You must say you were intercepted on your journey, and brought before a terrible host, and their fierce leader--

(gnashes his teeth and claws the air)

--and your very lives hung in the balance, until you escaped that pit of vipers, and marked its place, and have full knowledge of that host to bring to Sodon, thus redeeming yourself in his eyes, and declaring your part openly that he would otherwise anticipate secretly!

AVALON

It is not far from the truth!

MALEKI

Ah, a good lie is truth with but one twist!  
He will remain suspicious, of course, but this  
will fit his narrative. One thing only, I ask  
of you, my guests! Should you stay at the  
iron keep, someone may approach you in my  
name, and ask a favor of you. I suggest you  
accommodate him, for this favor may save your  
lives!

Roshim and Avalon look at each other. They don't have much  
choice.

ROSHIM

We agree to this plan. Thank you for the  
warning.

AVALON

Yes, indeed!

Maleki leaps to his feet, and roars! He squeezes his eyes  
shut, veins bulging in his swollen arms, and thrusts a clawed  
hand into the air!

MALEKI

Soon, soon! Soon, I shall be upon him, and  
soon these hands shall tear out his throat...  
and war shall make way for peace!

INT. CAMP OF THE CHILDREN OF IRON, BEDCHAMBER

Kenda brings Avalon and Roshim to a small bedchamber. It is carved into the bedrock like all the others, richly furnished, with a single large soft bed beneath a faintly sputtering oil lamp. It is a comfortable space, but windowless.

KENDA

Tomorrow, I shall guide you out of here, and set you back upon the path. Someone shall be outside your door tonight; should you lack for anything, ask and it shall be given to you.

Kenda hesitates, looking at Avalon firmly, and bows.

KENDA

I apologize again for my... hastiness. This is a delicate time. Good-night!

The guards are polite, but visible weapons make it clear the guests are not permitted to leave. Roshim and Avalon retire, and wash in a basin of water already there, then lay together on the big bed, and listen to the strange sounds of men's voices for awhile. Light shines under the carpet-door, which does not do much to muffle the sound.

ROSHIM

(quietly to Avalon)

How much of what was said is true, do you think?

Avalon is silent for so long Roshim wonders if Avalon has fallen asleep, but he sees the latter's eyes reflecting light, looking to and fro.

AVALON

As our host said; a good lie is truth with one twist. I think we cannot trust him; but he has some kind of plan already in motion that does not involve us, and I do not think a leader would pivot quickly from a well-laid plan. I think we are here because he wanted to know if Sodon has contact with the outside, and he has established to his satisfaction that we are chance interlopers. It seems to me that the keep has been cut off. He does not care if outsiders come in; but I do not think Maleki shall permit us to leave should we exit the keep.

ROSHIM

Perhaps he is letting us proceed as a distraction?

AVALON

Perhaps. It is certainly an awkward time to arrive. Have you much knowledge of war?

Roshim almost laughs, but Avalon's tone is serious. He shakes his head.

ROSHIM

You know Aphaelia. The city has never been at war.

AVALON

Indeed! Well, a war is full of feints and distractions, especially a war of attrition. And I can think of no better feint than for Maleki to send us to his father. It casts quite a pall over our arrival! Perhaps we should turn back after all; and yet, I think that door has also closed behind us.

ROSHIM

Shall you stay back here at the camp while I proceed? If the Lord here despises you as Maleki says he does, it may be wise to remain behind.

Another long silence, broken only by the sputtering of the faint light.

AVALON

(softly)

No. I shall accompany you.

Roshim lays his hand over Avalon's shoulder, feeling the wiry muscle. He kneads and strokes, feeling the power in his hands, and makes sure Avalon can feel it too. The latter shivers a bit, and arches back against him.

ROSIM

In the Library, we have many stories of the strength and wisdom of Sodon. I shall remind him of his former deeds, and perhaps his heart will be swayed. And should harm befall you, it shall strike me first, I swear.

Avalon shivers again, but says nothing.

In his dream that night, Roshim briefly glimpses what Kenda described: an endless sea, glowing blue-green at the horizon, and the silhouette of an island with three broken pillars. Upon the highest pillar, against the strange stars, a flutter of a yellow cloth, and the soft keen of a pipe over the still water as Avalon plays.

EXT. THE IRON KEEP      MORNING

Early the next day, Kenda appears with a trio of guards to escort them out of the camp. At the edge of the keepway road, Roshim retrieves the sand-cart, but before he can leave, Kenda catches him by the shoulder, and points to a distinct ridge like two broken horns rising out of the hilly terrain.

KENDA

Should the Lord of Iron send someone to us, take them there. An outpost will make it appear occupied; they cannot tell how many men are present, in the caves. Say that is the rebel hideout, that the main body of the army is in the caves. Do so, and the Lord Maleki will reward your loyalty.

ROSHIM

It will be done.

By the time Roshim and Avalon reach the road, the rocky hills appeared empty again.

In the distance, the hazy outline of the iron keep rises from behind a hill. Hours later, in the heat of the sun, they arrive at the great gate. The walls of the keep are made of beaten iron, rust streaming down the hammered sides, old corrosion of a saltwater memory smeared about the base. The bastions are like iron spikes, rising buttresses of metal that fit into the wall crudely. The wall is round, with riveted

seams, and slopes inward. The whole effect is like an ancient metal shield, left out in the elements; it shimmers in the light of the sun, and Roshim can feel the heat reflected from the gate at quite a distance.

From a balcony to the side of the great gate, a uniformed man stands and gestures to them. His attitude is unwelcoming. Below the balcony, a black flag with a red standard flutters-- the standard is two suns or circles, one large and one small, as if two suns were orbiting each other.

In a few moments, a small door opens at the bottom of the great gate, and a group of armored men emerge, wielding great pikes. They approach, and gesture for Roshim to unhitch the sand-cart, which he does.

A couple other cloaked men search the cart, and Roshim's hammer is brought out. He clenches his jaw at the way it is handled, but it is perfunctorily inspected and replaced. Roshim notes that many of the men face outward toward the desert, their eyes scanning the horizon.

At last a man in ornamental armor stands before him, eyes in shade from a visor. The man peers at him and Avalon, while pikes are lowered in their direction. He has a great beard and mustache, carefully trimmed, and a white cloth protecting his neck and shoulders from the sun. His eyes linger over Roshim, more curious than wary.

MAELLUM

I am Maellum, captain of the south gate of Iron Loraine. Who are you and what are you doing here?

ROSHIM

I am Roshim of Aphaelia. I come to speak with Lord Sodon, and beseech his aid, for he laid the foundations of my Library, and I wish to know how they might be repaired.

AVALON

And I am Avalon, child of the host, protector of Aphaelia and Roshim's guide in this holy land.

The captain grunts, one eye screwed nearly shut against the light, looking at them both thoughtfully for a moment. He gestures, and they are herded inside the small door, into a solemn-looking guard barracks, where the cart is left. Roshim has to stoop to pass under the low door, but soon they enter a wide corridor, more ornate but still stark, with Maellum leading the way.

The fortress' cavernous hallways are stone and iron, the same colors as the desert outside. The tall profile of the halls allows the hot air to rise, and despite the occasional rush of burning air from some door or window, Roshim finds the temperature quite cool.

After walking for some distance, they climb a circular stairway where a dozen men could walk abreast, then pass through a narrow but tall doorway with a door of iron into a wide circular room. The room appears equal parts audience hall, throne room, and arena. Light from the vented domed ceiling makes the rivets and struts of the iron walls stand in stark relief.

At the far end of the chamber, a wide dais raises seven chairs, six smaller and the center one large: Maleki sits in one of those smaller chairs.

INT. THE IRON KEEP THRONEROOM      DAY

Beside him, Roshim feels Avalon tense at the same thought, then realize along with him: the demiman is not Maleki, but one smaller, wearing a fine cloak, his hair trimmed and mane arrayed in finery, apparently in deep discussion with a handful of military men. More figures in military finery, women, couriers stand along with him. Weapons are prominently displayed; not all practical, but all impressive. A vast hammer, with a square head, is hung on the wall above the large throne. All eyes turn toward the visitors.

Roshim and Avalon are ushered forward. The figure in the chair raises a palm.

MAELLUM

(loudly)

Namabeth, your lordship, I beg your pardon.  
These two approached the south gate to speak  
with Lord Sodon.

The crowd in the room murmurs. Namabeth leans back in his chair, and gestures for them to come forward. The tension in the room is thick, and Roshim is keenly aware of the number of hands on hilts. The small of his back grows damp with sweat.

Maellum approaches Namabeth, and they confer together in low voices for a time. Finally Namabeth addresses Roshim and Avalon:

NAMABETH

Who are you? Why do you want to speak to the Lord?

AVALON

I am Avalon, the guide to this man Roshim, who seeks the Lord's wisdom.

ROSHIM

I am Roshim, come to the Lord for answers regarding his part in constructing my home, Aphaelia.

Namabeth stares at them, and his red eyes trace Avalon's face with particular animosity. The tension in the room does not abate.

NAMABETH

The Lord is busy. You will have your business with me. Did you encounter any trouble crossing the desert?

Avalon begins to speak, but Namabeth gestures to Roshim.

NAMABETH

You talk, sheep-man. Not him.

ROSHIM

As we crossed the desert, intent on my original errand, we were waylaid by the ruin of a gate by footsoldiers. We were brought before a man named Maleki, who claimed to be heir to the iron keep, and leader of a group of bandits, and he took our supplies for himself, and threatened to kill us; but that night, I broke the bars of our cell and we escaped across the hills to the iron keep. We had thought the only danger of the desert would be the heat. There are ill rumors in Under-Epha, but we thought them of no consequence; now I know better!

NAMABETH

And what did you hear, in Under-Epha?

ROSHIM

That supplies to the iron keep had been halted due to bandits. Surely the same ruffians who waylaid us have interfered with supplies from the city!

NAMABETH

Indeed, it is the same group. You are a fool to set yourself on this road. Or perhaps something else entirely--

A man in garb of the south gate rushes in and speaks to

Maellum. Maellum turns to Namabeth and nods. Namabeth's face twists in annoyance and fear for a brief moment before his stone-faced aspect returns.

MAELLUM

Sodon is coming. He heard someone approached the south gate.

NAMABETH

Out, out! Everyone, out. Maellum; remain at the door.

The tension in the room ratchets up to something near terror. Quickly, in a way that evidences familiarity, the room is emptied. One man rolls up parchment, dropping several scrolls on his way out; he does not pause to retrieve them. In moments, Roshim and Avalon and Namabeth are alone in the echoing room with two guards at the door. Though Namabeth glares at them, his gaze is far away, as if he is wholly occupied with some other thought.

After a period of tense silence, the door is flung open with a bang. A vast beast unfolds himself out of the frame, standing a full head higher than Roshim as he emerges; at first merely a fluttering trail of cape and mane and lumpen shapes, Roshim realizes this is Sodon, a parody of grotesque physical strength, his swollen muscles heaving as he lopes into the room, horned head twisting on a neck like a horse's, a pattern of vascularity on his mighty chest and arms that looks ready to burst.

One red eye locks onto Roshim's face, and a feeling like standing too close to a roaring fire comes over him, then that fiery gaze moves to Avalon. The beast grunts, floor shaking beneath his tread as he comes close, staring at Avalon's smooth face, fiery hair. Avalon stares back at the black mass of heaving hair and muscle, his own shoulders tense.

The beast barks-- no, Roshim realizes, Sodon is laughing. Behind Sodon's shoulder, Roshim sees Namabeth's face, sullen and angry.

#### SODON

Welcome, honored guests-- to the halls of my home! I am privileged to greet you myself. Your journey must have been long, and your trials many. Please, tell me: how may I serve you?

This unexpected agreeableness takes Roshim completely off guard, and he can feel surprise radiating from Avalon.

Seeing his visitors hesitate, Sodon calls for water and wine, and they sit on cushions at a low table while the Lord sits on his great throne, which protests under his weight. Namabeth sits beside his father, his aspect still quiet and sullen. Sodon ignores Namabeth and gazes intently at Roshim and Avalon.

SODON

(to Avalon)

You have never visited my halls, child of gold. It is my pleasure to receive you at long last. I am a great admirer of your father. Has he spoken much to you of me?

AVALON

He has praised your mighty work of Loraine, and your keen tactical mind, and your invaluable bolstering of the army of the Stranger.

SODON

I WAS the army of the Stranger. But how times change! This sad husk, Loraine; would you have seen it in its proper state, shining across from the temple of Gold... now it is a dung heap, a scurrying ant-hill that threatens to disintegrate. I am surrounded by fools. Alas, the fruit of iron is rust! I have heard the fruit of gold is more precious.

