

ROSES FOR AVALON CH. 5

THE PROTECTION OF SILVER

by

Clifton James Palmer

(purplebirdman)

"Laurientus reprimanded him, saying: 'Not all that is good is wise, and not all that is evil is foolish; nonetheless, one ought to do good. The sun shines on saint and sinner alike; the rain falls on both the just and the unjust. In the end, all are accounted for, all sums are added, and all debt is relieved. Who can say otherwise?'"

The Book of the Silver Sword, verse 398, Cephus bin Soolaimon

EXT. UNDER-EPHA HOSTEL TWILIGHT

We open in the hot shade of Under-Epha, the city nestled along that broken lip of wall. As the sun sets and the overwhelming heat dissipates, the streets come alive with revelers, merchants, ne're-do-wells, and weary travelers.

Avalon leans out the balcony window of a hostel, people-watching as he lights his first pipe of the night. He looks recovered from his desert trek, with a rakish tilt to his open vest and his red hair worn long and loose. A few appreciative looks are thrown his way, but he merely shakes his head at any prospective interests. Behind him, in the hostel bed, Roshim is still asleep.

Time passes; the pipe is on its way out, and the twilight is gloaming. Suddenly, Avalon tilts his head. On the darkening street amidst the unfamiliar figures, there is a flash of mangy white, the long crusted muzzle of a familiar stark face, scarred body hidden under a ragged cloak. Avalon and Ladulai see one another at the same moment, and a shock arrests the other.

Avalon points sternly with the stem of his pipe and gestures for Ladulai to wait. Ladulai does so miserably as Avalon descends to speak with him.

INT. UNDER-EPHA HOSTEL, ROSHIM'S ROOM TWILIGHT

Avalon's discarded pipe smokes on a table by the balcony. Roshim stirs on a straw mattress nearby, ornamented with leathers and ragged blankets, fabric over his face, as he does to sleep better. He groans, midway between waking and dreaming, then slips sleepwards.

Roshim feels his mind cast outward, feels it rush over seawater, through time, to some strange western continent. He reaches for Avalon, but senses him distant, distracted; so the dream carries Roshim further, drawn as if into a vacuum.

At last, Roshim sees a lush courtyard and cloudy skies; children and adults moving in groups, long dark robes swirling about them. They look like the crows that circle endlessly about the steepled roofs. The weather is cold and damp.

A girl child breaks from her group, and goes to the wall. Roshim sees her kneel over a dead crow, and cry over it. She takes its broken wing in her hands and straightens it, and leans over as if to kiss it.

Suddenly, there is a great light, whether from heaven or the girl Roshim cannot tell. Children gather and Roshim can hear their distant, excited voices. The crow leaps out from under the girl, spreads its wings, and flies away; the girl tilts her face to watch it leave. Despite the excitement around her, her face is calm, almost serene, framed by short golden hair in a simple cut. She rolls a feather between her fingers, and looks

thoughtfully at the sky. The crows on the rooftops suddenly draw a wing across their faces, stooping as if bowing.

Roshim suddenly feels a great warm pull, and realizes Avalon wants him. He shakes out of the cold, cloudy dream, sitting up in the warm straw and catching his breath. He sees the smoking pipe on the table.

ROSHIM

(grunting)

Wasteful.

Roshim wraps his cloak around him, picks up the pipe and moves out to the balcony, but strikes his horned head on the frame. He curses and ducks, emerges to look at the street, takes a few calming puffs. The dampness of the dream evaporates from him, and he looks about for Avalon.

It's been a scant few days since their exhausting trek back across the iron desert, but Roshim is already restless. He has been sleeping long, but plagued by vivid dreams, sometimes of Aphaelia, Cristio, Rami, and Balthius, sometimes of strange faraway places. The blessing of Oidecalla feels very close when he sleeps, and it seems to show him strange things he does not understand.

ROSHIM

(recalling)

The Lord of Dreams, indeed...

The pipe goes out, and Roshim taps out the ashes. He feels the pull of Avalon, and knows the latter is below in the common area, wanting to speak with him, but Roshim stubbornly takes his time and dresses and does his toilet. His hair and beard are longer, fuller, and he knots small jewelry into them in a facsimile of what the elders of Aphaelia do. He wipes his neck with perfume and shakes out his new tunic, carefully tying it with an embroidered leather belt; all these things are new, purchased after the return to Under-Epha.

At last Roshim leaves the room, locking it behind him, and descends into the common area, an oddly large vestibule arrayed with chairs, palms, and foot baths. The evening lamps are being lit, but despite the dimness he spies Avalon's fiery hair right away. Avalon is sitting at one of the foot baths, with someone beside him, conversing with their heads together.

Roshim approaches, and is shocked to see the one beside Avalon is Ladulai. Ladulai's bony back is exposed, his patchy white fur shot with gold, and the scars on his body trailing beneath his cloak about his waist.

Roshim hesitates, but comes closer, rounding the bath across from them.

AVALON

(turning to him)

Ah, at last, at last. Come; see who I have found.

Ladulai starts, and turns to face Roshim, his wild glassy eyes popping from his head, the half-smile, half-snarl that Roshim remembers vividly frozen on his long snout. The left bright blue eye seeks Roshim's brown ones; the other eye, white and unseeing, wanders. Upon seeing Roshim, Ladulai's aspect brightens, and he nearly lunges out of the foot bath to greet him, but shrinks back.

LADULAI

(eagerly)

Oh! Oh, of course, of course, my Lord. Yes, you are here. Honored, my Lord, would you join us?

Ladulai reaches a trembling hand to Roshim, who grasps it firmly, and Ladulai sighs. Avalon watches with subdued amusement, his sharp green eyes picking up the conflict in Roshim's aspect.

Roshim sits across from them, puts his own feet in the warm water. A bundle of thyme floats against his shins, and he looks at it, to avoid Ladulai's glassy blue eye for a moment.

ROSHIM

(looking at Ladulai)

Well, Ladulai of the East Tower... how came you to this place? Have you eaten? You were on your own journey, as I recall, back to the monastics.

LADULAI

(eagerly)

Yes, yes, brother of the Western Tower, my Lord Roshim, indeed... I have not eaten yet, today. I have no money, and I have run aground, as it were, under the shadow of Epha. Such is the fate of the wretched!

ROSHIM

Well, this won't do. We must eat.

LADULAI

(craning his neck in a bow)

Oh, but I have nothing to give in exchange, my Lord. Do not burden me with debt.

ROSHIM

Nonsense. We shall eat together. In exchange for a meal, avail us of stories of your journey. You came from the kingdom of a Lord, after all.

LADULAI

(with a strange smile)

The greatest kingdom, indeed! But oh, still, I am grateful to you, and if my words do not please you, you may do as you will with my body, Lord.

Avalon shakes his head, and calls someone over to request

food. As Avalon orders, Ladulai leans close to Roshim.

LADULAI

(in wonder)

Your-- this man Avalon, tells me, you have
crossed the desert, and returned from Loraine?

ROSHIM

We did, less than a week ago.

LADULAI

Ahhh, had I a fraction of your strength,
Lord... the desert was too much for me, and I
nearly died, despite my mission, my great
urgency, to speak to the Lord of Iron and warn
him of my Father, as I relayed to you on
Carcos... perhaps you have done this, in my
stead?

Avalon leans back, and hears this. He passes out cups of
water. Ladulai drinks his in great gulps, spilling down his
chin. Avalon watches this, and sips his own cup.

AVALON

Sodon is dead. His son Maleki rules Loraine.
For now.

Ladulai stares at Avalon, mouth open and dripping. He
whines, looks at Roshim for confirmation. Roshim nods gently,
and thinks to himself of Namabeth.

LADULAI

(upset)

Oh, but these are calamitous times, indeed!
How will order persist, without the guidance
of the eternal host?

AVALON

(looking at Roshim)

How, indeed.

LADULAI

(despairing)

So few can stand against the Pale King, so
few. Lord Sodon, surely, could have set a
bulwark against my Father's ambition. I had
hoped-- I had hoped-- yet, what good is hope
in this world?

Platters of food are set before them, and Roshim encourages Ladulai to eat. The mangy creature eats delicately, his long cracked fingers picking apart shell and bone, white eye spinning disconcertingly. But Roshim's heart is glad to see Ladulai eat, and he and Avalon also begin to partake. The food is simple but well-prepared, and with a local fermented juice aside, the mood lifts, as it does with good food and drink.

Ladulai sighs and raises his foot out of the bath to inspect it; Roshim sees there is a bruise on his ankle, cuts, and a missing toenail. Ladulai sees Roshim looking, and cranes his neck in a bow.

LADULAI

(muttering)

I apologize. I am not an appetizing breakfast companion.

ROSHIM

Do not apologize, friend. Your journey, I fear, has been harder than mine. Tell us about it.

LADULAI

(bowing)

Well... I apologize for my voice, my Lord... I am not used to speaking so much.

LADULAI

(quavering)

I left my birthplace, sacred Celia Mons, a pain upon pains to me, though my flesh is accustomed to pain, and my mind also. For a time I wandered, learning the ways of this world, chased by foul word and blow, and saw the madness and grief of disorder for myself, oh indeed, yes, I saw it. I came to know that my brothers were not altogether right, yet not altogether wrong-- to conquer this wretched world, you see, for that is the ambition of the Pale King, my allfather, Astheopithicus.

LADULAI

(raising his head)

The Pale King cooperated with the other Lords, you see, but even at the beginning of this age in his heart burned this ambition to conquer. He said, why ought the ageless kneel to the fickle children of earth, here one day and gone the next? Why must disorder rule over order? Why must youth rule over ageless wisdom? No, we of the blood of heaven are another class, to rule over the youth, these men of earth, as heaven has always ruled.

Ladulai looks at Avalon, who looks tired, then to Roshim.
Ladulai reaches out and clasps Roshim's hands in his bony ones.

LADULAI

(earnestly)

This is what I was taught, what I was raised in. Though I am of heaven and you, my Lord, you are of earth, I swear to you, I do not look at you as my inferior. For the world did not teach me fear; that was my family, my beautiful brothers, taller than you and twice as strong, radiant and fair, who beat and broke me, used me as their plaything, because I was born weakest, and none showed mercy, because I disgraced the blood of the king with my living self, and so I lived my half-life as the slave of my brothers. One day, maddened by torment, I escaped the White City with a foreigner, who beat and used me with his friends, yet I loved him, for his hand was softer than than hands of my brothers, and he let no other strike me-- this, I felt, was proof of his love.

LADULAI

(raising his eyes)

He was a merchant of great fortune, and I traveled with him to Hali, where we sold grain to the cities and encountered the monastics. There I met a great woman, a saint alive, who they call Lucea. She spoke to my master on my behalf, for the Sangriel do not abide slavery and free those they encounter, and my master resolved to leave rather than free me, but was struck down by a sickness and died in less than a week. I went with Lucea to the monastery on Hali Ridge, and so I joined their covenant, under the leadership of your Lord of Silver, Laurientus.

LADULAI

(looking to Avalon)

I told Laurientus all I knew of the Pale King, and the Kingdom of Stars, and the great army of my brothers, who were being bred there, seed direct of my allfather, to create a race of masters to rule this earth. Patiently and at length he unbound the chains of my mind, and taught me the true way of things, and I found the love of my true family there.

LADULAI

(looking at Roshim)

I know I am broken. It doesn't matter. I have seen kindness, in the Lord of Silver's hands, in the words of his voice, in the gentle way he heals the mind. I know kindness, now. I see that kindness in you, my Lord Roshim. I see it in all who choose to help the weak with their strength.

LADULAI

(ashamed)

But my fear of the Pale King grew, consumed me. After a year, I asked to leave, to warn the former compatriots of the Pale King that he sought their destruction, fearing the rivalry of others with the blood of heaven. My betters warned me against it, and at the time, I felt capable, resented their warnings. But it was my own pride and foolishness, driving me into useless action... for indeed, I could sway none.

LADULAI

(looking to Roshim)

And so, now... I return now to my family. I do not know what else to do; I must speak to-- there is someone I must speak to. If the Pale King has struck at the Western Tower, it must be a sign... his preparations must be nearing their end, and if that is so, soon the world will know the strength of the hands of my brothers, as I do.

Avalon looks at Roshim, raising his brows. Roshim leans forward, to Ladulai, who shrinks back.

ROSHIM

Do you think the Lord Laurientus will speak with me?

LADULAI

(wide-eyed)

Of course, of course... the Lord speaks to all, to everyone who he ministers. Even to one such as I.

ROSHIM

(slowly)

I would like to visit the Lord of Silver. Would you permit us to travel with you, Ladulai?

Ladulai stares back, as if not comprehending. He rocks back and forth, and suddenly bursts into tears. After a moment, Avalon puts a hand on that scarred bony back, and strokes him.

EXT. ROAD LEAVING UNDER-EPHA MORNING

We join Roshim, Avalon, and Ladulai, walking along a narrow road out of Under-Epha. Roshim's hair is tied up, and Ladulai is looking a bit plumper, and Avalon has rich new travel clothes; they have spent a week in Under-Epha, making plans, buying supplies for a journey on foot around the southern heel of the iron desert, to reach the mountains on the other side.

Roshim notes in his journal: "...L recommends the route he entered by, a painful trudge to the foot of the Hali ridge, where we must be equipped for cold, and snow, for the Hali ridge ascends to such an extent these precautions are warranted, and many have frozen on their pilgrimage to the monastery of Lucea, home of the Lord of Silver, which L conveys is at the heart of a frozen lake at the height of Hali."

So they proceed, and Under-Epha shrinks behind them, and the hot breath of the desert on their necks is replaced by the dampness of undergrowth as the path winds through a long, dim forest of cedar. The trees make Ladulai sniffle and sneeze, but for all that his countenance is bright and cheerful, and he seems to revel in the presence of companions, for as he tells Roshim and Avalon this is the first time in his journey he has been so blessed.

The routine becomes fixed after a week or two; they walk from morning to midday, then break for food and rest. Roshim waits for Ladulai to gather firewood, which he insists upon doing alone, and Avalon often cooks. Sometimes Roshim fishes

from a stream or river, making fishing poles as he learned to with Cristio, and there is fresh grilled fish.

During each meal, Ladulai talks, and talks, and talks. Sometimes, he is speaking to Roshim and Avalon, but often, to himself. Ladulai sometimes cringes, meeting the gaze of his questioning companions. "I have been alone for a long time", he says.

During these meals and late nights around the fire, Avalon and Roshim prod more details out of Ladulai, who despite all his words is frustratingly reluctant to speak of himself, and seems not aware of what information may be of interest to his companions.

AVALON

(around a mouthful of fish)

So-- the White City has naught but children of Astheopithicus like you?

LADULAI

(gesturing frantically)

Not like me! I am refuse, the-- bad blood, the bad blood of my mother, no doubt. For the seed of the Pale King births men like him, fair and strong.

AVALON

Who is your mother?

LADULAI

I know not. A woman of the people of earth.
They come-- there is a church, a church of the
Stars, and the mothers come from that church.
The Pale King has such churches, scattered
about in lands around the White City, for such
purposes. They give birth and leave the City
when their duty is done.

(turns to Roshim)

You said you do not know your mother. Another
thing we share.

ROSHIM

(in mild distaste)

The cause is very different. True, I do not
know who my birthmother is, but I must know
her. I may have worked alongside her,
shoulder-to-shoulder in the rice fields. To
bear a child is a gracious gift, and a
birthmother would only do so if her roots were
deep and her heart content. Anyway, I do know
my mother. She is the one who lit the morning
lamps, who brought us up with song, who
comforted and preserved me and my brothers and
sisters. Her name is Jilo.

Ladulai, wide-eyed, looks down and says nothing. Avalon
picks fish bones from his teeth, emerald eyes staring deep into
Roshim's own. Roshim wonders who Avalon's mother was.

ROSHIM

(sternly)

Ladulai-- eat more. You will not have
strength to walk.

After supper, with blue twilight dim through the trees,
Roshim sits on a log by the red fire while Avalon combs
Roshim's hair out and trims him with a long sharp knife.

AVALON

You're getting hairier. A man indeed. What
should I do with all this?

ROSHIM

Cut what you can. It tangles too easily.

Roshim sees Ladulai staring from where he is laying down on
his blanket. There's an envy in that glassy blue eye. Roshim
gestures for Ladulai to come over, and Ladulai does so
hesitantly. Avalon keeps trimming Roshim's shoulders.

ROSHIM

(to Ladulai)

If you need to be trimmed, Avalon shall do it.
He is an expert in all things cosmetic.

LADULAI

(backing away)

I should not burden you--

AVALON

(interrupting)

No, no, he's right and you're quite a tangle.
Sit down. I shall get to that muss on your
back.

Ladulai sits beside Roshim and watches Avalon work. At last when Avalon finishes, Roshim stands up and dusts off stray hairs, his beard and hair neatly trimmed, and claps Avalon's shoulder in thanks.

When Avalon approaches Ladulai with his trimming knife, Ladulai shudders violently. His teeth chatter as Avalon looks down quizzically.

AVALON

Is it the knife?

Ladulai freezes, nods miserably. Roshim watches closely as Avalon sets the knife down in his barber kit and brings out a copper comb instead. Ladulai breathes easier as Avalon begins teasing out the knotted fur on his long neck.

At last, Ladulai's mane and body fur is smooth, still mangy in patches but growing in thick and shiny. Combed out, it is a smooth pearly color, white at a glance but a dazzling combination of every hue. Avalon nods his head, and Roshim comes over with the trimming knife. Ladulai shudders again, but when he looks up to Roshim's face, his gaze is trusting.

AVALON

There's a bit on his back-- here.

ROSHIM

(to Ladulai)

May I cut it?

LADULAI

Yes.

(to Avalon)

I am sorry-- I do not fear you, but my body
does not obey.

Roshim trims Ladulai, less skilled than Avalon, but well
enough. He speaks to comfort Ladulai.

ROSHIM

I used to cut my siblings' hair. I had twenty
brothers and ten sisters in my room-- siblings
by assignment. Jilo watched over us all. Our
mother. I was the biggest and the handiest
with clippers meant for adult hands, so I got
to cut hair a lot. You have beautiful hair.

LADULAI

(shivering)

It is a pale imitation of beauty. Should you see my brothers, and hear their clear voices in song, and see the White City, then you will know what a sad fellow I really am. But I pray for your sake that your path does not go that way, for beauty may be the last thing you see.

Avalon shakes his head as he gathers up the silvery clippings and throws them in a nearby stream, where they drift away like shards of moonlight.

EXT. THE DREAM OF AVALON EARLY MORNING

That night, Roshim dreams a yellow ribbon winds around his leg like a serpent. He shakes it off in irritation, then looks around at the flowered fields, the mountain horn in the distance, its sides gleaming with the faint peach hint of pending sunrise, the glowing pools of water and rich grass. It is the dream of the kingdom of Avalon, but its king is nowhere to be seen.

Roshim finds a game trail at a pond with a large red rock in its center, and follows the trail as it wanders the flowery grassland. Misty clouds crest the hills and draw over him periodically, as if the clouds flow in a current, hurrying to somewhere. Bluebells, heather, golden lilies grow so thickly in some places Roshim cannot see the grass.

At last the path leads beside a stream, hardly wider than Roshim's hand, that bubbles and sings merrily as it cuts its way through the loam, heading downhill to a small house built out of rude white stones. As Roshim approaches, he sees the house is thatched with sod from the fields, and the flowers grow on it too. A trail of thin white smoke blows from the mouth of a clay chimney. There is a clearing for a small garden, and well-kept herbs in hand-made clay pots. The house door faces towards the far-off horn of the mountain. The arch of the door is framed by a vine of blooming white roses, full blossoms dripping with dew.

Roshim halts. Somehow he cannot proceed to the threshold of

the door, cannot cross that arch of roses. He waits.

Avalon emerges from behind the house. He is beautiful, his long red hair tied up and resting over one shoulder, trailing down his open chest. A spotless white tunic is cinched around his slim waist with a yellow sash. He is carrying a hot pot of tea. The dawning sunlight shines through his thin tunic, and Roshim sees softer, more feminine curves than he is used to; as Avalon comes up to him, Roshim sees it is not a trick of light, for Avalon's open shirt shows a gentle swell of breasts, large dark nipples flashing invitingly.

Avalon smiles knowingly at him, and he takes Roshim's hand, leading the dazed demiman to a small table by the garden, and they sit together as Avalon pours tea. Roshim looks Avalon over; Avalon's eyes are brighter, lashes longer, skin fairer.

AVALON

(sipping his tea)

You are not invited to the house, yet.
Perhaps one day.

ROSHIM

(staring)

You look more like your father, now.

AVALON

(gesturing to his curves)

This is how I looked, when I was banished from
the Lord's sight. More your fancy?

Roshim grumbles and looks at the house. He is half-hard, and he knows Avalon knows. He ignores the question.

ROS HIM

Who built the house?

Avalon smiles at him and taps the table. Roshim raises his eyebrows, looks at him, then the house again.

ROS HIM

I did not think you fancied that sort of labor.

AVALON

Oh, I do not, lambkin. But I will have my dignity. And after all, there was not much else to do.

ROS HIM

(gesturing to the fields, the sky)
For how long?

AVALON

(looking away)
The Lord was quite angry.

Avalon pauses so long Roshim feels he will not respond to the question, but:

AVALON

Nearly four hundred years. Not alone. Not the entire time. Twelve times, the Lord brought me companions. They were all sorts, who wanted to spend time with me, to learn from the child of a star. Some stayed a year or two, some stayed longer. I was a teacher here, a friend, sometimes a lover. Stripped of grace, I came to better know the world. I learned to hear its voice. In time I suppose I learned what the Lord wanted to teach me. And one day, the door was open.

AVALON

(sipping his tea)

When I returned to the world, I was ashamed of who I had been. It was easier, then, to return as a new person. A token of transfiguration. Not to hide, you understand, but to remind myself.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

Your name is not Avalon.

AVALON

(laughing)

No, indeed not.

ROSHIM

What is your name?

AVALON

(touching his hand)

You already know it. But allow me to remain Avalon. It was this wild place, after all, where I was born a second time.

Birds sing in the grass, greeting the sun. Avalon stares off to the distant mountain. The smell of the tea is warm, floral, minty. The edges of the tall grass glow gold, and white rose petals catch the light, littered along the path to the house.

Roshim holds Avalon's hand firmly, and the latter squeezes back. When Avalon raises his teacup, his hand is trembling.

EXT. THE PATH TO HALI DAY

The lushness of the river valley fades as the three climb, a slight incline at first, then steeper, mounting stony ridges with scant patches of moss and grassy tufts. There are no landmarks; Ladulai produces a tattered hand-drawn map and explains his route, but it is unclear to Roshim how well the map resembles the lands around them.

Camping on a ridge, surrounded by dense fog, Roshim turns to Avalon as they wait for Ladulai to gather firewood, huddled under their damp traveling cloaks.

ROSHIM

(grumbling)

Well, he is gone, for a little bit. It has been two weeks. What do you make of him?

AVALON

(thoughtful)

My feelings have not changed since I met him in Carcosa. Desperation does not make a good ally. I would prefer not to travel with him. Look how good I have been, coddling him with nary a cross word!

ROSHI

(rebuking)

You are rather heartless. Do you not pity him? You have something in common, as the children of Lords.

AVALON

(squeezing Roshim's arm)

I have more in common with you than him! And I admire your soft heart, and indeed I am in debt to it, so I know better than to criticize. Desperate men cannot be counted on to think straight, and attach themselves too readily to whatever relieves their suffering. I am curious to know more of this family he found, and what use they find him-- for the Lord of Silver is better at taking than giving.