Namabeth squirms angrily in his seat. Sodon does not glance to him. His gaze seems to wander, past Roshim and Avalon, to the weapons and armor girding the walls.

AVALON

I have not asked my father's opinion, but he cast me out of the kingdom some time ago. Only recently I have returned, and I fear all glory fades at last; the temple is a green ruin, though the city below flourishes.

SODON

Ahhh, but your father got what he wanted out of his kingdom. No, no, child of gold, your father meant for men, ordinary men, to inherit the earth. He was a shepherd. And speaking of sheep--

(to Roshim)

--this surprises me most of all. That Library! It persists, no doubt, in its own shabby echo of its founders' decline.

ROSHIM

The Library prospers. It honors the Archmasters, and it has grown to be a mighty tower, reaching towards heaven. The deeds of Sodon are well-kept there, and honored.

SODON

Oh, well, that is extraordinary. My apology!  
I must say I never held much hope for it;  
Oidecalla, Rhodowyn, and Astheopithicus held  
more with the future than with the present.  
Bah! Who can predict the future? Still,  
there are lessons to learn.

Sodon gazes at Roshim's thick frame, his large arms and sturdy legs. He seems to approve of Roshim's physical aspect, but there is a glint of something sinister lurking in the appraisal.

NAMABETH

Father-- these two were accosted on the road  
by Maleki.

Sodon nods. He signs for more wine.

SODON

Of course they were. I would expect every  
road is watched. And he took you, did he not?  
What happened?

ROSHIIM

We were accosted, taken to a hidden camp in the hills. There we met Maleki, who threatened our lives, took our supplies, and revealed he intended to strike at the keep with his group of armed men. That night, I broke out of our enclosure and we made our way to the door of your keep.

SODON

...I see.

Sodon looks at Avalon, the embers of his eyes burning hot.

SODON

Did Maleki seek an audience with glory? Were you sent to me by your sire, child? You are both marked by gold.

AVALON

No, Lord. I accompanied Roshim for years. I am no longer of the kingdom of gold; I belong to the Library.

SODON

You see the work of my hands, do you not? The fortress of Sodon is not merely on this side of the firmament. You have fallen into a deep well, for this is not a place you may take leave of without my consent. Why did you enter this place?

AVALON

I am here to see Roshim's journey through. That is all.

Sodon licks his lips in the same manner Maleki does. He stares at Avalon, glances at Roshim, returns his gaze to Avalon.

SODON

(to Avalon)

He burns brightly. But he is mortal. What is the meaning of this blessing?

AVALON

Only glory can tell. He was gifted this upon leaving Carcos. I was not permitted to pass the gates; I do not know what transpired between them.

Sodon laughs. His loud barks reverberate in the room.

SODON

I had thought to cage you before, child of gold. I laid plans and made schemes. But in truth, once I learned of your attempt on your father's life, I abandoned them all, because I understood who you were. You attempted to seize strength, and failed. You recognize that dreams and visions are not enough. A seed cannot grow large enough to move a mountain. You are doomed to look upon true strength and never grasp it.

Avalon does not answer, but his eyes turn away. Roshim cannot see what he is thinking, but Sodon seems satisfied. Sodon leans forward, his eyes alight with pleasure or satisfaction.

SODON

I often wondered why he had but one child. For a time it seemed like wisdom; but now, I see that it was disappointment. A child draws strength toward their father; you brought him nothing.

Avalon remains silent, his head bowed. Sodon leans back, drinking deeply. When he sits forward suddenly, the throne rattles, and Namabeth flinches. Sodon stares at Roshim, eyes alight with some strong emotion.

SODON

The glory of gold has withdrawn from old Carcosa. There is no longer light upon the mountain; but here before me, I see that pale light still shining. In a mortal man, no less! What did YOU do, to wrest it from that ancient serpent?

ROSHIM

I told him my mission. He offered me strength to complete it, and bade me to visit the remaining Lords to find answers.

Sodon's good humor seems to be draining from him, little by little. His movements become sharper, his voice rougher. He looks toward Avalon to see the reaction to Roshim's admission, sneering slightly.

SODON

(mockingly)

So he commanded you and his son to meet me? At this moment, when the rebellion surges against the walls of this fortress, the Lord of Gold sends you to me? And already, Maleki has spoken to you. And all this effort for that old ambition, that old Library? No, no. I will not abide this foolishness. You come from powers allied against me, who plot the downfall of this city, who plan to topple the throne of iron. How can I believe you?

ROS HIM

I swear, it is the truth.

Sodon stares at him, then looks contemptuously at Namabeth. He gestures towards his sullen son but speaks to Roshim:

SODON

And this, you see-- this is the price of loyalty! A circle of dogs who cower in my shadow. I am surrounded by liars. My own kin are weak. I look at you, Roshim of Aphaelia, and I admit, I am refreshed by the look in your eye. That you would come to my halls, and stand in my presence, and remain unbowed-- this is good. Strength recognizes strength; a rope of many cords is stronger than those cords alone. In this keep, I have few men I trust. How should I come to trust you? Why should I give you what you ask for? And why do you believe the Lord of Gold sent you here? Surely you know the serpent is subtle and wise in his designs; why would he invite your opinion on his plans? Speak to me! If I know your loyalty, then I shall assist you, out of respect for the strength in your eyes.

ROSHM

We escaped a camp of several thousand men in the hills of the desert. They were six hours on foot from the keep. I know not of war as you do, general, but I can tell you where they were, if that would help you.

Sodon growls appreciatively, and Namabeth sits up. Sodon's eyes are still bright with suspicion, but he nods.

SODON

Would you, indeed? That is very good. And yet, if you had conspired with Maleki, I would expect something of the sort. He should want to draw me from the city, to probe a crack or weakness. He is a fierce strategist, and his strength rivals my own.

(to Avalon)

Indeed, child of gold, you have much in common with his patricidal desires... would that I had learned the lesson that the Lord of Gold did! Yet he was not beset by usurpers.

Sodon gestures toward the empty seats beside him and Namabeth.

#### SODON

Sadumon, killed upholding my will to the men of the west; Jediah, Sipho, in their coup, killed by Maleki; and then Maleki plotted his own revolt, for no matter how much I gave him, he could never be satisfied, til he fled to conspire against me; Hediah dead by my hand. Now remains Namabeth the weak, a good son who dares not raise his voice against me, injured in his youth and unsuited for war.

Namabeth raises his chin, and in his eyes Roshim sees the fire of shame and anger.

#### NAMABETH

Father-- if it is your will, let me go out with Roshim tonight and see the camp with my own eyes. You must remain here; Maleki wants you to leave the city, so he can enter and rally the remnants of his allies. We will return tomorrow, and if Roshim tells true, draw up war plans to cut the throat of the rebellion. For without Maleki, his men will fall apart, and I have no doubt the people will align with you.

Sodon stares at him, and Namabeth shrinks a bit, but remains steady under his father's baleful glare.

NAMABETH

Weak though you are, at times the flame  
bestowed to you does not seem a waste. I  
agree. Should I leave now, some of the  
generals may become restless.

(to Roshim)

We shall know if you are loyal, Roshim of  
Aphaelia. The child of gold shall stay here  
with me, and know this: if you or Namabeth do  
not return, he shall surely die.

Sodon rises to his full height, grotesque and reeking of  
wine. He sways, fixing Roshim with one red eye, and gestures  
toward the door. Maellum and a handful of guards converge on  
Roshim and Avalon.

SODON

I reward loyalty, and I punish disobedience.  
If you have some hand in helping me root out  
these murderous cowards, I will grant you  
whatever you desire. Go with my son Namabeth,  
and return in a manner that honors me.

ROSHIM

Allow me a moment to speak with Avalon, Lord.

SODON

You may have a moment, now, but not in secret.  
There is nothing to hide here, after all.

Avalon's sun cloak is trembling slightly, but he smiles at Roshim. Roshim approaches him, and lays hands on on his shoulders.

ROSIM

I will return for you, I swear it.

AVALON

I believe you.

Namabeth rises from his chair with some difficulty, but throws his head back proudly.

NAMABETH

Thank you, Father, for this honor to serve you.

Sodon says nothing. Maellum and Namabeth walk with Roshim out of the room, and Avalon remains behind.

EXT. INTERIOR OF THE IRON KEEP      LATE AFTERNOON

Roshim follows Namabeth, the latter limping but moving quickly, not speaking to him. They pass outdoors suddenly, and the heat and light blinds Roshim; when he recovers, he sees a dusty ruin of a keep-town, nearly motionless in the stark afternoon sun. Haggard folk move in the shadow; the gleaming armor of Sodon's troops shines on every street corner. As they walk to the castle barracks, a brutal block of stone with iron-domed bastions, Roshim sees bodies strung along the road, impaled on iron spikes. Horrified, he sees that their heads have been smashed or are missing entirely; there is no clean mark of a blade to be seen. Some of the bodies have desiccated in the heat, but a few are fresh.

Namabeth notices his horror, and grins mirthlessly.

NAMABETH

One must have order, I maintain.

They ascend into the barracks, and Roshim is shown to a small cell-like room with a table and bunk and washing-basin. Maellum bows stiffly and excuses himself; Namabeth lingers for a moment as Roshim seats himself on the bed.

NAMABETH

Rest here. Food will be brought to you.  
Tonight I shall fetch you, and we will make  
our way to the rebel camp under cover of  
darkness. For your sake, and the sake of your  
companion, I hope you spoke true.

Roshim tosses his sun cloak over a chair, and when he turns  
back, Namabeth is staring at his body. There is a mix of  
carnal lust and envy in the other's eyes.

ROSHIM

You will be satisfied, child of iron. No need  
for threats. Will water be brought, so I may  
wash my face?

Namabeth starts and calls for water. A servant fills the  
rude basin with very little water and sets a scented cloth.  
Roshim splashes his face and neck then starts wiping down his  
huge body, conscious of Namabeth's gaze upon him and the fact  
they are alone. Roshim speaks so Namabeth has reason to stay;  
he feels some disgust and sympathy for the way in which Sodon  
shamed Namabeth.

ROSHIM

You look like your brother-- like Maleki.

NAMABETH

Well, that is to be expected. All of Sodon's children look alike.

(hesitates)

You spoke face to face with Maleki?

ROSHIM

We had an feast and audience. He seemed oddly merry. Optimistic, it seemed. He drank a good deal.

NAMABETH

He always drank too much. Did he speak at all to you of Sodon, of the iron keep?

Roshim hesitates. He doesn't want to speak in too much detail for fear of giving something away.

ROSHIM

He seemed quite angry toward Sodon.

Namabeth nods and moves a bit closer. He pushes a hand against the door, as if to ensure it's closed.

NAMABETH

He was a fool, to express his anger. The Lord has put down many a rebellion. Indeed, Maleki himself knew the price of such a thing. The Lord's trust is hard-gained and easily lost. But there is no better path to his trust than to be useful. You are a warrior, are you not? That shall already put you in his favor.

Roshim reaches out, takes Namabeth's hand and rests it on the scars of his forearm. Namabeth tenses, pulling away, but Roshim holds him easily, and Namabeth lets out a long, shuddering exhalation.

ROSHIM

I fight when I need to. But I am not a warrior, nor a soldier. I do not love the sword for its brightness; I love what it defends.

Namabeth's fingers trace the scars, running up Roshim's big arm. He swallows, a stubborn set to his jaw, staring up at Roshim. The uneasy mix of envy, hate, and desire make his wide eyes bright.

NAMABETH

Strength is strength. Power is power.  
Whatever story you need to tell yourself,  
horned warrior. There are many reasons to  
swing a sword-- or hammer. All warriors are  
storytellers and strength is its own  
justification.

ROSHIM

(speaking low)

Strength is expressed in many ways, child of  
iron. And though there is pleasure in  
conquest, don't you think there is also  
pleasure in submission? What fool would deny  
that?

Namabeth grips Roshim's huge arms, and feels his shoulders.  
Roshim stands still and lets him touch, looking down at  
Namabeth's face. The latter's breath comes heavy, yet he  
grimaces at Roshim's words.

NAMABETH

I submit to my father. I submitted to Maleki.  
What little pleasure there may be has long  
faded. You have not lived in the shadow of  
strength as long as I have, stranger. It is  
withering. One must seize strength of one's  
own, to be free. You might tell me of the  
burden of strength; I tell you, to be weak is  
worse.

ROS HIM

Why do you say you are weak?

NAMABETH

Any man in this city could kill me, stranger.  
You could. What is weakness, if not that?

ROS HIM

I would not kill you.

NAMABETH

Then you do not respect me, for you do not  
view my life as a threat to yours.