ROSHI

(surprised)

Taking, you say? Was he not also called the Lord of Gifts? The records note his generous nature. Did he not bring together the armies of men to force back the hand of heaven?

AVALON

(scoffing)

Oh, I don't know about that! But I know my father despised Laurientus. I do not recall his exact words, but it was something akin-- he gives twofold now for tenfold later. He is not the Lord of Giving, but the Lord of Taking. Unlike that fool Sodon, who disregarded all but the power of his own hands, Laurientus cast aside all his weapons but his tongue. You, child of the library, you know the power of words, for is the library not a spear to pierce the very heart of the Tyrant? You shall meet the one who recognized that words, ideas, knowledge can fashion weapons that reach from earth to heaven. And he does not hesitate to use them for his own purposes!

Roshim looks troubled, and is about to reply when Ladulai reappeared from the fog, coughing and stumbling with his arms full of firewood, so the conversation stopped there.

ROSHIM

(rising to help him)

You are stronger than when we first met, friend.

LADULAI

(pleased)

Ah, am I indeed? I suppose so. Thanks to
you.

EXT. RICE FIELDS OF APHAELIA EARLY MORNING

A brilliant promise of sunrise behind the mountains, and slow illumination of the bay of palms beyond the shadow of those mountains. The white tip of the Tower catches first gold light, and slowly the light travels down the full length, its likeness reflecting in the still water of the fields.

Huts line the hill atop the fields, narrow dwellings made of rude material but cleverly constructed. These are the communal homes of field workers, when they are not at their true homes in the city. In each house sleeps over a hundred young men, on hammocks made of palm fiber. A young Roshim lays with them.

A handful of boys emerge, tittering and shoving each other, with an older boy herding them. The frivolity stops as they take places on a small paved platform at the edge of the irrigation canal, which leads all the way to its gatehouse that connects to the grand aqueduct.

The boys begin to sing loudly, a morning song that is familiar to all, their clear voices rising like the sun itself, and after a few minutes a responding harmony song comes in sleepy tones, as the workers climb out of their beds to start the morning toil.

The communal song goes on as the boys tidy up their bedrooms, sling their bags, and rinse the sleep from their eyes. It grows stronger, triumphant, as the workers file out to the breakfast table, the white tower of Aphaelia shining

radiant in the corner of everybody's eyes.

Roshim feels himself, and not-himself. Now he stands on the hilltop, soft moss at his feet. He watches young Roshim prepare for the day alongside the other youth. He wonders if he sees himself now as his father and mother see him.

Avalon sits beside him. Without looking, Roshim knows Avalon looks the way he did before, soft and feminine, emerald eyes beneath long lashes watching Roshim's fellows below. They sit in silence together, experiencing the dream.

ROS HIM

(gruffly)

When we are together like this, I feel like our minds are becoming one. It feels like you are more present in my dreams than when we walk the roads together. Is that ridiculous? You tell me. I do not know what it is, this power of yours.

AVALON

(looking at him sharply)

Does it bother you?

ROS HIM

No. It doesn't bother me. But I wish I understood. I am trying to understand.

Avalon is silent. They watch the workers break and file out

to the fields. Roshim puts a hand on Avalon's shoulder, and gestures.

ROSHIM

(pointing)

There is new rice, in the lower fields. The upper right quadrant. Do you see it? That orange-tipped crop. Yes, that-- it was planted months earlier. The new breeds are tried there. Some come by trade; others by our own research.

AVALON

(staring)

I see it. Why breed more rice? Does not nature provide enough?

ROSHIM

(distantly)

Better yields. Better resistance to pests. More nutrients. Things can always be improved. The city is growing. Cristio-- he is in the agricultural program. He has bred his own strains. That may be his rice, down there.

Roshim laughs sheepishly, looking for Cristio's golden hair among the boys. He then looks at Avalon, and leans closer.

ROSHIM

When we were young, he said he would marry me.
Children say such things. They don't know
what they mean.

Avalon nods. Roshim stands, brushing moss leavings off himself, and starts down the path to the rice fields. The sunlight breaks over the top of the mountain, and lights the frayed strands of his coarse hair.

ROSHIM

Come with me, Lord of Dreams. Let us see
Cristio's rice.

They follow the meandering trail to the paddy. As they reach the waterline, along which lays a fine boardwalk, Roshim's heavy feet sink into the muddy clay, while Avalon leaves hardly a footprint. The song of the workers fills the mountains around them, as tens of other dormitories all across the paddies also file out into the fields.

Roshim gingerly stands on the boardwalk and leans out, and plucks a stem of the orange-tipped rice from the paddy. He shows it proudly to Avalon, rolling the plump heads between his fingers, breaking the husk to show white and gold kernels. Roshim does not notice that Avalon's eyes are more focused on his animated face than the rice.

ROSHIM

Look-- here is the bread of the earth. This is Cristio's life's work, and what got him admitted to the Library at such a young age. In ten years, this rice will compose the majority of the new plantings here. Bless him; he feeds us all. Hundreds of children are in better health because of Cristio's golden rice.

AVALON

I am surprised at your passion for agriculture. Are you not a stonemason, as you keep telling everyone?

ROSHIM

Of course I am a stonemason. I am also a child of Aphaelia. All members of the Library tend these fields as they are able. It is the law, that all must have a hand in food production. The first service to the community a child will do; the last service an elder will do.

As Roshim recalls, so the dream before them melts away, and Avalon sees a procession of children no older than four years old, walking along the boardwalk two-by-two, carrying racks of baby rice plants between them, arranging the seedlings under supervision of an older boy for the workers in the fields to plant. A young Roshim and a young Cristio work together,

Cristio's golden curls tied back tightly, his face already more focused than usual for a boy his age.

ROSHIM

(musing)

We take turns. A month out of every year, living in the fields. It is a common experience that serves a common need. I did not grasp this as a child; now I understand it.

AVALON

Is it not difficult, dirty work?

ROSHIM

Dirty? Yes. Difficult? No, not with so many. A few hours a day. The rest of the time is our own. I would often spend time hiking in the mountains, with my friends, or we would go down to the bay of palms to relax in the water, or--

A sudden embarrassment, and Avalon briefly sees naked boys darting into the tall grass to fall on each other, copulating outdoors in pairs and threes with the barest privacy. Avalon laughs as Roshim recoils, the latter trying to draw back the memory, too late.

AVALON

(smiling)

Well, I am sure all that youthful energy must go somewhere. Do not be ashamed of your honesty. I have already been exposed to your peoples' carnal appetites, you may recall!

Suddenly, they are together in Roshim's room, where they first had sex. Avalon lays naked beneath Roshim, soft and feminine and smiling, Roshim as he is now, too large for this small space, equally naked atop Avalon. Roshim feels warm pleasure, and he realizes he is deep inside Avalon, and moans before he can stop himself. Avalon's full breasts sway as Roshim thrusts hard, and the sight of that makes Roshim so hard he feels he cannot stop, and wordlessly fucks Avalon into the bed, crushing Avalon beneath his bulk.

As Roshim finishes, he feels Avalon's hands stroking his arms and sides. Roshim puts his head down and suckles the left, then right breast, grunting as Avalon moans in surprise, and starts thrusting again, his huge cock still hard. Avalon's sounds of pleasure become pained, but he still pulls Roshim to him, still squeals in delight. At last Roshim roars, shooting harder yet than his first orgasm, and relaxes, arms bulging and vascular with his strain as he holds himself above Avalon. Light brown eyes blink and focus, meet emerald green ones, and Roshim kisses Avalon on the nose.

AVALON

(breathless)

You are quite a man now, my dear.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

Mmm. A year ago I would have said that you bring out the worst in me. Now I do not know.

AVALON

Is that so? Maybe you no longer feel threatened by me, lambkin.

Roshim looks warily at Avalon, then smiles and sits up, his huge glistening body illuminated by the window. He lays a big hand on Avalon's stomach, drawing it up between Avalon's breasts, and traces the sweat and fluids there. He considers the nature of their relationship.

ROSHIM

(slowly)

No, I don't think that's it. I think-- when we met, I resented my uselessness. You do not need me to protect you, you do not need me to guide you. I felt like I amused you. I felt weak. I grew used to my role in Aphaelia, as the strongest. I was needed by everyone. You do not need me. I learned to be someone who was not needed.

AVALON

(softly)

Oh, but now? With the Lord of Gold's blessing
burning inside you?

Roshim starts, and looks back. Avalon's eyes are sharp.
Roshim shakes his head and lets out a long breath, and gently
pulls Avalon up by the shoulder, nose to nose.

ROSHIM

When I return to Aphaelia, it is yours. It
was not my intention to inherit your
birthright. You know that. I will gladly
give it up when my promise is fulfilled. My
desire is to take my place among my people, to
be beside Cristio, returned to my place on the
shelf as it were. I have not other ambitions.

Avalon studies Roshim's face, and his own aspect softens,
but there remains an edge in his voice.

AVALON

I trust you. I trust that you mean what you
say, but power is not easily relinquished.
Still, I accept this. What choice do I have?
(studies Roshim's face, smiles mischievously)
It must be said: you would make a good king,
O Roshim. I would be tempted to be your
queen.

Roshim fights the slow smile that comes to his own face, leans into Avalon until the latter falls back. The big demiman pushes his face between those perky tits and grunts, feels Avalon's hands running over his hair and neck. Avalon snickers as Roshim licks him. Roshim feels himself grow hard.

AVALON

(gasping, laughing)

Ah! A king indeed--!

EXT. COLD ROAD TO HALI RIDGE AFTERNOON

For a month they travel thus, moving along the winding road around the desert, going north and upwards. We see the changing environment: dry and sparse at first, then rain and sleet and cold haze and evergreens. A series of images: stopping at taverns with strange weathered characters; the gradual change of wardrobe from sparse sarong to full leathers and furs; Roshim's body changing a bit, growing out a full wool coat over his body, much to everyone's surprise, his beard and hair getting longer; Avalon comments that Roshim looks like an ox!

Ladulai seems to be healthier, now that he is with them and eating regularly, but he still exhibits nervous tics and antisocial behavior, and he avoids Avalon unless Roshim is present.

At last one morning there is snow. Roshim is quite taken by it, and Avalon and Ladulai share a moment of solidarity when they are both bemused by Roshim's animated excitement at his first snow. That night they all three sleep together for body heat, though Ladulai is painfully erect he hides that fact, masturbating quietly.

EXT. SNOWY TOWN OF HINDEL AFTERNOON

A few days later they stop in the town of Hindel, before the final climb to the monastery on Hali Ridge. The air is thin, and Ladulai wheezes constantly. Some of the rugged townsfolk recognize Ladulai, and their faces register a blank disgust or distrust.

At one market, Roshim is bartering for apples when Ladulai is suddenly approached by three men and dragged off. Ladulai screams, and Roshim immediately cuffs one of the men, seizing Ladulai back, and stands facing them, his huge aspect giving them pause.

ROSHIM

(loudly)

What are you doing? This man is with me.

SURLY MAN

That creature-- he is a thief and a prostitute. He has haunted this market before and no good has come of it. Get him gone!

Ladulai scrabbles to his feet and raises his hands. He holds out a pendant with a curved symbol, and waves it towards the three men. Roshim has seen Ladulai stroking and talking to this pendant before.

LADULAI

(whimpering)

Roshim-- these men are telling the truth.
Indeed, I was a wretch-- but now, all of you--
heed this, the protection of Lucea and the
Sangriel! I swear, any hurt visited upon me
shall be returned to you a hundredfold!

SURLY MAN

Sangriel or no, this market is for proper
business, not the sort of thing YOU conduct,
whore. Keep your lousy skin intact, then--
but keep it away from here!

(to Roshim)

Be careful of the company you keep. We are
proper law-abiding people here-- and he obeys
no law but the law of pain!

The men retreat, but stay at a distance to watch them.
Roshim makes his barter as Ladulai stands miserably behind him,
clutching his pendant until it cuts into his palm. Roshim
grimaces, reaches to pat Ladulai's shoulder.