ROS HIM

I do not view any life as a threat, child of  
iron. Am I a threat to you?

Namabeth shoves him, but Roshim does not move from the feeble push, though he is startled. He blinks, and steps back. Namabeth bares his teeth, eyes blazing. He fumbles for the door, leaves the room.

With that poisonous look lingering in his mind, Roshim finishes his toilet and sits on the creaking bed. The same servant brings simple food and drink, bows. Roshim notices his parched lips.

SERVANT

My Lord Namabeth bids you eat and rest. He  
will return later tonight.

ROSHIM

Tell him I will, and I thank him for his  
hospitality.

After the hearty meal, Roshim lays down. His thoughts are  
troubled and he feels as if he could not sleep; yet sleep comes  
suddenly, without drowsiness.

EXT. RICE FIELDS OF APHAELIA      MORNING

Roshim dreams of his home, and himself as a child on the cusp of manhood. He feels the warm sun on his back, the cool water on his ankles. He hears the rushing of water, turns, and sees the sun-baked side of the grand aqueduct, leading off to Aphaelia, bringing water down from the snow-capped mountains. It is spring, and the fields are being planted, and renewed.

Roshim turns away from the duct, and sees his class; children of the same age, mostly male, working under the supervision of older people to fertilize the fields. Many of the children look like goats, sheep; some faces an uncanny blend of man and animal, or so he is told by visitors to Aphaelia, but to Roshim, they look like his people, and there is nothing strange about it.

Roshim is a swarthy twelve years old, biggest out of several hundred in his class, and nearly as big as some of the adults though his horns are mere stubs poking through his tightly curling hair. He hesitates; then sees the bright gleam of golden curls among the working boys, and his heart jumps.

Cristio needs help. The small boy is emptying a bag of fertilizer, carefully dropping it in a line, moving across the field along with everyone else. He shakes out the bag, folds it as he moves toward the plankway. By the time he reaches it, Roshim is there, slinging a new bag over his broad shoulders, grinning.

Cristio grins back. His golden sheaf of curls is held together in a scarf, pulled tight over his budding horns. His small brown shoulders are wiry, slightly oversized hands and feet showing he will grow tall.

ROSHM

I thought Rami was your second today!

CRISTIO

He is, he is-- but he is resting. I said I would continue.

ROSHM

Oh, that loafer! Well, we ought to take a rest together, later-- it isn't good to work alone, dear. You should have called me over!

CRISTIO

Ah, but I saw you were helping the men clear the duct. That is more important work. I can manage on my own, for a little while.

ROSHM

Don't struggle when it's not necessary!  
Especially when I am right over there. What good is all this  
(flexes his muscles)  
if it goes to waste cleaning some old duct?

CRISTIO

(giggling)

You want to walk behind me, don't you? I see  
what this is all about, now!

(hikes up his underclothes and shows off long brown legs)

They return to the field, Roshim jovial and smiling as he holds the big bag easily. The workers occasionally sing together, and the loud chorus echoes over the water. Ahead of Roshim, the golden curls gleam, the curves of his lover bend and sway in easy motions; behind them, the white tower of Aphaelia, with the great sea shining behind it.

For an instant, Roshim realizes this is a dream, a memory consolidated from a thousand such moments. He feels the warmth of someone standing beside him, and the impression of long fiery hair. Though he wants to turn and look, he cannot.

ROSHM

Ah, so you're still here?

There is no answer, but when he blindly reaches out a hand, he feels the faint touch of someone reaching back.

INT. THE IRON CASTLE BARRACKS      NIGHT

Roshim wakes abruptly. He gets up, washes his face, and peers out the high window; the sliver of a new moon peeks though. Night has fallen, and the red desert is cold blue, sky blazing with stars. Roshim wonders where Avalon is being held. He tries the door, but it is barred, so he waits.

Soon the door opens, and Namabeth beckons him out. A handful of men dressed in desert robes and carrying swords await him, their faces hidden. Namabeth takes Roshim to the barracks dressing room, and they find a cloak that suits him, with a hood to go over his horns.

Namabeth is wearing light clothing with embroidery at the edges, and a fine set of braces on his weak arm and legs; Roshim sees the delicate embossing on the metalwork and wants to examine them, but Namabeth sees Roshim looking at the braces and glares at him.

They depart by the south gate, and in the tepid starlight the cloaks blend into the silvery sand.

NAMABETH

Well, stranger? Let us hurry. The night is long but my patience is not. Point out the road, but do not advance far, or you shall be cut down.

Roshim immediately sees the ridge that Maleki instructed

them, rising like two broken horns from the badlands. He points to it.

ROSIM

We must go to that ridge, shaped like two broken horns. The camp rests nearly in its shadow.

NAMABETH

Very well. Move quickly then! And remember your companion's life rests with you.

EXT. THE IRON DESERT      NIGHT

Despite his urge to move quickly, it soon becomes clear that Namabeth cannot keep pace with the rest of his men, let alone Roshim. His soft wheezing grows harsh and obvious, and he stumbles over his sand-shoes, trailing far behind after the first hour. The men ignore this and remain at Roshim's heels, but Roshim glances back uncertainly as Namabeth trails further and further behind.

After an hour or two, Roshim halts. He addresses the men:

ROSHIM

Stay here. I will fetch him.

A STONE-FACED SOLDIER

It is the Lord's wish to move quickly. He said that all must keep the pace, and to leave the weak behind.

ROSHIM

The Lord may rule his city as he sees fit.

Roshim turns and trudges back. He meets Namabeth cresting the hill. The latter's fury is intense.

NAMABETH

(trembling, angry)

What are you doing? Get back and lead the men!

Roshim does not respond to the anger. He sees the trembling arms, the skinny legs shaking. He kneels and gestures.

ROSHIM

Climb on my back. I can carry you easily.

NAMABETH

(outraged)

No, no no! How dare you, how dare you! What are you saying? The men shall not see me like that!

ROSHIM

(forceful)

You cannot keep pace. I can see the way you struggle. Climb on my back and let me carry you.

NAMABETH

(furious)

No! I shall not be seen like that. Get back to the head of the line and carry on!

Even as he speaks, Namabeth sways and collapses. In his eyes Roshim sees the burning humiliation as Namabeth struggles to sit up. Roshim walks to his side, and kneels beside him.

ROSHM

(annoyed)

If I do, you will be left behind, and you will die in this desert.

NAMABETH

(furious)

Then let me die obeying my Lord!

Roshim reaches out and slaps Namabeth's face. The latter recoils, fury fighting surprise, and stares at Roshim, eyes wide in the starlight.

ROSHM

(softly)

Climb on my back. Only a proud fool refuses what he needs.

NAMABETH

(growling)

I am no fool, stranger. I am tired. I am tired of being drawn from my father's scabbard, to be used and put away uncleaned. I am tired of the pity in your eyes. I am tired of the long weary days that stretch before me. I am tired of this burden.

Roshim leans in close, and puts his shoulder under Namabeth's arm, and lifts him. The latter sighs, his fury dimming, though he refuses to meet Roshim's eyes.

ROSHIH

When we return in triumph, and your father tells me what I need to know, I will leave this kingdom. Come with me!

Namabeth trembles, and sighs again. He rests a hand on Roshim's big shoulder. The men cannot be seen beyond the curve of the dune. The wind is still. Above, the stars blaze in a moonless sky.

ROSHIH

(softly)

The days before you need not be weary. None can divine the future, not even the angels, not even the gods themselves. Come with me, and free yourself from this prison. For the prison of the mind is made of sterner stuff than iron.

NAMABETH

(muttering)

I will think on it.

ROSHIH

Good! I do not know you, child of iron; but I know it takes strength of spirit to plot a course of your own choice. There are as many kinds of weakness as strength.

Namabeth climbs on Roshim's back, and Roshim lifts him

easily. Namabeth's breath warms his neck, and Roshim holds Namabeth's thighs. Namabeth loops his arms around Roshim's neck, and Roshim can feel Namabeth trembling.

ROSHIM

Let us go, then! Moonless hours lay before us.

Roshim starts off, his big thighs churning and sand-shoes landing surely. Namabeth exclaims softly as they fly over the neighboring dune, back into sight of the men. Namabeth composes himself, and speaks to them:

NAMABETH

I decided that upholding the will of my father is more important than my dignity. I shall expect the same of you. Let us proceed.

The men seem energized by this, and with Roshim leading, they move forward quickly. Roshim thanks Oidecalla for his newfound strength and size; he barely feels the weight of Namabeth and leads the pack easily.

After a time, Namabeth speaks.

NAMABETH

I am surprised at your strength, Roshim. Surely among your people you are a mighty man. No wonder you were chosen for a long journey.

ROSIM

I am blessed, O Namabeth, yet not remarkable  
when measured against the stock of my people,  
for great men and women have come and gone,  
and I am one of a multitude. Even this  
journey is not so strange; when a man comes of  
age and wants to secure a place among his  
people, he travels to discover new knowledge,  
and bring it back to add to the Great Work.  
That is my journey. Why, if you desire, there  
may be a place for you there, also. The  
Library is a place for everyone.

NAMABETH

I should like to see such a place. No wonder  
then that the child of gold chose to alight  
there.

EXT. OUTPOST OF THE CHILDREN OF IRON      NIGHT

Hours later, the party arrives at the foothills of the rocky ridge, rising like two broken horns. Namabeth dismounts from Roshim, and leads the party in picking a slow and careful ascent, concealing their approach from the rear side of the foothills. The sandcloaks blend well, and even in motion Roshim finds it difficult to see Namabeth or his men when they crouch.

Namabeth stops and falls to the sand, and inches forward on his hands and knees. Everyone follows suit, and Roshim sees there is a lone feeble torchlight glinting under an outcrop, casting a shadow.

Namabeth sends several of his men to circle the outcrop, and keeps Roshim beside him. Namabeth's breath is harsh, but his eyes are gleaming with satisfaction, and he looks at Roshim with approval.

Soon the men return, and in low voices give their reports.

SOLDIER

There are three entrances, and burrow deep into the root of the mountain. The entrances are well-guarded, and one of them is wide enough to put a carriage through. It is impossible to say how many men are present; however, I counted at least thirty on the Eka side. They had iron weapons from the keep; they are certainly deserters.

ANOTHER SOLDIER

These old caves run deep. There could be an entire host sleeping beneath this mountain.

Namabeth turns to Roshim, his amber eyes searching Roshim's face. Then he smiles a broad smile.

NAMABETH

The Lord will be pleased with us, Roshim.

EXT. THE IRON CITY      EARLY MORNING

The stars have nearly faded by the time the party returns to the south gate. Maellum lets them through, and they are immediately brought before Sodon into his war-room. Roshim stands silently while Namabeth describes the journey, the layout of the camp, and draws lines and circles in a smooth floor of sand to illustrate. Sodon's hulking figure looms above his small progeny, but Namabeth seems unafraid, and speaks quickly and confidently.

A cadre of generals are brought in, and Sodon and Namabeth begin to draw up war plans with them. Though Roshim is too far to hear most of it, he feels the energy in the room, the confidence in Namabeth's gestures, and Roshim begins to doze a little, wishing he could speak to Avalon.

At last, Namabeth stumbles, his own weariness overcoming him, and straightens himself against the table, rising back up. But Sodon calls for a servant, such that all could hear:

SODON

My son must rest. He has done invaluable work, and with the help of the stranger, we shall soon strike a crushing blow. Retire, Namabeth, and return when you are able. I am pleased.

SODON

(to Roshim)

The child of gold will be released to your care once our plans are laid, Roshim of Aphaelia. We shall speak later, and I will attend to your matter-- for now, I must prepare, and you must rest.

Namabeth gestures for Roshim to come with him, and Roshim follows. Through a tired haze, he realizes that they are going to a different part of the lower keep, with great vaulted halls and ornate paneling. They enter a grand dining hall, and sit at the end of a long polished table. Fine food is brought, and he eats, slowly realizing it is only him and Namabeth, with a servant outside the door.

NAMABETH

There will be a feast to remember, later. For now, relish this. Little of this fine vintage is left, but soon our storehouses will be overflowing when the roads open back up. Drink with me, Roshim. You have done me great service.

They drink, and though Roshim sips sparingly, the strong wine makes him reel. Namabeth admires him as Roshim throws off his cloak, and Roshim returns the glances. Despite Namabeth's weak legs, his body is supple and wiry, the result of hard training.

NAMABETH

Perhaps you should stay here, Roshim. My father would welcome one like you-- yes, I dare speak on his behalf. I sense our compliment. A desire to support, a strong sense of duty and justice are necessary to raise up a kingdom. Strength of body, and mind.

ROSHIM

Oh, yes? You flatter me. I feel so young, so inexperienced.

NAMABETH

Of course, but that is remedied in time. This place has been stagnant for so long, it is hungry for change. New blood. New strength. You will see soon enough. Come, sit beside me.

A servant brings forth a plate of dainties, and Namabeth picks from them, his eyes lascivious. Roshim sits with him, and the lounge creaks. Namabeth rests a hand on Roshim's thigh, and Roshim lays a big hand on the other's back.

ROSHIM

Are you certain you are not mistaking your own hunger for another's, Namabeth?

Roshim plucks dainties from the plate and feeds them to

Namabeth, who licks his fingers greedily, the lithe body responding to Roshim's firm grip on Namabeth's shoulder. Roshim abruptly pushes himself atop Namabeth, seeing the half-surprise, half-anger, the bared teeth and wounded pride, and pauses there, letting Namabeth feel his bulk.

NAMABETH

I will not submit to you, Roshim.

ROSHIM

Of course not, son of iron. But I should like to retire somewhere quiet and private, and discuss things that will be to our mutual benefit.

NAMABETH

Come then. I feel a great weariness upon me; yet it is better to address such business as ours.

They retire down the hall to Namabeth's quarters, sparsely but lavishly decorated with fine silks and linens, fine weapons displayed on the walls, along with tapestries that depict Sodon's grand battles. Roshim recognizes some of the scenes from the Library's own records, but he loses interest. His desire to dominate Namabeth is almost painful, and Namabeth laughs, eyes glinting at Roshim's prominent erection.

NAMABETH

Why, I thought all your weapons were removed at the gate, O stranger... yet I see one was overlooked, though how it could be missed, I do not know.

Namabeth carefully removes and folds his fine garments, his ornate braces, and at last stands naked. His muscles are fine and unimposing, all shapes fitting neatly together, and he stands before Roshim, uncertain but with the air of command.

NAMABETH

I shall lead, and you shall follow.

ROSHIM

No. I shall lead; you shall follow me.

Namabeth's eyes flash with a light of excitement, and wounded pride again. He looks angry. Roshim begins removing his clothing, casting it carelessly to the floor, and walking up to Namabeth, staring down at him.

Roshim sees that Namabeth cannot bring himself to submit, though Roshim's long sexual history tells him Namabeth is longing to be submissive. Roshim considers.

ROSHIM

A contest of will. He who wins shall lead.  
Lay in bed, and wrestle me.

NAMABETH

And how is that a contest of will? You outweigh me two-to-one, stranger.

ROSHIM

(grinning)

Nothing to be done about that, child of iron. I want to put my hands on you.

Namabeth considers, his own erection growing. He takes a small knife from table and holds it up.

NAMABETH

I shall use this, if I feel you are being too bold with me. What do you say to that?

Roshim is a bit taken aback, but nods. He strokes along Namabeth's flank, and swaggers to the bed. The frame creaks heavily as he sits.

ROSHIM

I am honored to bed you, child of iron. Now come here. Let me have you.

Namabeth trembles and tries to hide his glee. He trots over and hops in, the short knife gleaming in his hand, and Roshim seizes Namabeth's hips and immediately thrusts, pressing his hard cock against Namabeth's belly, holding them together.

Namabeth groans and sighs, pressing down, hands on Roshim's

chest, fingers curling. They sway together, grinding. Roshim puts a hand behind Namabeth's neck and rolls him over. They wrestle, playful but determined, feeling the limits of power, growing sweaty and slippery, grasping each other. Roshim's horns tear the linen, and Namabeth bites him, the small knife prodding gently and leaving droplets of red on the white sheets.

So they go, getting wilder, and Namabeth arches his sweaty back, Roshim gripping that mane of hair and pulling him, growing bolder as Namabeth offers less and less resistance. Roshim growls as the little knife jabs him once more, and slaps it out of Namabeth's hand, and slaps Namabeth's face.

ROSHIM

(growling)

Enough! I will have you. Submit or not, you are mine, Namabeth bin Sodon. None shall say you gave yourself willingly.

Namabeth's eyes light up with hunger, eagerness, and he lets out a whine like a cat in heat. Roshim takes a lamp and slathers his hand with oil, and rubs it along Namabeth's back, ass, and fingers him ruthlessly. Namabeth squirms and growls, but his eyes are glassy with horrified delight as Roshim sinks his hard cock inside, and Namabeth cums almost immediately across Roshim's stomach. Roshim fucks Namabeth hard, cumming inside Namabeth over and over again, letting him scratch and claw at Roshim's heaving chest.

At last they part, Roshim sitting up and drinking more wine, Namabeth sprawled out, steam rising from his lithe body, his legs twitching as he sighs blissfully. The bed is a mess of fluids and nearly torn to shreds. Roshim dabs at the small cuts on his arms, and growls. He feels strong, indeed, and the awed glances Namabeth gives him make him feel like a demigod.

As the pleasure fades, a tinge of shame returns to Namabeth's face. He sits up stiffly, and drinks as well in silence for a time.

NAMABETH

You have assaulted my dignity twice tonight, Roshim of Aphaelia. And yet, I must say, I do not feel the same shame I would, had you been a lesser man.

Roshim does not know what to say to that, so he drinks and says nothing. Namabeth sighs and lays back on the bed.

NAMABETH

Go back to your quarters. Tomorrow we shall confer. Celebration is all well and good, but do not forget your place. I may have been overhasty.

ROSHIM

I enjoyed our time together. There is no shame in celebration. Sleep well, child of iron.

With Namabeth's eyes following him, Roshim collects his things and dresses, then a servant leads him back to his quarters. The moody conflict in Namabeth's face occupies Roshim's mind for awhile, but shortly after laying down in his small bed, he plunges into a weary, dreamless sleep.

INT. ROSHIM'S ROOM IN THE IRON BARRACKS      MIDDAY

Roshim abruptly wakes hours later, his mouth dry. A jar of water has been placed on the low table; he drinks, and stares up at the narrow window, and the white block of sky.

Roshim tries the door, and to his surprise it is not barred. He wanders out until he emerges into the barracks courtyard, where he finds a group of men cleaning armor. They stop talking and stare at him. There are no demimen among them; instead they are a swarthy breed like Kenda, with short beards and well-trimmed hair.

A senior man speaks, no more than forty years.

SENIOR SOLDIER

(amused)

What do you need, bull-ram?

ROSHIM

I should like to walk around outdoors and see the city. How do I exit this place?

SENIOR SOLDIER

You exit straight down thataway.

(points)

But I advise against it, stranger. One does not stroll about the city without their *fasci*.

ROSHM

I do not know that word.

The man rattles a small leather box strung around his neck.

SENIOR SOLDIER

Papers of authority. If you do not have them, the guard will take you. If you do not have them, it is better to stay here. The iron city stirs today. Best not to get stirred up with it, bull-ram.

The other men laugh and nudge each other. Roshim stares back, and the idle mockery in the senior soldier's eyes causes an fierce anger to tense the muscles of his broad back. Roshim lets out a breath and calms himself.

ROSHM

I am here as a guest of Namabeth. If I must wait, is there something to eat?

SENIOR SOLDIER

Ah, I know you who are, bull-ram. If Namabeth left you here, here you will stay. But eating requires no papers! Avidad, take him to the mess hall.

A lanky man with a scraggly beard and sharp dark eyes rises from the group, and jerks his head for Roshim to follow. They walk through a series of wide corridors to the mess, Roshim's

horns banging against a couple low archways.

ROSHIM

Why is the city stirring today?

AVIDAD

Warmaking. Troops marshaling. The order has been given to prepare.

ROSHIM

Prepare for what?

AVIDAD

I do not know. Weapons are being sharpened; armor is being oiled, shields counted. Captain hasn't said yet.

They pass a group of armored soldiers with decorative bandoleers. Avidad salutes. Roshim moves out of the way clumsily, a head taller than all of them. One of the group stops and stares at him.

DECORATED SOLDIER

(to Avidad, sharply)

Why is this man with you? Captain Maellum seeks him.

AVIDAD

The bull-ram wandered into the courtyard and asked to be taken to the mess. Ardnoi told me to accompany him.

DECORATED SOLDIER

No, no, no. This is quite incorrect. I shall take him to the captain myself. Return to your duty.

Avidad salutes and leaves without a word. The soldier waves on his fellows and stares up at Roshim. He claps Roshim's arm in a friendly way.

ASHWALD

I am Lieutenant Ashwald, under Captain Maellum of the South Gate, under Lord Namabeth of the Line. You are Roshim, correct?

ROSHIM

I am.

ASHWALD

Good. The captain wanted an audience this morning, but Namabeth did not tell him where you had been put in the barracks last night. He shall see you immediately.

Roshim follows Ashwald, who moves at a brisk pace, exiting the barracks and out into the oppressive heat and light. There

are many soldiers rushing to and fro who stop to salute Ashwald, and Roshim sees the great court between the barracks and the iron keep is bustling with activity. Lines of weapons are being racked, and rows of soldiers carry gleaming pieces of armor that catch the sun.

On the pikes of desiccated corpses outside the barracks, two new bodies have been added.

They enter the keep and ascend, trudging up long spiral stairs, until at last they nearly are at the top. Outside of the window, Roshim sees over the great iron walls, to the ridges of red dunes beneath a hazy white sky. A hot wind blows over his face as he enters an ornate chamber with one wide open window, Maellum seated at a low table, staring out over the desert, with Avalon seated beside him, sprawled over soft cushions.

Roshim's breath catches when he sees Avalon, and he finds himself grinning.

ASHWALD

Captain! I found your lost lamb.

MAELLUM

Oh, excellent. Well. Better late than too late. Come Roshim, join us.

Avalon looks at Roshim with a smile, and springs to his feet to greet him. Roshim catches Avalon up in his arm, and sits

with him, still grinning foolishly.

AVALON

Well, I do not often see that look on your face, Roshim. I consider myself blessed!

ROSHIM

I have never left someone behind imprisoned, and I must say it weighed quite heavily on me. I am glad to see you alright.

AVALON

Ah, it was hardly all that. Just a stuffy little room in the captain's house, a bar on the door, and no wine to drink for the night. But Maellum has seen me all right, and so have you, my friend.

Avalon kisses Roshim's bearded cheek, and Roshim finds himself suddenly flustered. But Maellum pushes a plate of sauced meats and fruit toward Roshim, and the smell distracts Roshim from the strange feeling.

MAELLUM

Eat, eat, and drink. We must talk, but such talk is better on a full belly.

Roshim eats, and a light wine is served afterward, fragrant and bubbly. Avalon stays close to him, and the familiar presence helps Roshim feel like everything is all right,

especially after a glass or two.

After the plates are cleared away, Maellum brings out a long pipe, and offers one to them; they smoke and drink, and look out over the city, bustling with bright dots of armor. At last, Maellum speaks.

MAELLUM

This city is dying. It is crushed beneath the weight of Sodon. Ever fearing his fall, he eliminated all threats that stood before him, then all possible threats, first among the people, then among his own children. He would rather rule a dying city than permit a living city to challenge him. By his own hand, he has slain his own who challenged him-- not by their intentions, but by their very existence, and he killed them as if they were rabid dogs, even his own sons. He is a monster, and if he does not die, this city will.

The room is silent save the wind. Maellum stares out across the desert.

MAELLUM

But there is one who would cast off Sodon. The flame he intended to snuff out long ago, driven out, still burning. The storm rises in the desert, and Sodon is afraid. Oh, he is afraid, indeed. For he sees death is coming.

Maellum turns and looks at Roshim, who flinches. The unsheathed hatred in Maellum's eyes rages, but he slowly brings his focus to Roshim's face.

MAELLUM

So. The Lord prepares for battle; and Sodon, also. The Lord Maleki sees much inside the iron city; and he tells me that he is pleased, very pleased indeed with what you have done for him. But the danger is mounting. Sodon shall use this coming battle as an excuse to purify his order, to purge those who he suspects of disloyalty, weakness, or any other focus of his ire. Even today, there are already executions scheduled. His fist shall tighten before his hand is cut off.

MAELLUM

(looking from one to the other)

Therefore, the Lord Maleki offers you escape. He believes you shall both be imprisoned, or worse; and if you are not before the coming battle, when the Lord Sodon discovers he has been deceived, he will certainly kill you both. So then-- what do you say?

Avalon and Roshim look at each other. Roshim realizes Avalon is waiting for him to respond, so he gathers his thoughts.

ROSHI

(uncertainly)

I am intensely grateful to Maleki for this offer. I confess, I am not sure what to do. I am here seeking answers only Sodon can provide; he has said he would speak to me, but I do not know when he intends to-- or if he will, at all. If we flee, then there is no chance.