ROSHIM

You did not tell me you had so many friends
here. Come; let us leave in peace.

Ladulai's glassy eye rolls, and he shivers, not from the
cold, and follows meekly. That night, at Ladulai's direction,
they lodge at a public house with the same symbol of the

Sangriel etched and painted red upon the lindle. Avalon points out that many of the dwellings in the town are marked similarly.

At the public house, Roshim is greeted with silence when he tries to inquire about the path to Hali Ridge. One man attempts to speak with him, but Roshim does not know the language, and gives up, returning to the small room to write in his journal. Ladulai is nestled in the corner by the fire while Avalon stares out the slot window, watching the snow fall, his face distant.

EXT. SNOWY ROAD TO HALI RIDGE AFTERNOON

They set out the next day along the road to Hali Ridge. The same symbol appears at the fork off the main road: a small tree cut and bowed, splashed with red paint. An offering plate and proliferation of candles rest beneath its outreached arms. Roshim stops to inspect it, sniffs at the scent of burnt offerings.

LADULAI

It is a guide, for pilgrims to follow. There ought to have been more along the road to Hindel, but they have been taken down, I suppose.

AVALON

Who would do such a thing? You said your saint was beloved.

Ladulai does not respond, but shows his teeth in a pained smile. He fumbles with his pendant and puts it around his neck, muttering to himself.

LADULAI

The monastery is three day's walk. There may be other travelers along the road. It will be-- it is a bitter road. Let us pray for good weather.

ROSHI

(boldly)

We have plenty of supplies. Come! We are nearly there. What's a mere three days?

The day is cold, gray, listless, and with ominous stormy clouds overhead the entire trudge. The incline is steep enough that one feels their strength sapped slowly, and by nightfall, a great freezing wind begins to tear along the naked rocks, which do nothing to halt it.

Roshim lowers his head and trudges along, a heavy pack on his back, while Avalon and Ladulai move ahead of him. His hair falls in front of his face, muffling the wind, and he silently thanks his body for its strength, and the Lord Oidecalla for his blessing. His mind wanders, and he sees a waking dream of home in front of him instead of the cold sharp rocks.

So hours pass, until at last the light is nearly gone and the wind is blowing so hard that Avalon and Ladulai are obliged to wrap their cloaks tightly or be knocked down. Roshim raises his head and blinks dumbly as Avalon calls him over to the meager protection of a larger cluster of rocks to break for the night.

Roshim throws off his pack and looks around. It is a poor shelter from the wind but as good as they could expect to find here. A skeletal tree, wind-burned and barkless, rattles nearby in the gale. With Ladulai's admiring eyes on his arms, Roshim rips it down and breaks it apart into firewood with his

bare hands, but finds he cannot light a fire in the wind. Avalon manages to coax it alight, and soon the bright warm light raises their spirits for a bit.

However, that night a wet snow begins to fall, and when they awake the next morning, the path is damp and packed with heavy melting snow up to Avalon's waist, and the wind is unbearable, gusting relentlessly into their faces. Ladulai is shivering uncontrollably in the cold, his nose pink and dripping as they miserably make their way forward, now with Roshim in the lead forcing his way through the heavy snow to make a path for Ladulai and Avalon.

At last at midday Roshim calls for rest, and nearly collapses when he sits down, back to the snowbank. Avalon makes him drink water, though the icy cold makes Roshim want to spit it out. Roshim's legs are shaking, his enormous thighs quivering with the strain of hours of pushing through snow. Avalon touches his sweaty forehead in sympathy.

AVALON

Even the blessing of the Lord cannot sustain you forever, dear. Rest, rest! See, down there, smoke from Hindel's chimneys. We have come quite a ways up already.

(turns to Ladulai)

We are nearly to the top, yes?

Ladulai is crouched, fondling his pendant. He blinks at Avalon, blind eye reflecting the white snow.

LADULAI

Nearly at the top. Yes. Then the glacial lake, cold Hali, blessed Hali. We will see the spires of the mont by the start of the third day, when we descend to the lake. Unless there is fog.

Roshim makes a move as if he is about to stand, but Avalon shoves Roshim back down. Roshim stares at Avalon, annoyed.

AVALON

I said rest, lummoX. Eat something. We will clear a bit of the way ahead. Ladulai, come! He has done enough for today.

Ladulai looks at Avalon, surprised, and looks at Roshim, then slowly, reluctantly gets to his feet and helps Avalon push through the snow. Roshim grumbles a bit, but his legs, having had a bit of rest, are quite done. He pulls his cloak round him, gnaws on a bit of dried fruit, and drinks more water. Avalon and Ladulai make their way toward the bright sky at the top of the ridge, and watching them move forward is the last thing Roshim remembers.

Suddenly he starts awake, Ladulai's glassy eyed face appearing inches from his own. Ladulai grins at him, painfully.

ROSHI

(loudly)

Oh-- El above, what is it?

LADULAI

(purring)

Come along. We have a better place to rest ahead. The child of gold awaits you. Come along, Lord!

Slowly and painfully Roshim gets to his feet, his thighs no longer shaking but stiff, and shoulders his pack. Ladulai takes his hand and leads Roshim through the path, up to the height of the ridge. Another great mass of tall stones, and another offering tree, broken into the symbol of the Sangriel, the red paint splashed on the rocks as well-- and a rough shelter of pine, where a cooking fire burns beneath a boiling pot of water with Avalon tending it, his hair reflecting the firelight. He turns to see Roshim, and smiles.

AVALON

Ho there, weary traveler! Come; rest properly, and let me see that pack! We shall have a proper soup tonight, and let the snow fall upon this pine roof, and let the wind blow fruitlessly. The Sangriel have left blankets, meat, seasoning. How encouraging! Even a mean bit of gristle would be a welcome sight after this ascent-- as they intend, no doubt.

Roshim grunts wearily, and throws himself down by the fire beneath the wing of the shelter. He watches Avalon tend the soup for a bit. Ladulai puts a blanket around his shoulders and sits beside him.

ROSHIM

(sleepily)

Are you glad to be nearly home again? I dreamed of my home last night.

LADULAI

(muttering)

I-- I return with more failure. But so I came to them. They will forgive me, as one does a foolish child.

ROSHIM

Have you someone who waits for you to return?
A friend or lover?

LADULAI

(staring at him)

Oh, yes, I have friends who will be glad to see me, foolish as I am. Great friends. They shall be glad to meet you, the one who brings me home. You shall meet them.

(hesitates)

I am glad to travel with you. I know I am useless, weak, and stupid. I have never met another as kind to me as you have been, Roshim of Aphaelia, despite my uselessness.

ROSHIM

I assure you, Ladulai, I am no kinder than I was raised. My father Balthius, my mother Jilo, they taught me kindness is owed to all people; it is not a reward, doled out in return for one's utility, but a minimum acknowledgment of shared humanity. Your story makes me sad, and I hope the kindness of your Sangriel heal you further.

That night they rested early and well, and ate heartily. Ladulai slept beneath one of Roshim's arms; Avalon beneath the other, and the little shelter was warm and cozy.

EXT. THE ICE FIELD OF HALI MORNING

The soft pink glow of morning wakes Roshim, and he goes out to relieve himself, and sees the descent to the Hali ice plain shimmering before him.

Hali is a glacial lake, frozen on the surface and wedged between the slopes of the Hali Ridge, that trickles down into a meager stream that flows down past Hindel. At this altitude, Hali stays frozen most of the year, and thus the glacial plain is flat and lumpy, with wind-scorched dunes of snow and bare ice. The wind gusts unceasingly, and the sky seems uncannily close to earth, and the fading stars shine with a cold bright light that reflects off the ghostly snow as the sky succumbs to sparse daylight.

Well-warmed and well-fed, refreshed by the coziness of their little shelter, the three set out, descending through a gulf of snow-drifts toward the bright frozen plain of Hali. Reaching the plain in a few hours, Roshim is struck by the sight of ice in all directions, snow meeting the sky. The clouds part, revealing a dark blue zenith, and the bright face of the moon.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

It feels like we have reached the top of the world.

AVALON

Perhaps the Library should have been built
here; think how much sooner it would pierce
heaven!

Ladulai shouts and points; following his finger, Roshim can
make out a darkness against the horizon, the faint impression
of spires.

LADULAI

(dancing)

The Sangriel! Oh, my friends, let us hurry,
and be out of this cold world, and close the
doors fast behind us!

The snow is scant on the surface of Hali, and easy walking
despite the wind. After a few hours, the lump on the horizon
becomes a distinct mount, with spires and steeples making an
oddly jumbled shape. The skies grow overcast again, and
threaten snow; Ladulai clutches his pendant and prays for good
weather as they hurry. The air is so thin Roshim feels out of
breath, and finds himself gulping. Ladulai does not seem to
notice, and prances ahead of the two, occasionally shouting
encouragement.

Roshim is glad to see Ladulai's optimism, but Avalon's words
make him cautious. He tells himself to be wary, for none of
the Lords thus far have given him what he has asked for, and
something about the isolated plain, the craggy steeples, the
cold wind disconcert him.

ROSHI

(to himself)

What sort of kingdom is this? It seems removed from the world altogether. But maybe I am too quick to judgment. Let us see first.

The snow begins to fall when they are a few kilometers from the base of Mont Hali, and the dark steeples are nearly obscured by the whirling snowfall. The wind howls, and Roshim's beard becomes stiff with the frost of his breath, and he lowers his head, trudging forward. He looks on occasion to see Avalon beside him, the latter's bright hair tucked into his hood, and Ladulai's cavorting figure ahead.

At last, Roshim can hear nothing in the blizzard, cannot see Ladulai ahead of him, cannot see the steeples, only a deluge of snow. With Avalon by his side, he keeps walking, until he wonders if he has walked past Mont Hali--

And then dark stone looms out of the darkness in front of him. Roshim looks up, and a break in the snowfall shows twinkling lights and silhouetted steeples.

LADULAI

(screaming)

Lord Roshim!

Roshim starts and looks to his left. A fluttering torch cuts through the snow just enough to illuminate a narrow gate, and Ladulai's windswept hair.

INT. MONT HALI MONASTERY MIDDAY

The narrow door shuts behind them, and leaves the tempest outside. Roshim sighs and shakes the snow off his broad shoulders, and looks about. Ladulai's anxious face peers up at him, and gentle torchlight illuminates a cavernous brick foyer. Two pale men in ruffed robes finish shutting the door, and Ladulai begins speaking to two more men, who glance at Roshim and Avalon with mild curiosity.

Roshim realizes he cannot understand the language Ladulai is speaking; he listens, but try as he might, the speech bears no resemblance to any language he knows of. Ladulai clasps the hands of one of the men, and speaks low and urgently as he nods.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

Do you know this speech? My people do not know of a language specific to the Lord of Silver.

AVALON

(listening)

No-- I do not know it. And I say that, having spoken nearly every tongue of earth and heaven! Rather peculiar.

The man replies to Ladulai in the same language, and Ladulai hurries to Roshim. His blue eye is sparkling feverishly.

LADULAI

Come, we must warm ourselves. Word will be sent to the Lady, and she will attend us when she is able. Come, come! See my home with me.

The brickwork of the monastery is stark and rough, and Roshim's breath still frosts his nose as they proceed up a spiral stair. His horns scrape the top of the ceiling, and his shoulders nearly the walls! They ascend several flights, and Roshim sees into several floors, brickwork rooms with braziers, and huddled bodies. Firewood is stacked in alcoves at each floor, and pine bark crunches under his feet. The howl of the wind outside is ever-present. A few slotted windows show the darkness of the storm outside; it is difficult to believe it is mid-day! Roshim feels glad for the brick walls, cold and rough as they are.

Suddenly the brick gives way to raw stone, and they move out of the stair into a wide corridor lined with pillars, cut horizontal into the mount, with the brickwork continuing only along the outward side of the corridor. Roshim notes the stone cuts are still rough, the walls still showing the marks of the tools as if none cared to sand them down, and he shakes his head.