(turns to Avalon)

Your mind is keener than mine; what do you think?

AVALON

I think we have been following a course set for us since we passed into the iron desert. I do not trust either Sodon or Maleki to give you an answer; they are concerned with their own matters, and you have done what you were asked with merely the promise of reward. Why ought they tell you anything, when you do as you're asked for nothing better than a promise?

MAELLUM

The Lord Maleki is generous and will do what he can, in time. But this is war, and it is unreasonable to expect his concern for such a small matter, despite how dear it be to you. That is no surprise, I am sure. The knowledge held by Sodon may be unearthed, for it is rumored that he has stores of books and ancient knowledge in the castle, and Maleki shall avail you of them. That much I can promise-- empty though promises are, as you say.

AVALON

There are three more Lords, also. I, for one, would prefer not to risk my neck here. We have stumbled into a cooking-pot that is already hot.

MAELLUM

Indeed, and it is not yet warm enough! I advise you both, urgently: leave now! In a few months, this will be settled, and the Lord Maleki shall remember your loyalty to him when you return.

AVALON

How shall we leave? Surely Sodon will be suspicious if you escort us out of your southern gate!

MAELLUM

There is a-- mmm, what would you call it? A cistern, beneath the keep, and great well where water is drawn out of the earth. The well is quite deep, but there you should be able to leave. I can ensure you can reach the well unseen.

AVALON

(nodding)

Did the Lord Sodon not close off the causeway? He certainly is the type to do so.

MAELLUM

(shrugging)

I do not have personal knowledge of the causeway, child of heaven, nor have I seen it myself-- but Maleki says a path is open at the bottom of the well, despite Sodon's belief that it is sealed. Apparently even the strength of Sodon cannot command a water so deep.

ROSHIM

(baffled)

I do not understand. What causeway could await at the bottom of a well?

(to Avalon)

You have used that word before.

AVALON

Yes, I have. The causeway is my birthright, and Maleki's as well. It is laid in the space between firmaments, and built up by the Lords and their kin, though who laid it originally I do not know. But I do not care to traverse it often. It is a dangerous, ill-maintained road, and there are travelers on it I do not care to meet. Still, it is better than facing the wrath of Sodon.

MALEKI

Decide quickly. I will assign you both a new room in the barracks, that you may have time together, though how much time, I cannot say. Sodon means to attack swiftly, but it will take a day or two to muster the army. Should you accept the Lord Maleki's offer, leave the door ajar when you sleep, and someone will attend you at midnight.

Roshim thinks of Namabeth, and his offer to help Namabeth escape.

ROSHIM

What will become of Namabeth, should Maleki take the city?

MAELLUM

(looks surprised)

That is for the Lord Maleki to decide.

ROSHM

(brow furrowed)

When I spoke to Namabeth, he expressed his discontent here, as a son of iron beneath the hard hand of his father. I pitied him. I offered him a chance to leave this city with me when my business was done, and he seemed to consider it; now, I feel I must offer him a chance to depart with us. Yet it is not only my life that hangs on such a choice.

(turns to Avalon)

AVALON

(slowly)

Your generous spirit is admirable. I trust your instincts, but I do not trust that man Namabeth. He may not know his own loyalty; it may slip one way or another in a moment of desperation. Desperate fellows seek relief.

ROSHM

Have you insight on Namabeth's heart, captain?

MAELLUM

That child of iron, the last and weakest of Sodon's line? He has had no contact with Maleki, nor helped my Lord. He has clawed to his position beneath Sodon and clung to it with jealous tenacity. I do not know his heart, but it seems to me he is invested in Sodon's power. Besides, on the eve of a pivotal battle, I do not enjoy taking risks. Leave him to Maleki, should he survive. He ought to have gratitude for that.

Roshim nods, but his own heart is stung by this counsel, and he cannot forget the wide desperate eyes of Namabeth.

ROSHM

We thank Lord Maleki for his offer, and accept it gratefully.

(to Avalon)

You are ready to quit this place?

AVALON

Oh, yes indeed. One does not face a sandstorm without blinking. Let us leave tonight.

MAELLUM

Good. Tonight, leave your door ajar, as I said, and sleep in your traveling-clothes. Beyond the causeway exit, Maleki has provided provisions; you may stay and wait, or leave for Under-Epha as you see fit.

AVALON

(to Roshim)

I am sorry you did not get what you came for.

ROSHIM

As am I, friend. But let us not speak of that again til we have left this mess far behind us. I have no room in my thoughts for regrets, yet.

MAELLUM

I shall show you your new quarters, and the men on guard are mine. This is no time to wander about, so should you need anything, let the men know and it will be brought to you.

ROSHIM

Thank you, sir. I hope... I hope for your success.

MAELLUM

(weary)

You seem a good man. I wish you had come at a better time, but alas. Such is the way of things. Peace be with you both, child of earth and child of heaven. May we meet again under more favorable stars.

INT. THE IRON CASTLE BARRACKS      NIGHT

Roshim yawns and looks up from his journal. He has been recording his adventure diligently, and the scroll is growing heavy. Roshim lays sprawled on a fine lounge in a fine room of the barracks with his scroll-tray, wearing a light robe. A broad window shows stars and moon peeking above the jagged wall. A table of wine and food rests nearby, with an oil lamp flickering atop it, and Avalon sitting naked on the bed, brushing his long hair. They have been having sex repeatedly, out of both boredom and relief to be in each other's company again.

A knock on the door. A guard slides the portal open.

GUARD

Lord Namabeth requests entry, Roshim of  
Aphaelia.

ROSHIM

(uncertainly)

Ah. Well, let him in, then.

One half of the great double door opens, and Namabeth enters. His mane is combed neatly and his perfume proceeds him, and his robe is lined with feathers. He stares at Avalon on the bed, who bows slightly. Namabeth turns to Roshim.

NAMABETH

(commanding)

Get dressed and dine with me tonight. We must discuss this impending war, and our roles in it. I will await you outside. Do not make me wait long.

With a last sneering look at Avalon, Namabeth turns and leaves. Roshim gets up and gets dressed in a more flattering wardrobe. He looks uncertainly at Avalon, who is smiling slightly.

AVALON

Well? It wasn't a request. Go; I am sure his authority overrides Maellum's! I shall endeavor not be imprisoned again when you are away.

ROSHIM

Bah, take your safety seriously. I will be back as soon as I can.

Roshim strides out of the room, where Namabeth greets him more warmly. They walk at Namabeth's pace to the grand dining room, where they are served another small feast, which Roshim devours hungrily.

Again, Namabeth beckons him to share a lounge; again, Roshim presses against him, and this time Namabeth does not resist, nor look ashamed, but eager.

They retire to Namabeth's chamber, and there is no resistance, but as soon as Roshim lays on the bed, Namabeth slides atop, and Roshim sinks into him, and long minutes pass while they hold each other, undulating and breathing, excitement mounting, sweating, until Namabeth reaches shuddering, gasping ecstasy, and goes limp on top of Roshim's huge chest.

Afterwards, laying together, Namabeth speaks his mind.

NAMABETH

(softly)

I do not know who I am without my father, Roshim. But... after this battle is fought, I shall resign my service to him, and I shall go with you. He will be glad to be rid of me.

ROSHIM

...I will be glad to have you with me.

NAMABETH

(sharply)

Oh, do not assume I shall walk in your footsteps, like that child of gold... I shall find my own way, after a little while. Perhaps to your Library. It may be interesting to see the other works of my father, before his heart was hardened.

ROSHIM

The world is vast, and there is much to learn.  
Curiosity is the first step on the journey to  
wisdom. I hope you discover yourself,  
Namabeth bin Sodon.

NAMABETH

I can thank you, at least, for speaking  
boldly. Your voice is as refreshing to my  
mind as it is infuriating.

Roshim hesitates, thinking of the advice of Avalon and  
Maellum. He squeezes Namabeth's shoulder, and the latter  
squeezes back.

ROSHIM

You will leave with me, then?

NAMABETH

As I said, yes.

ROSHIM

...will you leave with me tonight?

Namabeth draws back, sits up and stares at Roshim's face.  
He looks angry and bewildered, glances to the door.

NAMABETH

(hissing under his breath)

What do you mean?

ROSHI

(whispering)

Tonight, Avalon and I depart this place. If you mean to leave with me, it must be tonight.

NAMABETH

(quietly)

...how?

ROSHI

(whispering)

That I will not say. But if you wish to leave with me, tell me, now.

Namabeth looks angrier and angrier. He puts a hand on Roshim's chest, digging into the skin with his nails.

NAMABETH

(snarling)

How dare you ask me to depart, on the eve of battle! Despite my complaints, I am grateful to my father for all he has done. He is a mighty king, and I respect his ambition.

Namabeth bows his head, his hair falling in front of his face. When he raises his face again, his cheeks are wet with tears.

NAMABETH

(weeping)

How dare you, Roshim of Aphaelia. I had the ambition to depart this kingdom with the pride of my father to carry me forward, a wind on my back. Should I depart now, he will think me a coward, to flee before battle, and his darkest opinions will be justified.

Roshim lays a hand on Namabeth's arm, who flinches but does not pull away. They lay together awhile longer, and Namabeth calms down. He licks the scratches his fingers left on Roshim's chest.

ROSHIM

(softly)

And if Loraine falls to Maleki, will you fall with your father?

NAMABETH

That will not happen. The iron city has stood long for good reason, the least of which is the strength of Sodon. He understood that the strength of many must be united, and so filled his ranks with mighty men... and yet, that was some time ago.

ROSHIM

How many mighty men remain with your father?

NAMABETH

(angrily)

Fine! I will entertain this a bit longer. It is true that Maleki took many with him, and that the generals have-- there is a new character, it seems, in the inner circle of advisors and men of war. I admit this. I have oft considered it a flaw, this reckless pursuit of loyalty... and yet, it is a time of war, and the city must remain united.

ROSHIM

(gently)

With respect, it seems to me that the city lost its unity, long ago. I have been here only a few days, and the signs seem clear. What of those bodies, on the pikes? Is that in the name of unity?

Namabeth does not answer, but gets up and stalks to the table. He pours wine and drinks heavily, his taut back slick with sweat. His eyes are wild.

NAMABETH

I would not expect you to understand these matters. They are complex. You have no experience managing a city under siege.

ROSHM

Will you come with me? Or stay here? I would  
enjoy your company.

Namabeth glares at him, torn. He fumes, and slams the brass  
wine cup on the table, then points at Roshim.

NAMABETH

(angry but firm)

Enough! Why must you twist these pleasant  
moments into something so... painful? Out of  
respect for you, for our pleasure together and  
your kind heart, I shall not report your  
treasonous words, but I shall not entertain  
you any longer. Go back to your room. I know  
not whether to thank you or curse you.

Roshim gets dressed and is escorted back to his room with  
Avalon. His last view of Namabeth is Namabeth standing at the  
window, looking out at the moon, the proud sensual arch of his  
back rimmed by lamplight.

INT. THE IRON CASTLE BARRACKS      LATE NIGHT

Upon returning, Roshim and Avalon pack their scant belongings and lay down together. Avalon sees Roshim is troubled, but does not ask; Roshim cannot bring himself to tell Avalon what transpired. If Namabeth betrays us then so be it, Roshim thinks to himself; it is too late for regrets anyhow.

Late that night, as they doze, there is a furtive knock at the ajar door, and they spring up. Ashwald peers in.

ASHWALD

(quietly)

Prepared? Good. Come with me. You know who sends me.

Ashwald leads them through the quietest part of the barracks, and soon they creep out, through a wide drainage ditch that leads up to the castle.

They walk swiftly single file abreast the drainage wall. Atop, the sound of voices and torchlight indicates plenty of activity is still ongoing. Ashwald pauses with them beneath a bridge, waiting for a platoon to pass overhead.

ASHWALD

(whispering)

Were this an ordinary night, the way would be clear. The army prepares to leave tomorrow. Sodon is eager, bloodthirsty. He will empty the keep in his haste for battle. Such foolishness! Such waste.

After the platoon passes, they move again, staying tight to the drainage wall. After long, careful moments, Ashwald hesitates, stumbles back into Roshim.

Suddenly, bright armor on the path ahead, and torches. Ashwald gestures for them to go back, but the same there. They are trapped; and it is clear they were expected.

INT. SODON'S THRONE ROOM      LATE NIGHT

Roshim's and Avalon's travel bags are taken from them, and their hands are tied along with Ashwald's. Sodon's troops do not say much, but urge them forward, to the keep, up to the throneroom. Sodon awaits there, with a single hot fire burning in the grate, casting an eerie red flame. His huge black bulk resides mostly in shadow, but his wrath is etched into every visible line of his body. Sand and props and etchings cover the floor; a war game for the coming battle is in progress, with a handful of weary-looking men attending.

One of the captors speaks to Sodon quietly, and a strange expression flits across Sodon's face, then he smiles mirthlessly, his long fangs gleaming white and yellow. He gestures for Roshim and Avalon and Ashwald to be brought forward.

SODON

(looking at Ashwald)

So-- what's this about? Speak.

ASHWALD

I was told-- I was commanded to bring them to captain Maellum. Immediately.

SODON

(to the assembled men)

Where is Maellum?

SOLDIER

I will fetch him.

SODON

Good. Hurry up!

A man leaves to fetch Maellum. Sodon casts his wild eyes over Roshim's face. Roshim feels a burning sensation, as if standing too close to a fire. By Sodon's side is a heavy blunt-nosed hammer, and the great angel fingers the rough iron handle, worn smooth. Sodon sees Roshim looking, and drags the great weapon out, letting it fall carelessly to the sand-strewn floor. The notched head is stained dark and rusted.

SODON

(to Roshim)

You. What is your name?

ROSHIM

(loudly)

Roshim.

SODON

Yes, yes. I was told that you carry a hammer.

Is that so, Roshim?

ROSHIM

That is so.

SODON

Perhaps it is with you. Produce it!

Roshim nods to his travel bag. A captor soldier digs through and produces it. The gold and silver hammer shines in the firelight, its intricate relief glittering. Sodon stares at it, lip curling.

SODON

That is no war-hammer. What is it?

ROSHM

It is a tool of Aphaelia. It is an embossing hammer, to write on stone. See; there is its chisel. It was presented to me by my allfather, upon my leave of Aphaelia to seek the wisdom of the Lords.

Sodon gestures, and Roshim's hammer is given to the general. Sodon swings it experimentally, tosses it in the air. Despite his air of contempt, there is a sense of admiration.

SODON

It is weighted well. Surely could have cracked a few heads by now. Why did your father not give you a weapon?

ROSHIM

It is as you say. I have swung it in a brawl once or twice, to defend myself and my companion. I have had no need for a weapon.

SODON

Ah, but a weapon is just another tool. And though this hammer may have been meant to write, it may yet do more, eh? All tools might be weapons. Even the most innocent-seeming tools are a channel for power. Isn't knowledge itself a hammer?

Sodon tosses the hammer at Roshim's feet. Roshim stoops slowly to pick it up.

SODON

I have had eyes on you since you arrived, of course. Though loyalty is precious to me, it lives ever in the shadow of certainty. I bring order, and order is built on certainty. So here, I find myself, acting on the advice of my son Namabeth, preparing to destroy Maleki, but-- you act strangely, you visit with Namabeth, you visit with my captain Maellum. And tonight, again! It makes me wonder, what is so fascinating about you, Roshim of Aphaelia, ward of Aphael.

Roshim opens his mouth to speak, but Sodon holds up his

hand, lips drawing back.

SODON

(snarling)

Surely a coincidence you entered by the south gate! That Maellum spoke to you first, eh? That Maleki brought you before him, captive-- or maybe not!

Maellum is brought in. He has been beaten about the head and face, and his eye swollen shut. His beard and ears have been cut off. Sodon indicates toward Maellum in a grand sweeping gesture, facing the generals who stand with him. Roshim squeezes the grip of his hammer so tightly that his fingers cramp.

SODON

(triumphant)

For years, my eye has watched Maellum, captain of the south gate. For years I have become more and more certain that this man is the gateway between my kingdom and the rebels, and I have let him spread his rot inside these walls, and route out all here who would be swayed by Maleki's seduction. Tonight will be a night of justice, and cutting out the rot that has festered here too long-- and tomorrow, victory!

Sodon raises his fist, arm muscles bulging. A loud cry of

affirmation comes from the gathered men, and they raise fists in support.

SODON

(roaring)

Justice shall not tolerate a man like this, who waits to stab me in the back, who opens the door to let in snakes and vermin. We shall not tolerate his poison any longer. I shall not tolerate it! Justice be done.

Sodon grasps the hilt of his hammer, eyes blazing, and swings it up. Maellum is shoved forward and falls on the floor. Sodon swings his hammer down and Maellum's head bursts like a rotten fruit. The floor resounds with the impact. Flecks of gore splash Roshim's shins, and Avalon inhales sharply. Sodon looks around, his mane bristling.

SODON

(frothing)

Before Loraine destroys Maleki, we shall destroy the rot of Maellum. Where are the rest? Who else shall meet the hammer? Captain Arren?

CAPTAIN ARREN

(stepping forward)

We have imprisoned who we could tonight. Some killed themselves. A few yet remain free but the south gate has been reclaimed.

SODON

Fine! Fine. Bring me the second in command, and I shall deliver justice to them; the rest must be executed tomorrow ere we leave to route Maleki. The iron city must be closed and secure behind us, its walls and gates held by men firm and true!

Arren and his men bow, along with the remaining captains and generals.

Ashwald is pushed forward as Maellum's corpse is dragged away, and Roshim stares, his guts roiling in sickly anticipation. Roshim becomes aware that Avalon is holding his arm-- to comfort him, not to be comforted. He swallows his bile. Ashwald does not cry out as he dies, but Roshim hears him mutter a curse before the hammer swings down. The floor resounds again.

Suddenly at his other arm, Namabeth appears. Namabeth looks quizzically at Roshim.

NAMABETH

Lord, why are they here?

Sodon sits heavily on his chair, letting his bloody hammer fall to the sand as Ashwald's corpse is removed. He stares blankly at his son.

CAPTAIN ARREN

(to Namabeth)

They were intercepted along with Ashwald tonight.

NAMABETH

(to Roshim)

What were you doing with Ashwald?

ROSHIM

(heavily)

I do not know. We were instructed to meet Maellum... we did not know...

Roshim sees Namabeth's eyes gleam. Namabeth is thinking of Roshim's offer to escape, and putting this failed plan together. Namabeth hesitates, seeing the fear in Roshim's eyes, and Namabeth's face softens. Namabeth reaches out and touches Roshim's hand.

Sodon watches this, and his expression darkens. A horrible contempt twists his face, but Namabeth does not see, looking at Roshim.

SODON

Arren. Take the child of gold and Roshim, and put them in holding until tomorrow. We shall purge the rot tonight. Tomorrow-- tomorrow I shall deal with this.

Arren salutes, and takes the hammer from Roshim's numb hands. A handful of soldiers lead them away with the captain, and as they leave the room, Roshim hears Sodon speaking:

SODON

Namabeth, you will stay with me. We have much to do together.

NAMABETH

Yes, Lord.

INT. IRON KEEP DUNGEON      NIGHT

Roshim is numb. When he comes to himself again, he and Avalon are imprisoned together in a small cell, and he is sitting on a straw-covered floor.

One wall is iron and three are stone; starlight shines through a narrow horizontal groove atop one thick stone wall. The iron wall is set with a slotted door. It is quiet.

Avalon stalks up and down the length of the room, good for ten paces. He hums tunelessly. His hair glitters when he passes in front of the starlight.

Avalon turns to Roshim and sees Roshim watching. Avalon opens his mouth to speak but is interrupted by a banging on the door. A thin tube is thrust through the slot.

GUARD

Water. Take it.

Avalon helps Roshim stand, who realizes his mouth is parched. Roshim drinks from the tin straw.

AVALON

Guardsmen! Does this water come from the keep cistern?

GUARD

(surprised)

Yes. All water in Loraine comes from the cistern.

AVALON

Ah, that explains the taste. Thank you! I am a visitor, you see.

GUARD

It is a poor time to be a visitor. Be quiet.

Avalon drinks after Roshim, and the tin straw is withdrawn. Avalon sits next to Roshim, and they watch the stars through the slit in the wall. The guard's footsteps recede.

ROSHIM

I feel ill. I can't stop thinking about it-- the death blow.

AVALON

Ah. Have you seen men killed in such a way?

ROSHIM

I have seen dead men. And you know I am no stranger to violence. I do not know why it affects me so. But enough of that: what shall we do? Shall I break down the door?

AVALON

I do not think brute strength shall avail us here. But if we leave this room, what would we do?

ROSHM

We must-- we must escape. We must leave the city. I do not see it all, fully, but we do not gain anything by staying. Sodon will never tell me what I wish to know. Namabeth has made his choice. We must leave!

Avalon raises an eyebrow at the mention of Namabeth, but does not remark.

AVALON

I agree, we must leave. However, the manner in which we leave, and when, is unclear to me. I really do not think we can tear through a city gate at such a time-- despite your heft, my friend. All these men on alert, weapons proliferating-- no, no, it would end in disaster.

ROSHM

Something in your tone. You have a thought on this.

AVALON

Why, the cistern ought to be our escape, of course. It is close at hand. Touch the rock; feel its coolness. Ashwald may not be able to guide us, but the original route lies open somewhere in the bowels of this keep. Er, not open, per se, but more open than one of the city gates I'd wager!

ROSHM

Ah, brilliant! But there is one primary objection!

AVALON

What's that?

ROSHM

(knocks on the door with a knuckle)

This door! Not even you are slim enough to slip through that opening, thin as you are! And I should hardly squeeze a hand through any opening you could make it through! So, back to my original thought. Shall I knock down the door?

AVALON

Yes, the door is a bit of an issue. My eyes see better than yours, and I do not think you can breach it-- but the Stranger smiles on those who try! Have we a tool?

They search the cell and find nothing but the clothes on their backs. Roshim attempts to budge the door, wrapping his blunt fingers around the slot and pulling, but the iron door is very sturdy and makes not a single creak of protest, despite Roshim's puffing and muscle-flexing. At last he steps back, fingers bloody.

ROSHIM

(out of breath)

Haven't you some witchcraft that works on doors?

AVALON

(laying on the floor)

I'm afraid not. Nothing stymies trickery like a good door! But-- I did not want to interrupt all that work you were doing-- I would prefer to avoid the door altogether. There is another way, I believe.

ROSHIM

(a bit angry)

Tell me.

AVALON

Words are useless. I need water! When the guard offers us drink again, we must take the waterskin from him.

ROSHM

Water? No, you shall explain yourself. Tell me what that means!

AVALON

Very well. In short-- water is the bridge to the causeway. The gateway through firmament is sealed behind water. If the water we are brought has come from a deep water, deep enough to reach the through the firmament, we may be able to use it. We might. I might. But we need as much water as possible.

ROSHM

I do not understand.

AVALON

Of course you do not. But this you can understand: we must get that waterskin!

INT. THE IRON KEEP DUNGEON      EARLY MORNING

Sleep comes fitfully. Roshim and Avalon curl together on the straw, and Roshim experiences the vivid dreams that accompany closeness to Avalon. During sleep, their minds intertwine, and Roshim feels Avalon's fear as well, but also the hope of escape, the sureness of a long life, and it comforts Roshim.

At last, the guard's footsteps approach. Avalon is on his feet by the door when the tin straw slides through, and he gestures at Roshim to stay laying down.

GUARD

Water. Take it.

AVALON

Good morning, sir! I hate to be a bother, but my companion is having difficulty rising.

Might a waterskin be provided so he can drink?

The straw withdraws and a skeptical face peers through the slot.

AVIDAD

Ah. I know you, beastman. You've been visiting my Lord Namabeth. What a state you're in now!

AVALON

Well, these are suspicious times, and the Lord Sodon wants to confine all who had associations with Captain Maellum-- I assume you've heard? Of course, during war some indignity must be suffered, and thus we submitted ourselves. But I assure you, Namabeth still watches over us both.

Avidad grunts. He looks a bit uncertain.

AVIDAD

Strange times indeed. I wondered-- well, nevermind what I wondered. Fine, then.

Avidad walks away. He returns shortly with a skin and slides it through the slot. Avalon fills it full from the tin straw.

After Avidad leaves, Avalon crouches to Roshim and lets him sip. Avalon stares at Roshim, eyes narrow, as if thinking. At Roshim's quizzical look, he speaks.

AVALON

In Under-Epha, I asked you before. Can you see me without your eyes?

ROSHIM

As I said then, I say now: I assure you, I cannot.

AVALON

Can you see Namabeth?

ROSHIM

I tell you, I can see nothing. What of Namabeth?

AVALON

I have seen his flame since we came to Loraine. Inside the city walls, he and Sodon have burned bright. But last night, his flame vanished.

Roshim recalls the look of contempt on Sodon's face last night, and tries to dismiss the soft pool of dread that collects in his lower stomach. He grunts.

ROSHIM

What does that mean?

AVALON

I do not know. Perhaps he has concealed himself, as does the flame of Maleki. But I mention it now because for the first time I do not know where he is.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

Do you see where Sodon is?