On the mount side, windowless rooms are cut into the stone, and even more fires glow within their darkened interiors, with more huddled figures inside, the stark walls echoing the murmur of that strange tongue. The floors are padded with straw and

the scent of incense is overwhelming. Stray snow swirls through the narrow slotted windows.

At last, they climb a wide stair into a great vaulted hall, its ceiling so high that it remains dark despite torchlight. The stonework is of fine condition here, and even Roshim's critical eye finds no fault in the ornate pillars and trim. Great colored glass windows stand at one end of the hall, painted with wax. They are dark with with blizzard outside, rough and bubbled, small pieces of melted glass stuck together in a lead lattice. On the other end of the hall is a massive fireplace, with an entire pine log burning steadily, and people drawn around the warmth on long rough tables. Roshim smells food.

Ladulai calls out, and a group of men turn. One raises a hand. Ladulai urges Roshim and Avalon to come, sit, and they do so. Dozens of pale faces stare at them. None seem particularly friendly nor unfriendly. Ladulai speaks to them, his raspy voice carrying as he fidgets. The men seem amused, and one of them reaches out for him, gives him a hug, slaps his back. They surround him warmly and their tone is welcoming. Roshim sees Ladulai drink it up eagerly, his uneasy grin becoming warm and natural as he hugs his friends.

Ladulai gestures to Roshim, and their gaze turns to Roshim, and back to Ladulai, who continues talking and gesturing. Evidently Ladulai has begun to convey the tale of his journey, and they surround him, ignoring Roshim and Avalon.

A woman brings hot mugs of water to Roshim and Avalon. The water is faintly alkaline, and the stonework mugs are crude. Still, the warmth feels good, and Roshim drinks it.

ROSHIM

(looking at the woman)

Thank you.

The woman who brought the water bows, her eyes low. She does not reply, but Roshim sees her looking at his horns as she walks away. The pendant around her neck is the same as Ladulai's.

Ladulai continues to talk to his companions, and Roshim and Avalon sit in silence. Nobody else approaches them, so Roshim is content to rest. His eyelids droop a bit; the warmth of the fire and low murmur of speech is comforting.

Roshim slips into a half-sleep. He becomes aware of Avalon beside him, a yellow flame. He looks around the hall, and sees pale flames burning over the heads of some of the people. The tiny flames burn both up and down, like spindles of fire. Roshim looks up, and the roof of the great hall disappears, and above the blizzard the dome of the heavens presses down with its chorus of stars, looming so close that Roshim feels he must duck his head or be utterly crushed.

There is a terrible sensation of an approaching gaze, and Roshim feels as if the pillars of the hall were about to transfigure into pillars of flame, as if the hall itself was on

the verge of burning. He starts fully awake, and realizes Avalon is speaking to him.

AVALON

Someone approaches.

At the far end of the hall, a small woman flanked by a handful of maidens emerges from a side passageway. She is dressed in white, the rest in dark red. The group stops in front of the wax window, and confers for a moment, then the group proceeds towards them.

Around Roshim and Avalon, all the seated people rise to their feet. Roshim sees an old woman, arms gnarled and back bent, struggle mightily to rise, to be helped by a pale younger woman. She sees Roshim looking, then pointedly looks away, to the approaching figure in white.

Roshim and Avalon stand as well. Ladulai returns to their side, his ragged breathing excited, standing tall.

LADULAI

(whispering)

That is Lucea. She will greet you. Please, respect her.

As Lucea approaches with her handmaidens, Roshim realizes she is quite young, nearly a maiden herself, with pale skin and gold hair trimmed close to her soft, round face. Her garments are simple; a white cowl and outer robes, with a bright red

sash around her waist, but the material is fine and embroidered intricately. Even the weave of the cowl appears have many patterns; plain from a distance, but complex the closer one looks. A pendant hangs around the necks of each of the Sangriel, but around hers there hangs a fine silver chain and key. Her cheeks glow pink, and her eyes are bright blue and smiling.

As she passes through the crowd, the people bow respectfully, and she grasps many arms, speaks gently to many of them. Her smile is easy, and many of the pale men and woman seem glad to see her. A small child tugs at her robe hem, and she bends to listen to it speak. Roshim sees her gaze pass over him, Ladulai, Avalon, and she makes her way over without dismissing those who clamor for her attention.

At last, Lucea stands before Ladulai, who trembles, reaches out for her, and she embraces him, fully without reservation, and kisses his forehead. Ladulai murmurs to her and blinks, and she whispers back in that strange tongue, stroking his arms.

Lucea draws back and looks at Avalon, who stands partly behind Roshim. She smiles, and gestures for him to come forth, and appraises them both together. When she speaks, it is a language Roshim understands.

LUCEA

(arms wide)

I am Lucea. We are honored to harbor you here, and glad you brought our brother Ladulai back to us. He has been away for some time, and many thought he had perished. Thank you! Welcome to our home.

She approaches, and Roshim is surprised when she embraces him. Her head presses to his chest, and her little gloves touch his back. He stands stiffly, unsure of what to do, and gingerly pats her back. Avalon looks amused at Roshim's reaction, and accepts Lucea's embrace with more dignity. She stands back, sees Roshim's face, and laughs.

LUCEA

I apologize if I caused discomfort. Here we embrace, as natural as brother and sister, and I forget those outside rarely do. Tell me your names, where you are from, and what brings you to our home! But first, sit down; I have heard you are just in from this storm. Let us sit by the fire, and warm ourselves, and attend to this.

Suddenly, furs and blankets are brought; the tables are moved away from the fire to make room, and in short order Avalon and Roshim are seated in front of it across from Lucea. The crowd around them keeps a respectful distance, but does not disperse; Lucea does not seem to notice them, her regard fixed

on Roshim and Avalon. Ladulai sits beside Roshim, fidgeting as always, but a blissful expression on his scarred face. Food and drink is brought, a warm spiced juice and dried dainties, and incense burnt. A handmaiden drapes a fur cloak over Lucea's shoulders, and she leans forward, staring curiously at Roshim, though her gaze frequently turns toward Avalon.

LUCEA

(looking to Roshim)

As I said, I am Lucea. Few seek this place, but many come guided by my brethren. Who are you, and do you intend to stay with us?

ROSHIM

I am Roshim of Aphaelia. I asked Ladulai to bring us to Hali to seek the Lord of Silver, who has knowledge of the construction of my home.

(withdraws the letter scroll from his bag)

Here is a letter, signed by my elders, that describes my purpose, and asks for the Lord's cooperation.

AVALON

And I am Avalon, companion to Roshim and aide to his people, who serves as his guide in this land.

In the faces of the crowd, Roshim sees no recognition of the words they speak. The pale faces remain impassive. A

handmaiden takes the scroll from Roshim's hands and delivers it to Lucea. Lucea glances at Roshim, her eyes keen, reading his face.

LUCEA

These people speak no tongue but that of the Lord of Silver. It is not a law here, but their decision, to better mediate on the Lord's work. The children here do not learn any other.

Lucea reads the scroll, and returns it. Her face is still smiling, but a bit distant. Roshim cannot read the look in her eyes.

LUCEA

You traveled far to reach us here, Roshim of Aphaelia. The Lord is surprised.

ROSHIM

It was not my intention, when I set out. The location of the Lords is not known to my people. Guided by Avalon, I met with the Lord Oidecalla first to no avail, and on Carcos I met Ladulai also, who was beseeching the Lord for his own purpose. From Carcosa I left to speak to Lord Sodon-- also to no avail. It was on my return to Under-Epha that I met Ladulai a second time, and came with him to seek your Lord.

LUCEA

I admire your strength. Your people ought to be proud to have raised up such a man as you, one who will persevere proudly for his kin, for you are the type of man who carries forward his community.

LUCEA

(leaning forward)

In a manner not unlike yourself, I came to this mount, a stranger in a strange land, carrying the light of my God with me, seeking answers from the Lord of Silver. Mount Hali was the end of my own journey, and I believe it may be the end of yours. The world is a place of questions; this is a place of answers.

LUCEA

(peering at Avalon)

But first, a question or two more! Your companion is modest, I see, but the light of heaven cannot be hidden from the eyes of the Lord. Who are you, sir? My own poor eyes cannot tell me more.

AVALON

(bowing)

I am the child of the Lord of Gold. As I said, I am called Avalon, and I serve the Library of Aphaelia.

Lucea is silent for a moment. A shadow passes over her face, and the fire crackles in the silence.

LUCEA

That is surprising. Very surprising. Yet all are welcome in the sanctuary of the Lord of Silver. As you have seen, even the children of stars find shelter here.

(gestures to Ladulai)

This is a place for answers, as I said. It is also a place of rebirth, for the questions that are answered must lead one to question anew. It is a place for the strong to rest, and the wandering to put up their feet. It is a place of still water.

Gently, Lucea reaches down offer dried fruit to a small child, no older than two years. The child gnaws on the fruit and sits on the furred hem of Lucea's coat, staring up at Roshim's face with huge round eyes.

LUCEA

My Lord is the Lord of Weakness, one who knows the arrogance of the strong, the cruelty of those who have never been burdened by impotence. My Lord has risen from the depths of the firmament to sit on the highest mountain, to be enthroned amongst the stars themselves, and He has not forgotten his meek and mild devotees, for the weak are many, and the strong are few. For indeed strength is isolation, and in weakness one finds many friends. Gather in with us tonight, child of heaven and child of earth, and the Lord shall answer you tomorrow, if you offer him your weakness.

Outside the walls, the cold wind shrieks.

INT. MONASTERY BEDROOM NIGHT

The odd interview ends, and Roshim and Avalon are taken by Ladulai to one of the dormitory wings. The monastery building is constructed haphazardly, wooden boards in parts, broken stonework piled up in others, and Roshim understands the teetering outline he saw from afar. This place seems to have grown with no plan or purpose, a cluster of original buildings around the great hall that were smashed apart and connected by odds and ends to accommodate great numbers of people. And everywhere, dark figures huddled around braziers, and bitter cold outside of those piles of humanity. The air is misery.

Ladulai leads the way, carrying a torch, for most of the halls are unlit save the moonlight from outside, when the storm abates.

LADULAI

(babbling)

It is a bit dim this time of year, and a bit cold... but we shall make do. I shall sleep with my other friends tonight, if you don't mind. I know it is difficult, not speaking the language of the Sangriel-- but should you want to learn, I can teach you! Tomorrow, you shall see the Lord, and indeed as the Lady says, I'm sure, I'm sure he shall satisfy you...

AVALON

What can you tell me of this language? It is quite strange! I know of none that is similar.

LADULAI

Oh, oh, I am no authority, better to ask the Lady... this tongue is the tongue of the Book, the Book of Silver, written by the Lord himself, and to learn the Book one must learn the tongue, so says the Lord, for he will not permit the Book to be translated, and indeed, that act is sinful. This tongue is sacred, a gift of the Lord.

Roshim has many thoughts on this revelation, but they arrive at a moderately private room with a door, and Ladulai hustles them through it. He smiles at them, his usual pained smile.

LADULAI

These are the rooms for the new acolytes of Mont Hali, and I hope they please you. Rest now, and I will fetch you tomorrow. There is work to be done, and the children are cold. The Sangriel will soon know your quality, Lord Roshim, for I know you will do what you can to help. Rest well!

The door shuts crookedly and blows a draft. Roshim wedges it upright, shaking his head at the shoddy craftsmanship. He

looks around the room, a cold cell with a ventilation shaft emitting a faint heat from somewhere in the monastery, a flickering torch, and plastered walls, and a straw mattress with a pile of ill-smelling blankets. There is a worn pelt on the stone floor. Avalon looks back at him, unimpressed.

AVALON

The cell in Loraine was more hospitable than this place.

ROSHM

Indeed. It is a bit miserable. But complaining won't help.

AVALON

Your patience with him is inspiring, Lord Roshim. That mattress is too slim for us both, I reckon.