AVALON

Yes, quite clearly. He is above us, in the audience hall--? No, closer, some other room. There are few soldiers in the keep, or the city for that matter. Most of them are already outside the southern gate, I believe, preparing for the march to Maleki.

Roshim grumbles to himself. He flexes his battered fingers. Avalon looks concerned.

AVALON

No, I do not think you should pay him a visit.

ROSHM

I-- I know it is foolish. Last night, the way he looked at his son-- at Namabeth. I believe Sodon hates his son. Perhaps I am mistaken.

AVALON

Well, why is that surprising? Sodon hates weakness. He has purged it from himself. And what is Namabeth to him, but another limb of Sodon? A weak limb, I daresay.

ROSHM

(shaking his head)

Namabeth is not weak.

AVALON

Perhaps not. But I think Sodon's definition of strength is rather singular. I believe he respects his son Maleki more than Namabeth. But see now! We can talk about this later. The hall is empty; we must make for the cistern.

Roshim thinks of his hammer with regret. He nods.

ROSHIM

Very well. We will leave right away. Show me this causeway of yours. I am well overdue another of your secrets.

Avalon sighs and gets up, clears straw away from the door, and uncorks the waterskin. He crouches, and pours water at the foot of the door. It pools on the stone floor, and runs beneath the door, spreading into a wide puddle, still and flat as a mirror, reflecting starlight.

Avalon stands up and tosses the empty skin away. He steps to Roshim lightly, his green eyes glowing in the darkness.

AVALON

I have not traversed the causeway in an age. We shall leap, gracefully I hope, and pass beneath the door! Come, lambkin. This shall rattle your sturdy bones! Are you ready?

Roshim is bemused, and lets Avalon hold his hand.

ROS HIM

I suppose. Do your magic, then.

They stoop, and Avalon touches the still surface of the dark water--

Roshim's hair stands on end. A sensation, like falling into a vast well, seeing that dark mouth agape before him, then falling through, turning to see the circle of sunlight shrinking--

The world contorts.

EXT. THE LORDS' CAUSEWAY

Roshim and Avalon stand on a small islet. The ground is like shivered shale, crunching beneath Roshim's bare feet. Warm water laps at the shore, collapsing into glittering wavelets that rush the beach. The sky is dark, as if cloudy, but through gaps peek a brilliant spray of stars that somehow seem very close. The foggy horizon is lit by a dim blue glow that seems to come from a nascent sunrise or by the water itself.

Far out in the water, single vast pillar sticks out, like a shipmast, broken sharply. Looking up, Roshim sees lights beneath the clouds, and an impression of winding paths and stairways, impossibly far away.

The air is neither warm nor cold, and heavy with humidity. Something about it stings the throat and Roshim coughs as he looks around.

Avalon is looking around as well, as if searching for something he is anxious not to find. He slaps Roshim's arm.

AVALON

Well, close enough to deep water. This is your hansel of a much longer journey, lambkin. The city Loraine rests deep in the causeway, for the Lord Sodon feared trespass, no doubt! There are few stairs or paths connecting this place to any other. Let us move quickly. We cannot reach the cistern from here, but I see it rests near at hand.  
(gestures in an apparently random direction)

ROSHIM

(dazed)

A moment, if we have it. What am I seeing?

AVALON

(impatient but eager)

The space between firmaments, dear. I have not the wisdom of Oidecalla to tell you more. This is the space that underpins our world, the realm traversed by the heavenly host. And those so blessed may open the gate, just a crack, and slip through-- if one minds one's fingers and toes. However, this is no time to gawk. Hold my hand and we shall step out!

Avalon grasps Roshim's hand, who holds it limply, Roshim still gazing at that strange sky--

INT. IRON KEEP DUNGEON      EARLY MORNING

--and suddenly, Roshim finds himself facing a familiar slotted iron door, but from the other side! He staggers, and Avalon laughs beside him.

AVALON

Up, up, stay on your feet, we must move! Are you all right? Few mortal men have passed through the causeway as you have.

Roshim shakes his great horned head, and stamps his feet. Water splashes his ankles; the puddle lays there.

ROSHIM

Incredible. I shall interrogate you later! For now, my gratitude, you rogue! Let us move.

They move, stealing quickly through the nearly deserted block. Avalon can sense the presence of men, and guides Roshim past them to a small barred door that Roshim breaks open. They begin a descent, but the bottom of the narrow corridor grows bright with torchlight.

They backtrack, and nearly meet a handful of soldiers leading a gang of chained prisoners. Avalon leads them higher, up a flight of stairs to ground level, and they emerge into a great corridor lined with standards. Staying close to the decorative pillars, they wait for the soldiers to leave.

Roshim's heart is pounding, but Avalon seems calm. He peers out, down the empty corridor, toward a double door at the end.

AVALON

(pointing to the door)

I believe Sodon is there.

ROSHIM

That close? I suppose-- ah, I know this place. This is close to the hall where Namabeth dined with me. We have walked through this corridor. Is there anyone else there with Sodon? Can you see Namabeth's light?

AVALON

(tilting his head)

I do not think so. It seems mostly prisoners and men below. There is only Sodon. He is-- sleeping, perhaps. Not alert.

ROSHIM

Does he see you?

AVALON

Oh, I think not. None see as well as I. Ah-- men are coming.

They move away from the stair, down the hall. The door of the dining hall looms overhead, cloaked in shadow. Roshim

tests it, and finds it slightly ajar. He slips inside and pulls Avalon after him, and pushes the door nearly shut. It is quite dark in the dining hall, and the men stay at the far end of the corridor.

AVALON

(softly)

What bother. What bother! Well, soldiers do not eat here, so I do not think they will come in-- what is it?

Roshim is silent, staring at the far end of the dining room. He sniffs the air, and smells death, mixed with perfume.

At the far end of the table, the remains of a feast. As his eyes adjust to the dim light, Roshim sees tooth-gnawed ribs, and savaged broken limbs. Namabeth's glassy eyes stare at him from a jawless head, discarded on the floor. The carpet is soaked in blood, black as pitch.

Roshim's breath catches, faster and faster. He kneels on the floor, and stares at the carpet, breathing through his mouth. A piece of Namabeth's brace pokes his knee.

AVALON

(slowly)

El above. So then. Sodon leaves nothing to chance. Whatever nobility he may have once had, he has forsaken.

ROSHIM

(dazed)

I will kill him.

AVALON

No, you shall not. He cannot be overcome by our likes. Leave him to Maleki.

Roshim's breath comes fast. He lurches to his feet. His muscles bulge and fingers hook as he stalks to the door. He thinks of Namabeth's room nearby, and the weapons he saw there.

AVALON

(hissing)

Roshim. Roshim! Enough, enough.

Roshim thrusts Avalon aside and opens the door. He walks to the captain's dormitory wing, to Namabeth's quarters. The ornate door does not open, but one sharp shoulder thrust bursts the latch apart. Roshim feels filled with strength, and he strides into the room, ignoring Avalon's entreaties. Roshim smells Namabeth's perfume, sees the bed. He seizes a large warhammer, imagines Sodon's face as the hammer comes down on him.

AVALON

(pleading)

Roshim, this is foolish. Do not do this! I cannot aid you. Do you wish to die here?

ROSHIM

(growling)

What better use of Oidecalla's gift than to bring justice to such a tyrant? That... eater of children! I have been given strength to carry out my tasks, have I not?

AVALON

Roshim, I swear to you, sheer strength cannot overcome Sodon. I beg you, come with me. You are not the one to bring him to justice.

But Roshim feels Oidecalla's blessing, and the burning of his righteous fury. He does not heed Avalon's pleading, but imagines the cruel death of Maellum and Ashwald, imagines the horror and confusion of Namabeth in his final moments, imagines that terrible last feast.

ROSHIM

He is sleeping, is he not? I shall kill him with one strike. One strike, that is all I need. I can do it.

Avalon says nothing, but shakes his head, following Roshim back. Roshim stands outside the double door, arms bulging as he holds the hammer, and gently nudges the door open. He looks at Avalon one final time, and Avalon's sorrowful eyes fill him with anger.

ROSHM

When I return, I shall expect some gratitude.

Avalon does not reply. Roshim shuts the door behind him, and stalks forward into the strange room, hammer over his shoulder.

Roshim moves quietly into the anterior, past tables and curtains, and sees the silhouette of Sodon in the dawnlight, bloated and grotesque, reeking of wine and blood, snoring on a couch.

Roshim creeps closer, his fury unabated, but caution growing as he sees the full size of Sodon, the strength of those knotted shoulders and arms. Still, no matter! Roshim reaches striking distance, and plants his feet firmly. Sodon has a cloth draped over his face, and his breathing continues without interruption.

Roshim raises his hammer high, every big muscle in his body tense! He imagines the arc of that fatal swing, imagines Sodon's head smashed like Maellum's. It fills him with delight.

The hammer swings down--!

--and glances off of Sodon's horned head with a violent sound, wrenching itself out of Roshim's hands. It tears through the couch and smashes into the floor.

Roshim blinks, unable to interpret what he saw--

--and a moment later, his throat is seized by a vast blackened hand, and the red light of Sodon blazes in front of him, eyes like coals staring down at him, those long, long teeth bared with that hideous strength.

No words are spoken. Roshim is cast to the floor and smote on the forehead with a fist like an iron bell. When he comes to, he is being dragged out of the door, Sodon's angry rumbling in his ear, the clatter of armor, the sound of excited men. Chains are fastened to his shins and wrists and neck as he peers around, unable to make out anything except a blur of lights. He is cast into a dark cell and fixed to the wall.

Some time later, Roshim's vision clears, and his thoughts take firm shape. He realizes that Avalon is gone.

EXT. THE KEEP DUNGEON      MORNING

Sleep and unconsciousness blend together. Roshim jolts awake hours later, when the door to his cell rattles. A handful of men take him down, and affix a leash to his collar, and lead him outside. One of them slaps his face when he staggers, and pokes his side menacingly with a pike. He shouts as it digs into his skin and a spurt of blood runs down his side; they laugh.

MOCKING SOLDIER

You're going to the dogpit, bull-ram. Why so squeamish about a little blood? Part with it gracefully!

The dogpit is at the center of a theater, one side against the iron wall of Loraine, the back toward the keep. A discarded pile of props show that this is indeed a theater, but it hosts different shows nowadays than it had in the past. The crowd in the seats is mostly soldiers, crowing and jeering at the men being lead into the center of the pit. Roshim realizes by the captives' armor sigil that these are mostly former men of Maellum; this is the purge that Sodon promised.

Roshim is struck about the head until he stands still, at the outer edge of the "stage". He cautiously opens his eye to see a group of men tied to a stake whilst an orator reads out their crimes to the theater crowd.

There are many words spoken, about justice and strength, and

stern lips aquiver with righteous indignation, and the balance of reward and punishment. After the orator stops reading, another group with swords descends on the helpless tied men and hacks them into pieces. The sand is soaked with blood.

This goes on for some time. At last, Roshim is pushed forward, and his manacles are undone. He stumbles dazedly forward, prodded by pikes. The crowd is on its feet, screaming! Roshim winces at the accusatory roaring, eyes darting around. He clenches his fists, and attempts to stand tall, though his guts tremble.

Out from the wing strides Sodon himself. His mane is wild, his red cloak flowing and clinking with gold sigils. He stands to his full height, rippling with muscle, and holds his arms high! The crowd shouts, then settles as the orator steps forward again.

ORATOR

(projecting, deep)

Today is our day of liberation! Today, the Lord promises to break the backs of traitors, and our city will again flow with foreign goods. The caravans of food and wine will once again fill our markets; the dawn of plenty is at our fingertips! Death to Maleki! Death to those who bring death to YOU! Our Lord promises JUSTICE, and TODAY-- TODAY is the day of promises fulfilled!

(pauses, points to Roshim)

This one, who supped at your table, who drank the water of the well, came into the house of your Lord and tried to kill him! No doubt the rot of Maleki runs deep, and it will be cleansed, piece by piece! By whose flame?

THE CROWD

(roaring)

SODON, CHAMPION OF LORAINE! LET JUSTICE BE DONE!

Sodon smiles mirthlessly, and speaks to Roshim.

SODON

You struck at me, unarmed and alone. Now, you shall face me like a man. It is more courtesy than you gave me, and more justice than you deserve, perhaps. I will crush your skull with my own hands.

(to his guards)

Bring our weapons!

ROSHIM

I gave to you what you gave to Namabeth. If only I had succeeded, that would be justice.