ROSHM

You take it. I shall rest on the floor. It is not too cold.

AVALON

Come, come, we turn the mattress and both rest our heads, lay on the pelt, and cover ourselves with your cloak. You may be warm enough alone but I shan't suffer more than needed.

Roshim throws his travel bag into the corner and they do as Avalon suggests, then they lay down together and listen to the howling wind. The torch embers are red in the corner of the room, and only moonlight beneath the door.

That night, there are no dreams but briefly. Roshim sees the three pillars, the strange stars of the causeway, and hears Avalon's flute, but does not see him. Nonetheless, he feels a strong embrace, and feels protected, at peace. The storm cannot reach him.

INT. DREAM OF THE DORMITORY OF APHAELIA EARLY MORNING

In the white stone room, rows of sleeping boys and girls lay on their mattresses and blankets, all about ten to twelve years old. A sea breeze blows through the curtained balcony, some children sleeping together outside, here and there as they wish. The dawn will soon break over the bay of palms, and the horizon is peach, and the stars are fading.

The double doors to the entrance are opened, and a large horned woman enters. Her vast mane of fleecy hair is decked with jewelry, and her goatlike face is bearded and jeweled also. Vast breasts proceed her, hanging low over her curved stomach, and her white linens swathe her. Her arms and legs are stout and powerful, and every child in the room knows she can heft a child with little effort. She carries a long lamplighter in one hand, and a bell in the other. She looks like a goddess. This is Jilo, mother of Roshim and this room of children.

Sweetly the silver bell tinkles, and she lights the lamp above the door, and goes around the room, stepping over sleeping children to light the other lamps. She begins to sing a morning song in a deep register, and the children stir. By the time she has gone round the room, they have started sing as well, harmonizing sleepily. She prods at a few who lay longer with the butt of her lamplighter, coaxing them up.

The song grows louder as the children put their bedding away, and stretch, and file out into the hallway to join other

children, all singing the same song. Jilo brings up the rear, helping a child who has difficulty walking, and they go to the washroom, and rinse the sleep out of their eyes, and relieve themselves by the hundreds.

Then the procession proceeds through the adult dormitory, and the adults emerge, in ones and twos from their small rooms, more range added to the morning song, and they all go together to the great dining halls, the vaulted ceiling reflecting the song back at them grander still. Food is served from great pans, quickly and efficiently distributed, and the song dies down as the food is eaten. The sunrise shines pink through the wide open balconies, and the chatter of a thousand eager voices fills the air as Aphaelia wakens, the rings of the city below stirring to life.

Young Roshim jostles at his table, with Cristio and Rami and other friends, side by side, like books on a shelf. A yellow ribbon curls around his leg, unnoticed by the dream-memory. A strange child, with red skin and fiery hair, now sits with them, and looks around in wonder.

INT. MONASTERY BEDROOM EARLY MORNING

Roshim awakes with a start to hear a chorus singing. He thinks for an instant he hears the same morning song, sung by Aphaelia; but no, this is a different song, in the language of the Lord of Silver. Beside Roshim, Avalon raises his head, bleary-eyed.

They are both up when Ladulai knocks, pushing open the door. Sunlight and a bright blue rectangle of window illuminate his hair in a halo.

LADULAI

Oh, yes, awaken and come along, friends!
Please, join us for the morning meal, and--
see the Mont, beautiful now, and peaceful.

They emerge from their dark room, blinking, into a file of dark red robes, pale faces, bright sunlight. Through the windows Roshim sees a horizon split between pure white snow and blue sky, clear and cloudless. He moves with Avalon and Ladulai, the Sangriel singing in a solemn but beautiful way, and Ladulai joining them with his quavering voice. Roshim begins to hum the melody and Avalon looks at him sharply.

The Sangriel file into the great hall, and seat themselves at the long tables. Trays of warm bland porridge are served from vats wheeled up and down between the tables, and the hall is nearly silent as they eat together. The colored-wax window is brilliant in the sun, and etched with such detail that

Roshim cannot stop glancing at it, though he cannot make out what it is portraying.

Ladulai eats across from them, slack-faced, but smiles whenever he sees Roshim's eyes on him. Roshim notices new cuts and bruises on his face and scuffed fur.

ROSHIM

(leaning forward)

What are those bruises on your face?

LADULAI

(bringing a hand to his face)

My friends were too rough, too rough last night. I am not injured. It is not serious hurt. We have already spoken of it. Do not worry, Lord Roshim.

Ladulai smiles again, and Roshim sees specks of blood in his teeth. Roshim feels a sudden anger and renewed pity, and Ladulai shies away at Roshim's change of expression. His one good eye dilates.

ROSHIM

(grimly)

I should like to speak to these friends of yours, Ladulai.

LADULAI

(horrified)

No, no, it is nothing, truly! No need! They have already apologized.

ROSHIM

Give me your hand, please.

Ladulai offers his trembling hand. Roshim grasps it firmly and glares at Ladulai, attempting to impress his conviction by touch. Avalon watches with faint amusement at Roshim's sudden passion.

ROSHIM

(gruff)

Sleep with me tonight. You enjoyed it well enough during our journey, did you not?

LADULAI

(wavering)

I did, I do, certainly-- yes, I should like that, I think, Lord.

ROSHIM

If you like how I treat you better, then no more of these friends. While I am here, sleep with me.

Ladulai whimpers and kisses Roshim's hand, tears in his eyes. Avalon looks faintly put off, but Roshim glances at him

angrily and Avalon purses his lips in assent.

They eat dried fruit and drink water, and as the meal ends, Lucea enters the hall and stands beneath the great glass window, her white robes turning multi-colored in the light. An array of men stand beside her, white-robed also, and she raises her hands as they begin to sing, a deep slow song.

The crowd rises and begins to sing in response, and Roshim stands as well. The song is short and rather monotonous, a call and response, and when it is over, Lucea begins to speak, her voice soft yet clear. Her words move the crowd; some weep openly, some merely close their eyes and tilt their heads, and a few fall to their knees.

Ladulai is on his knees, babbling gently, and he clings to Roshim's hand. Roshim kneels beside him, while Avalon stands, arms crossed.

Lucea recedes, and one of the men beside her speaks next. Everyone sits on the benches, and by the man's tone, it sounds as if business is being discussed. Roshim takes a moment to glance around the hall; there must be a thousand or so seated, and more crowding the entrances and lined up against the walls. Most of them are wearing dark red robes. Many children run to and fro, some wearing small scraps of old robes. There are no demimen among them, and most are pale.

The service concludes, and the hall grows noisy as people get up, clear dishes, and begin to disperse. Ladulai grasps

Roshim's hand again, pulling him insistently towards Lucea, who still stands beneath the great window, her short white hood nearly disappearing in the crowd about her.

This time, Roshim is prepared for her embrace, and returns it less awkwardly. She smiles at him, as if it is a joke they share, and Roshim feels his own lips smile in response. The warmth in her face feels genuine.

LUCEA

Brothers, I'm glad to see you this morning.
Our home is meager but we are happy to share
what we have. Yet the day does not wait for
us, and like I said last night, this is a
place of answers! Come with me and I shall
answer what I can.

Lucea gestures for her train to leave them alone, and the four of them leave the hall through a door beside the great window. Roshim blinks at the sudden blaze of white sun on snow and shakes his head, grateful for the fresh air and the quiet. A cobbled path leads along the head of the mount, up a steep stair to an isolated tower. Offerings and candles line the path, laid one atop the other. Roshim stares at bright red flower petals, blown atop the white snow.

LUCEA

The Lord's original monastery stood here, built long before I arrived. There were but a handful of faithful alongside his Lordship in those days. Now most of it has been razed and used to build the Mont, but this tower remains of the first work.

AVALON

What inspired the growth of the Sangriel?

LUCEA

The Lord's revelation that community is necessary for his work to continue. It is well and good to isolate oneself at times, but we must have distance, not disconnection. The world remains outside the gate, but we are a part of it.

ROSHIM

My own people have a similar view. My father Balthius once said: "A wall without gates will be broken."

LUCEA

I know little of your people, Roshim, save for what the Lord has told me, but I believe you will find many familiar ideas here. It only makes good sense, does it not? The same Lord set forth many of the principles we both abide by.

Near the top of the spiral path to the tower, Lucea pauses and looks at them solemnly. Ladulai shivers, and Roshim pats him, staring up the length of ragged tower. Avalon looks withdrawn and distracted.

LUCEA

My title here among the Sangriel is "Voice of the Lord." What you see here may surprise you. It may horrify and shock you. But this is the Lord's will, and his suspension is at his consent. I show you this to frame the Lord's work, as a foundation upon which all other answers will rest.

Lucea rings a bell by the tall, narrow blackened pine doors, and they are opened by a Sangriel in a black robe. They leave the bright outdoors for a dark cavernous narthex. A large brazier burns in the center, and the monk lights a torch from it and hands it to Lucea with a bow. Roshim sees more offerings line the walls, the floors, wax droppings as large as small boulders, centuries of candles.

A smaller pine inner door is opened by the monk, and Lucea leads them through it into the tower proper, with three large vertical windows letting in a white light that is absorbed by the blackened pine walls and floor. Ladulai is whispering, clutching his pendant. Avalon looks upset. Roshim feels the sensation of a gaze upon him. He stares, realizes there is a silhouette under the three great windows, that the great Sangriel cross has a figure on it.

It is too horrible for him to perceive right away, all silhouettes and edges in the harsh light, but as Lucea's torchlight moves closer, Roshim sees the desiccated figure on the cross.

LUCEA

This is the home of the true living saint,
Laurientus, our gracious Lord.

The arms and legs of the figure have been cut off, and the stumps lashed to the pine cross, bent into the symbol of the Sangriel, and wreathed with dried flowers. The figure's ankle-length sparse hair is draped over its face, but two long horns protrude, one broken off. The body is dry, and the eye sockets are empty. At the base of the cross, swords and spears are piled up, and more flowers. The body is naked but cowed with a filmy material, that blows about in the drafts from the windows.

Avalon curses in a language Roshim does not know.

LUCEA

Yes, I understand. It is a terrible sight. I apologize for your shock, necessary though it may be. I would not dare describe his Lordship with mere words, else one may disbelieve.

Ladulai falls to his knees and prays at the feet of the cross. Roshim is in shock, mouth agape as he stares at the hooded body. Avalon looks at Roshim, at the figure, then at Lucea's face carefully. Despite her solemn words, there is something like mirth in her eyes that only Avalon sees.

AVALON

Tell me what was done here. I do not understand what I see. For beside you I sometimes see a blue flame, apart yet alongside you, so faint it recedes behind you, yet here it burns brightly.

LUCEA

(surprised and delighted)

Ah! It is so! What others must take on faith you see clearly. The Lord lives! And he tells me, your sight is superior even to that of your father.

ROSHIM

(dumbly)

The Lord lives?

AVALON

The flame of Laurientus burns beside this woman and hardly at all in the body of Laurientus. She is a kindling for it. She is host to the Lord, in a way.

(to Lucea)

The Voice of the Lord, indeed!

Lucea laughs, claps her hands together. She appears wholly delighted, ignoring Avalon's expression of confusion and fear.

LUCEA

Yes, exactly! The Lord sees and speaks to me. I am a vessel, a resting place for his holy spirit. At times, I clearly hear his voice. His is a great sacrifice, you see; I offer my own small sacrifice in return.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

She has been blessed by Laurientus? Is that different from--?

Avalon raises a hand sharply and cuts him off. Lucea looks at Roshim knowingly.

AVALON

(to Roshim)

She has not been blessed, she has not inherited the flame; it rests on her, as I said. Laurientus is alive, in a way I have never seen. It-- I cannot imagine what drove him to to abandon his body, to live so tenuously--

LUCEA

Oh, the Lord's body lives as well, despite its sorry state. Look!

Lucea holds up her torch, and in the light, they make out the faintest puff of foggy breath in the cold air; a creak, slightly, of those dry lungs; a tilt of the head, so slight as to be imagined. The undulation of the veiled cloth hides such minor movements, but Roshim realizes the desiccated eye sockets of Laurientus are looking down at them.

Roshim backs away, and collapses into a pew. Despite the cold, he wipes sweat from his neck, and feels faint.

Avalon is also silent. The murmured prayer of Ladulai is the only sound for a time.

LUCEA

(softly)

Listen to me. I tell you truthfully, the Lord will live again, in his full body, with his full life restored. This beautiful sacrifice, his expression of love: it shall be rewarded. It is a tribute, a sign of his devotion, a sign for his people to follow. It is a surrender.

AVALON

Devotion...? Devotion to what?

Lucea looks away, gestures to the black-robed monk standing by the entrance, and he opens the door. They exit back into the narthex, and as the door closes, cutting off that cadaverous gaze, Roshim feels an immediate relief. He wets his lips, still sweating. Ladulai pats his arm. Roshim stares at Ladulai, wondering why Ladulai did not mention the state of Laurientus.

LUCEA

Come, let us go to my study, and we shall talk about these things. Now that you have seen and believed in the Lord, you will understand what I will tell you next.

Dazed, Roshim follows Lucea, back to the great hall, and to the far end of the waxed window, where another double door of carved pine stands flanked by two white-robed monks. As they

approach, the monks bow to Lucea and open the door to a arched hallway. The brickwork beyond is still crude and the air is cold, but the space beyond is smaller, more intimate, plastered in some places, and the plastered walls are covered with fantastic paintings. At the end of the hallway is a small chapel, and behind the pulpit is a small plain door, painted red. Lucea opens the door with a key, and they enter her study, Roshim ducking his head beneath the frame.

The study is intimate and plain. All the walls are plastered white and broken by two windowed alcoves and a fireplace, the laced windows gazing out over the tower's base and the plain of Hali beyond. Before the fireplace is a rough-hewn desk, and many wooden chairs lined against the walls on either side. The fire is stoked and burning well. In one of the alcoves stands an ornate rosewood cabinet, decorated with silver and gold relief, carved to resemble wings. The room looks less like a study and more like a meeting room.

Lucea does not sit behind the desk, but draws out a chair, and gestures for them to sit with her. She nods to a red-robed maiden who remains by the door.

LUCEA

There shall be tea, soon. Please, be comfortable, and ask for anything more you desire. Let us speak about everything, and be open and clear; it is the least I can do for you, who have traveled so far.

Lucea waits for Roshim and Avalon and Ladulai to sit, then looks at Avalon. Her eyes are still friendly, but there is a glint of triumph, of concealed pride in power.

LUCEA

(to Avalon)

You asked me a question, in the Lord's presence. You could not imagine what had driven the Lord to such a state, why he hangs as he does in that sanctuary. But again, I assure you: it is at his own request.

AVALON

He has lost his reason, then. For what is the purpose of such suffering?

LUCEA

Ah, but the answer is in your own words.
Suffering. Laurientus *suffers*, and that is the purpose itself. He suffers on our behalf, for the future of the Sangriel, and also on behalf of the world we live in. He suffers to appease the Tyrant God and wash away the sin of mankind's rebellion, and the sin of God the Stranger whom he served, and his own sin taking part in it.

(looks at Roshim)

You look surprised. I know these names are familiar to you. My Lord has told me of your Library, and the history of the Hand of the Stranger, and the desperate rebellion of the fallen host, and the Stranger's promise of grace. Indeed, all that and more is written down in the Book of Silver. It is a continuation of the First Book, which was also written by Laurientus. Is that not a sacred text of yours?

ROSHIM

(dazed)

You know of the First Book?

LUCEA

The Lord has shown me a great book written in stone, inlaid with gold, at the heart of Aphaelia. And now, look!

Lucea goes to the rosewood cabinet in the alcove, and unlocks it with the silver key about her neck. As she pulls it open, the interior unfurls like a flower, presenting a great scroll at the center with silver handles, draped with a silk cloth. She gently touches it and looks back at them.

LUCEA

This is a copy of the Book of Silver, the Second Book. In the hollow of this mount, there is a pillar unlaced with silver; that is the Book itself. As it is there, so it is here.

Lucea shuts the cabinet, and sits again with them. Roshim notes she seems satisfied with their speechlessness.

LUCEA

Now doubtless you are asking yourself this: how long must the Lord suffer? How long does it take to wash away the sin of mankind and appease the wrath of God? I confess I do not know the answer. But I do know that his prayer has been heard, and the God of this Earth has answered.

ROSHIM

The God of this Earth...?

LUCEA

As the one you call the Tyrant would refer to himself. As the Book itself says: Laurientus came to this mountaintop after the heavens were closed, and pondered the future of mankind. He had neither the wisdom of gold nor the strength of iron beside him, and he knew these fallen embers would burn to ash, and that the God of this Earth would return with vengeance when the might of the Hand was extinguished. The Lord of Silver waited for the promise of the Stranger to be fulfilled, as did many others... but no aid came. So for another age he pondered, and he came to know God the Stranger had abandoned the earth, and that the promise of the Stranger's grace was a foolish hope.

Lucea saw something on Roshim's face, and she raised a hand, her eyes earnest.

LUCEA

(pointing to Roshim)

Do not be angry, Roshim of Aphaelia. Have you not visited other Lords, and heard much the same? The indolence of Oidecalla; the ruthlessness of Sodon; the winnowing of Astheopithicus; the silence of Rhodowyn: these are but symptoms of their lack of faith in the Stranger's return. For hope is a potent ally, but when it is withdrawn, the body yearns for its support, and falters.

LUCEA

(raising her hands)

So then, Laurientus asked himself: to whom shall we turn, to avoid retribution? For the fury of the God of the Earth is unabated by the passing of time, and surely He plans to extract punishment for this rebellion. The tragedy of the First Age must not be repeated, thought Laurientus. And so, the Lord of Silver beseeched whom he once called Tyrant, on the behalf of the world entire, to take the sins and fury of the God of the Earth upon himself in blood payment. Earnestly, Laurientus prayed from this very mont.

(pauses, looking at Roshim)

On the fortieth day of Laurientus's prayer, there was a mighty wind that ripped boulders from the mount and cast them into Hali, but this was not God. Then there came a mighty storm, and lighting struck the head of the mount and shattered it, and rain flooded the lake in torrents, but this was not God. Then there was a rain of fire from heaven, and burning glory that engulfed the pine and melted stone where it touched, but this was not God. Then there was silence, and darkness that lasted for three days. Still Laurientus prayed. And in a still, small voice, the God of the Earth answered.

Lucea stops, and gestures for the handmaiden at the door to bring in the tea. Roshim takes the small delicate cup, and sips it without tasting. His mind is spinning, confused, distressed. Ladulai pats his arm helplessly. Avalon stares out the window.

ROSHM

(gruffly)

The God of the Earth answered?

LUCEA

(softly)

Yes. He sent me.

INT. APHAELIA, CHILDREN'S DORMITORY

It is midnight, and the glow of the full moon shines through the balcony curtains into a room full of sleeping children. Two children are out on the balcony with pillows and an oil lamp, reading from a great illustrated scroll. The moonlight shines off the bay of palms, and the sky is full of stars. One boy is Roshim, chubby and big at ten years; the other is Cristio, thin and already wise for his age, golden hair reflecting lamplight.

ROSHIM

(reading)

"In the beginning was the Word. God spoke the Word, and created the heavens and the earth. He spoke again, and there was light.

"God divided the formless earth as He saw fit. He built a firmament called Sky and raised up the bosom of the earth from the Sea to become Land. From the Land he brought forth a multitude of Life; plants to cover the face of the Land, animals to swim in the Sea and to walk on the Land and fly in the Sky.

"And God was pleased, and beheld his work, and said to himself 'Truly, it is good. All that I have created is perfect, but there is none like me, none to govern the heavens and the earth, and to rule and tend to them.'

"So God created the host of the heavens, angels and archangels, and He created the host of the earth, humankind, and gave them dominion over each realm, and thus began the First Age."

CRISTIO

That's us!

ROSHIM

It's your favorite story, isn't it? That's why I took this book for you, Cristiano. You always love this story when Mother reads it.

CRISTIO

Weeeeeell, you shouldn't have taken it. You'll be in trouble!

ROSHM

It's okay. I don't care if I get in trouble. I wanted to read it with you. It's your birthday!

CRISTIO

(blushing)

You're very kind to me.

ROSHM

I'm going to marry you, silly. I'll steal all the books from the Grand Library for you.

CRISTIO

(blushing more)

I wouldn't want a thief for a husband!

ROSHM

When we're of age I'll pay your retention debt. We won't be librarians forever! We can go anywhere! Anywhere in these stories you like to read about!

CRISTIO

I don't like the next part of this story. It's scary.

ROSHIM

(reading)

"As His creation grew and prospered on earth, the Lord God grew jealous of the Word, and He grew jealous of the cleverness of man, and became a tyrant, and demanded all of his creation worship him, and demanded the sacrifice of animals of the earth. And man came to fear God, and bowed low beneath His commandments, and spent the blood of his fellow animals for the pleasure of God, and for fear that man himself would face God's wrath.

"In those days, the hosts of heaven and earth intermingled, and God grew still more jealous of the love of angels and men. The rebel hosts of heaven fought a war against God and his faithful host, and lost, and were cast down to live among mankind, to intermarry and mingle further, to become demihumans, to join man under the tyranny of God, and the heavens receded, and were closed off, and the host of earth suffered greatly.

ROSHIM

(still reading)

"And yet, God was not satisfied, and He demanded more sacrifices, more devotion, more cruelties, and man came to despise God, and hid from God's watchful eyes. In a rage, God sank the earth below the Sea, and destroyed the world he created, because they would not love him and serve him as he desired, and turned his face away. So ended the First Age, and began the Second Age."

"But then, moved by pity for the dead, another God pierced the walls of the firmament. To the surviving men and demimen, a flaming Serpent appeared, bringing knowledge of the Word, and of the Lie of Good and Evil, and gnosis, new revelations, knowledge that God hoarded, and with this knowledge mankind rebuilt the ruins of the world.

"The Serpent left us gnosis and tools of inquiry, and he promised to return and rescue us from the grasp of the mad tyrant God, and take us to a world where we could live eternally, like the heavenly hosts, in a realm of our very own, and in time, we too would become Gods. Such was the promise of God the Stranger."

Roshim and Cristio admire the drawings on the pages.

CRISTIO

The mothers say it's a true story.

ROSHM

Do you wish it was true?

CRISTIO

Well, I should like to see the Stranger. All the drawings of Him look different. Nobody knows what he looks like. I should be glad to see with my own eyes.

ROSHM

He'll burn you up! With his flames!

CRISTIO

(giggling)

You're making fun! You don't believe it!

ROSHM

I'll believe it when I see it, husband.

CRISTIO

Do you see the wind, oh faithless?

ROSHM

No. But I'd rather look at you anyway. It shall be a shame when your curls are cut. They have such a pretty color.

Roshim kisses Cristio on the cheek.

ROSHM

Happy birthday, dear friend. I'll take the
book back tomorrow.

Beneath the full moon and clear sky, the city lights twinkle
like another set of stars.

INT. LUCEA'S STUDY MORNING

Roshim jolts as Avalon laughs. It is a bright, clear mirthful sound. Avalon sits back, crossing his arms, and shaking his hair back. Lucea looks at Avalon, stone-faced.

LUCEA

What amuses you, child of gold?

AVALON

All gods lie, woman. The God of Earth, indeed! And yet unable to set foot in the kingdom he claims, eh? One mustn't confuse domination for dominion! Some believe that all they see lies within their domain; some believe that all that issues from them is them; some believe that saying something is so makes it so. Anyone who insists on these is a liar or a fool.

Lucea is silent, staring at Avalon. The fire crackles.