Sodon's hammer is carried out by two men. He grasps it firmly, drags it carelessly behind him as he stalks forward. Roshim is handed his hammer and chisel, and his heart sinks. The crowd jeers at his weapons, pathetic compared to the great slab of iron held by Sodon.

SODON

(glaring)

Strength is justice. Those who would say otherwise are dead.

Roshim stares at the red eyes, the frothing corners of Sodon's mouth, the swollen arms. Despite his terror and rage, he finds a sadness at Sodon's words.

ROSHM

Your words are empty. You speak the same way that you wield your hammer. Had you a library here, it would have only one book. But words need not be a hammer, Sodon of Loraine. They can do much more.

SODON

The time for words is over. Come, ward of Aphael! I will not deign to speak to you again.

Sodon moves forward at a great loping gait, murderously fast. His hammer drags great grooves in the sand. He swings it, and Roshim jumps aside. The ground shakes. Roshim feels the wind of the blow, and Sodon eyes him, carelessly swinging again.

Roshim sees Sodon is leaving huge gaps in his defense. It seems like an obvious invitation, so obvious Roshim does not trust it, but he dashes in to strike at Sodon's head with his hammer as the latter recovers from a swing. Again, the hammer glances off Sodon's skull, ringing loudly, though it splits the skin. Sodon laughs, blood running down his cheek. He swings at Roshim again, who is off-balance, and catches his leg with the ragged edge of the greathammer.

Roshim falls back, his thigh gashed open. He swallows, and wonders how he might injure someone as sturdy as this. The crowd is roaring, waving standards, distracting him.

No, the sound is wrong! The crowd is not roaring with excitement, it is surprise! A fight is breaking out-- no, there are other men there, men with cloth on their face, wielding long knives, stabbing at the soldiers. Men of Maleki! They are flooding out from under the wing, from the tunnels and into the theater seats, quickly killing the soldiers of Sodon, who are stupefied with surprise.

Sodon hears the change in tone, and turns, his huge neck straining as he looks. Roshim sprints forward, and flipping the hammer about, lunges in with the point and strikes true! The hammer digs into Sodon's clavicle, only sinking in a few inches. Sodon roars, and Roshim barely ducks the riposte, yanking his bloody hammer out of the angel's body as he throws himself back. The blood causes his grip to slip, and the hammer is flung far away. A great fount of blood pours out of Sodon.

Sodon's murderous gaze turns back to him, and Roshim realizes he is seconds away from death. He scrambles back, but Sodon closes the distance with a great stride, blackened hand reaching out to seize his forearm. Roshim pulls away, but indeed, Sodon's grip is like iron. Roshim strikes Sodon repeatedly in the face with his free fist, tries to stab him with his chisel, but the latter lowers his head, and absorbs the blows easily. Roshim is pushed down to the ground, and he shouts in terror. Sodon's mouth opens, and rows of bloody blades flash in front of him.

Behind Sodon, Maleki strides out of the wing, mane flowing

like his father's, a dead soldier in one hand, and a polearm fit for a demigod in the other. He is two heads taller than the other men, moving easily, confidently, blood dripping from his weapon. He glances around the theater, his helmet flashing as the sun crests the iron walls, hair aflame with light.

Maleki's gaze fixes on Sodon. Without hesitation, he drops the soldier and lunges forward, polearm raised, and with a throwing motion flings the mighty weapon into Sodon's broad back.

Roaring, Sodon attempts to rise.

MALEKI

(shouting)

Hold him down! Come! My men!

Roshim grips Sodon's mane, and pulls him back, face to face. Sodon flails, and his blows would have crushed a normal man, but Oidecalla's blessing holds, and though Roshim's bones are shaken and his flesh is bruised he continues to hold down Sodon. The rage, despair, and fear in Sodon's eyes will haunt him the rest of his life.

Maleki is there, gripping the polearm, twisting and forcing it into Sodon; a demigod indeed, but still small compared to Sodon's size. His men surround him, and while Sodon struggles, they all grip the haft of the mighty polearm and PUSH, forcing it through Sodon's guts with their combined strength. Roshim rolls out from under Sodon's bulk as Sodon's eyes lose their

focus, and he sways drunkenly, and sees the tip of the polearm come out from Sodon's stomach.

Roshim walks away, to the theater seat, and sits down heavily. He watches the score of men with Maleki towering over them force Sodon down, the latter's massive bulk disappearing beneath them.

KENDA

Roshim, my friend. You live!

Roshim turns to see Kenda draw back the cloth on his face. The dark eyes sparkle as Kenda smiles.

ROS HIM

(faintly)

Kenda... indeed, I seem to be alive. What...  
what are you doing here?

KENDA

(laughing)

Well, it is exactly as it seems, I fain!  
Sodon's army is trapped outside the walls,  
locked out of the city until they surrender.  
The gates are ours. The keep is ours. The  
children of iron are freeing Loraine-- have  
freed, perhaps. And now, Sodon has fallen.  
To his own son, as he feared! Blessed be this  
day!

Roshim hears a great cheer, and turns to see Maleki rise from the seething mass of soldiers, holding the severed head of his father Sodon.

Then darkness comes over his vision, and though Kenda shouts words, Roshim cannot make out what he is saying.

Roshim suddenly sees a bright yellow sash out of the corner of his eye, and tries to grasp at it. He feels the soft hand of Avalon, then slips into oblivion.

INT. IRON KEEP BEDROOM      AFTERNOON

Roshim awakens slowly to the feeling of soft blankets and aching bruises. He groans, and opens his eyes to see an ornate bedroom. A window overlooks the keep town, and the wall; he is high in the keep.

For a moment, he feels a sensation like warmth at his side, and turns over. Avalon is sitting in basket chair, smiling at him and combing his long hair.

AVALON

(cheerful)

Good afternoon! How do you feel?

ROSHIM

(croaking)

Good afternoon? I feel... like shit.

AVALON

(pouring a cup of water)

Ah, well, you did tangle with a Lord, after all. In fact, you fared much better than I could have imagined. Perhaps I needn't have worried.

Avalon helps Roshim sit up, and Roshim drinks gratefully from the brass cup. Roshim notices Avalon is perfumed, and blinks.

ROSHI

(rasping)

Thank you. How long was I asleep?

AVALON

A few hours. Kenda and some men carried you up here. They have been in an altogether excellent mood; the city is in their hands entirely, and with less bloodshed than one would expect. You, sir, are something of a hero to them! Maleki himself remarked on your bravery. There are stories being told already about the man who attempted to strike Sodon down-- with deference to Maleki's victory, of course!

ROSHI

(bleary)

Ah. I failed at that. And where did you go, while I was being so heroic?

AVALON

Why, I left for the causeway, of course. Bravery and foolishness go hand in hand, and I shall entertain neither! You were quite out of your mind with anger; I have never seen you like that before. Had you faced a lesser foe than Sodon, I have no doubt you would have crushed him.

ROSHIM

I should have expected you'd abandon me. Yet I cannot bring myself to call you a coward. I was foolish.

Avalon spreads his hands in a conciliatory gesture, and bows slightly.

AVALON

I can only admire your bravery, Roshim. At a safe distance! But you can rest assured; Namabeth has been avenged.

ROSHIM

I am glad Sodon is dead. But I do not know if I am satisfied yet. It seems so... I do not know. I do not know if Namabeth would want Sodon dead, either. It was so sudden.

AVALON

(rising to his feet)

That is the nature of death, to come suddenly and leave things unfinished. But look here; there will be time to reflect on this later. Tonight will be a victory feast, I am told. I shall go tell Kenda you are well. He will want to speak to you.

Avalon leaves, and soon returns with Kenda and a plate of food. Kenda greets Roshim warmly, and has Roshim recount the

journey since they last saw each other. When Roshim tells the story of his attempt on Sodon's life, Kenda looks at Avalon slyly.

KENDA

(laughing)

Ah, the dancer abandoned you, did he? Well then, who was the frantic fellow who I met on the threshold of the causeway, begging me to save your life? Who interceded with Maleki, who lead him to Sodon-- and you? Who dogged my heels, and pulled me along?

Avalon looks away, and Roshim is surprised to see him shaken, embarrassed, trying to laugh it off.

AVALON

(waving it off)

Maleki wanted Sodon, and I wanted Roshim. Our aims intersected rather nicely, I'd say!

ROSHIM

(leaning back)

Yes, after all, as long as this blessing resides with me, he shall follow me to the ends of the earth!

KENDA

(laughing)

Oh, I do not doubt it, not at all!

They talk of this and that, and Kenda makes Roshim and Avalon promise to attend the victory feast. After Kenda leaves, Roshim rises, and wanders the keep with Avalon. They return to the dining hall, but Namabeth's remains are gone, so they retire to the top of the keep and watch the activity taking place. The standards of Sodon are ripped down, and collected in a pile in the courtyard, and burned. The smoke rises black in the hard blue sky.

INT. GRAND DINING HALL      NIGHT

That night, Roshim and Avalon are brought to the grand dining hall of the keep by Kenda. The courtyard is cleared, and food laid out for the townsfolk; the storehouses are emptied in a great feast! "Lorraine shall celebrate as one," Kenda tells them. "Today, we are all victorious."

The grand dining hall is dazzling. A profusion of candles and braziers fills the stately room, and the long tables are laden with the finest food from Sodon's larder. A crowd of Maleki's soldiers fill the room, dressed for ceremony, mingling jovially with the command.

Roshim and Avalon are seated just before Maleki enters. His new standard is held aloft by his train, and the room roars with approval! The joy is intense; Roshim sees some men weeping. Maleki is magnificent, his huge body fitted with fine clothes and his cloak satin. He holds up his hands as he takes his seat at the head of the table, and the crowd roars again!

The young Lord calls for wine, and makes sure everyone is served before he calls again for silence, and begins to speak:

MALEKI

(loudly)

My fellows, I shall not speak long. There will be time for many words later, when our table is not so tempting; but I am compelled to bless this new kingdom, born from the withered husk of Sodon's madness, and to acknowledge the strength of the men who made it possible. We ARE VICTORIOUS!

(waits for crowd to still)

And yet, there is more work to do. The sin of Sodon runs deep in this city, and it will take more than a day's work to root it all out. We shall take account of those who abused their power, who worked with the tyrant, and we shall bring them to JUSTICE!

(eyes glimmering, waits for the crowd)

For the people of this great city deserve justice! They thirst for it, as if it is water. We shall build Loraine again upon a foundation of justice, and then-- then we will have PEACE! But first, a final guest, who made this all possible--

The crowd roars, and many cups are raised. Roshim looks around, and sees eyes full of hope-- and yet, something more. Anticipation!

The grand doors open, and a train of servants walk in. They carry a great serving tray, upon which rests Sodon's head.

Some people gasp; some laugh; some spit on the head as it brought past. The tray proceeds up to Maleki, who gestures for it to be laid on the floor, in front of him, and face the crowd. He smiles a great smile, and his fangs gleam.

MALEKI

(roaring)

Now we are all here. Eat, enjoy, and let us cast off the shadow of my father, and step into the light of a new day!

Roshim looks at Avalon, who looks back. Wordlessly, they eat, not speaking, and after the crowd is full of wine and mirth, together they slip out of the room. They pause beneath a dark window, stars glittering overhead. Outside, the sound of celebration.

ROSHIM

Let us leave this place, tonight. I could walk across that damn desert without stopping until I collapse in Under-Epha. I cannot stand it here another minute. Why does justice here reek of death?

AVALON

Rather dramatic. I take your point, however.

A figure steps beside them. It is Kenda, and though he is smiling, his face is drawn.

KENDA

You left early. Maleki has yet to have audience with you.

ROSHIM

Kenda. I ask you, in payment for our services to Maleki: do not stop us.

Kenda's face twists. He says nothing, but beckons them to follow. He leads them to the barracks, and brings out their travel bags and cloaks. Roshim inspects his bag, and finds his hammer and chisel there, and his journal, and letter.

KENDA

You have done much for my Lord. And-- I thank you for that. I shall ask no more of you. Let this be your reward.

A nearby sand-cart is filled with dried food and water. Roshim harnesses it to himself.

Kenda leads them to the south gate, and waves aside the guards, who salute him. They walk out, into the silvery sand, under the blazing stars, a distance from the iron wall with its spike bastions.

KENDA

My Lord is not evil, though perhaps Sodon began with a similar ambition. I will remain at Maleki's side, as close as his own right arm-- or his knife. Nothing is certain in this world. One takes the chances one can afford.

Though the stars cast faint light, Roshim sees Kenda's pained smile.

AVALON

El bless you, Kenda. Indeed, I should call you mercy. For mercy compliments justice.

Kenda bows his head and says nothing.

Avalon and Roshim turn and begin the long journey back, small figures soon lost in a sea of sand.

THE END