LUCEA

(to Avalon)

I respect your age and your experience. I value your judgment as a child of gold, and I pray that your future holds as much value as your past. But allow me this much: a king without a kingdom is not a king. Therefore, the kingdom makes a man a king. So it is with a god. A god becomes a god by virtue of power over his domain. If a god of wind says to the wind "blow there" and it does not, or if a god of rain says to the rain "fall there" and it does not, how can they be gods?

AVALON

And so if the God of the Earth says to those on earth "worship me" and they do not?

LUCEA

As the First Book says: God sank the land beneath the sea. The defiant perished. They were subject to the power of God, whether they obeyed him or not. God created the land; God destroyed the land. Hence, God is God. Power is power. This world is shaped by the will of God. He rewards those who serve his will and punish those who set themselves against him. Therefore, it is better to serve.

AVALON

It is as you say! I am not eager to engage in rhetoric with a disciple of Laurientus, but I cannot resist pointing out that God's will is not the only will at play. In the image of God the creator, men exert their wills on the world. Why, if that God himself could carve a relief as well as our friend Roshim here, I'd be impressed.

LUCEA

I would be pleased to see the Grand Library someday, and see Roshim's own contributions! Indeed what you say is true, and furthermore, it is God's desire for men to create things that bear witness to their creators' glory, and so it is with God. Those wills of men and angels, creations of God, are subject to the will of God, and are made for his glory. To act in accord with God is to act rightly; to act otherwise is to invite discipline. We are children of God, our great Father, whom we glorify through our obedience to his will, as all children do.

LUCEA

Despite your words, I see you also respect your father's will, child of gold. My Lord tells me of your own rebellion, and your imprisonment. Did you not return to Aphaelia for the sake of your father's will? To watch over that people, to parlay obedience into forgiveness upon your return to Carcosa?

Avalon stiffens, and the mirth leaves his face for a moment. He glances at Roshim, then back to Lucea.

AVALON

Even after my attempt to take his life, my father did not threaten me with death. My respect for him emerged after he let me live, at a price. He did not demand blood or obedience; he demanded my reflection. I admit-- I had hoped he would see me as I am now, but my journey was not wholly for my sake.

(looks at Roshim)

Indeed it is not.

LUCEA

(looking at Roshim)

And you, Roshim. You honor your parents with your actions. This is respect for their will, is it not? The letter you showed me; it is a sign of the faith of your people, and you honor that faith with your actions. This is good, is it not?

ROSHM

True, I would call it *good*. However, my people do not subjugate children to the wills of their parents; a child chooses its parents, and neither has authority over the other. Indeed, I do not know my birthmother or sire, nor what they think of me. You would be better suited to argue theology with Cristio or Balthius, and consult with me for stonemasonry. But in their stead, I say this: it is always wisdom to question the use of power. Power is power, and power is not justice.

LUCEA

You speak well, Roshim! It is the desire of the Lord of Silver to seek justice, to repay the debts of mankind. My Lord, as I have said, is the Lord of Weakness. Next to the God of Earth, we are all powerless. Power sets the rules that we must abide by. The God of Earth demands blood for disobedience, and Laurientus pays for us all. If I were God myself, I would not demand the scales be balanced so harshly. And yet... I submit to the reality of His power, with my Lord. This is the mission of the Sangriel: to spread awareness of the sacrifice of Laurientus, to pay off the bloody ledger of sin and disobedience, to avert the wrath of God. We submit. We bind ourselves together in our submission, and we hope and pray for salvation. We help one another here. For the world is cold.

Lucea's smile is tinged with sadness, her eyes searching. Roshim's mouth is dry. He cannot think of anything else to say. Avalon is also silent.

LUCEA

(to Avalon)

I have said all that I can. Now you begin to understand who we are. Thank you for attending me. I must go and attend to others.

LADULAI

Thank you, Sister Lucea.

LUCEA

Go in peace, brothers. We can speak another time. Ladulai will show you what can be done here, to ease the discomfort of the young and old. It is fine to talk about heaven, yet the suffering on earth must not be forgotten. I believe you will find your strength is well-needed here.

ROSHIM

I agree. I'm happy to help while we stay. And what of my request of the Lord? Will he answer?

LUCEA

Your help is invaluable, Roshim. And the Lord will consider your request. He apologizes for making you wait.

A white-robed man enters the room. He and Ladulai herd Avalon and Roshim out, and Roshim sees the chapel area is full of waiting people. The pale, patient faces of the children fill him with pity.

ROSHIM

(to Ladulai)

You said there was work to do here?

EXT. MONT HALI WOODYARD DAY

Roshim and Avalon follow Ladulai through the woodyard beside the outer wall of Mont Hali, great stacks of pine wood piled up against the wall, and great logs dumped in a pile to be cut. Men work hard, cutting and splitting the logs into firewood. Roshim is looking about, frost rimming his beard and squinting in the bright sunlight at the cloudy horizon; Avalon is fuming, still irritated at Lucea, his mood edged with fear.

AVALON

(to Roshim)

...how like those without power to grovel at the feet of those with it! Laurientus is a coward. Even in their diminishment, the Lord of Gold and Lord of Iron kept their pride, at least. Madness, madness indeed! From the ambassador of the rebellion to its prosecutor, bah! It is madness to see the world for what it is, and not for what it should be! And where did that woman come from? She speaks with authority.

ROSHIM

(distracted)

She did not say where she came from. But in Under-Epha, I feel like I dreamed of her face.

AVALON

Ho, do not come after my title now! You did not mention this before.

ROSHIM

Well I did not know her then! I paid it no mind. You need not chase after every dream I have.

AVALON

Well, I shall keep a closer eye on you. Who can say in what ways the blessing of gold shall take root? My father spoke of premonitions and glimpses of the future.

Ladulai turns and tugs Roshim's cloak anxiously, pointing to a swarthy man in a wool cap. The man looks at Roshim and scratches his big beard. Ladulai calls to the man, who saunters over, slinging a large wood axe over his shoulder. A handful of men stop chopping and sawing and watch.

Ladulai mutters in the Sangriel tongue to the man, who nods and gestures to the woodyard, speaking rapidly. His breath puffs in the cold air. Suddenly he holds out the axe to Roshim, who takes it.

LADULAI

(to Roshim)

This is the foreman. He is used to working with foreigners. He will show you what to do. I shall-- I shall come back later, and make sure you are getting along alright. Will you accompany me, Avalon? We shall work inside.

AVALON

Very good. Will you be alright without me at your side, Lord Roshim?

ROSHIM

I will manage somehow. See what else there is to see. Call if you need me.

Avalon slaps his arm and follows Ladulai away, back into Mont Hali.

Roshim turns and follows the direction of the foreman, who places a few cut logs in front of him to split. Roshim swings the axe strong and true, splitting the wood neatly, and the foreman grunts approvingly. He pulls back Roshim's cloak to show his thick arms, and whistles, looking to the men. They laugh and make comments, then go back to their tasks. The foreman indicates a great pile to be split, and then leaves as Roshim starts splitting them. It is mindless, grueling work. The other men sing in a low monotone, and Roshim hums along.

As the afternoon drags on, the sky becomes cloudy and the

wind gusts painfully. The foreman instructs Roshim to load the cut wood onto a great carriage, then brings another pile to split, much bigger than the first. Roshim stares at it, but gets to work. His rough palms do not blister, but grow red and dry. He feels thirsty, but no water is handed out. His big shoulders ache by the time the sun is well into its descent, and the frost in his beard is heavy.

At last, the pile is cut. Roshim looks about for the foreman, tired and cold. One of the men has built a small fire under a copse of pines, and a kettle steams over it. The men are gathered there. Roshim lumbers over, feet sinking into the snow, and sees they have warm broth to drink. The foreman gestures for him to come over, and hands him a cup. They murmur among themselves, facing the setting sun, the glossy snow reflecting flecks of warm light that cut through the clouds. The pines bend and sway in the wind, and snow begins to fall.

Roshim sees the men are talking about him, looking at him openly. There are no demimen among them. One of men gets up, reaches out and grasps Roshim's horn and tugs on it, as if it would come off his head. Roshim pushes him away with one big hand, and the group laughs. The man slaps his hand and ambles back to sit down.

Roshim finishes his drink, sets down his cup, and walks back out to the woodyard. He begins stacking the wood he cut into the great carriage. The foreman joins him, and together they load the carriage, then the foreman indicates to Roshim to sit

beside him in the driver's seat. A mule is harnessed to the carriage, and pulls the great creaking load of firewood around the wall of Mont Hali, to a wide gate. Roshim sees this gate does not lead directly into the monastery, but a little cluster of houses and other buildings, like a keep-town ringed about the foot of the mont.

Roshim glances up the mont, and sees the window of the great hall, and Laurientus's isolated tower on the top. The carriage trundles along a street that climbs back-and-forth up the mount, stopping occasionally to unload some firewood. Roshim sees many women and young children, a few men. Counting the streets and rows of houses, Roshim realizes the population of the mont is much greater than he imagined, some thousands, maybe even ten thousand. They all stare at him, some of the children slack-jawed. A few young women touch his arms, then laugh and whisper to each other. Again, Roshim notes there are no demimen among them. Most are pale, short, with golden hair, like the folk of Hindel.

At last the street reaches the top of the mont, and a wide gate opens to an enclosed court at the foot of the great hall. The foreman hitches the mule to a rack and shows Roshim how to tie the logs into rough packages that can be carried on one's back. Cold-looking young men wearing Sangriel robes await them, taking the packages of firewood and distributing them throughout the monastery. Roshim sees very young boys among them, struggling under the weight of the firewood.

One of the last boys, about twelve years old, slips and

strikes his head on the firewood. Roshim leaps out of the carriage and gently lifts the dazed child's head, checking for bruises. The boy looks up, shocked at Roshim's appearance, and sits up. He mutters in Sangriel tongue, staring at Roshim's dark face and beard, horns, woolly body. Roshim inspects his head, and sees nothing but a bruise.

The kid stands, and sways. Roshim gestures for the foreman to leave without him, and carries the firewood package with one hand. Roshim gesture for the kid to show him where it was to be delivered, and boy leads him through a narrow door. He laughs as Roshim has to turn sideways and duck to fit, making a gesture that says "big!".

Roshim follows the boy to a dormitory wing. The boy starts talking, though he knows Roshim does not understand, pointing out this and that to his large companion. The boy laughs when Roshim keeps striking his head on the ceiling, but it is not malicious. After one such strike, the boy stops him, and reaches up to pull down on his horn, pointing at the ceiling seriously and miming a head bump.

ROSHIM

I know. I am too big for this place. I am called Roshim. Roshim!

RANNA

(pats his own chest)

Ranna! Ranna. Roshim? Ranna!

Ranna leads Roshim to an empty firewood alcove, and begins stacking the wood there. When Roshim tries to add wood himself, Ranna shoos him off furiously, and restacks it. Roshim becomes aware that many children are looking curiously at him out of the doorways. A little girl of about three years old totters out, sucking her thumb and staring.

Roshim sees these are children's dormitories. He looks about in distaste at the dirty matted straw on the floor. He takes a piece of wood and holds it until Ranna notices.

ROSHIM

Show me where this is used, Ranna.

Finally Ranna understands. He stops stacking and takes Roshim's hand, leading him through one of the doorways into a low room. Like other rooms Roshim has seen, there is a brazier; Ranna puts the wood in it, and clumsily stokes the fire. He speaks to Roshim confidently, and other children come to watch.

Roshim goes to each room and cleans the ashes and refires the braziers, with children trailing after him. Roshim sweeps up the dirty straw and puts it in a corner, and finds a closet of fresh straw and spreads it out. The children help, finding this all very exciting. The dormitories grow warmer, and the children less shy. Little hands touch Roshim's arms, beard, horns, and he sits down and lets them inspect him, leaning up against the brick wall. His arms and shoulders ache and his legs are sore. No harm in a short rest, he thinks.

The three-year-old girl climbs into his lap and falls asleep. An older girl brings him a cup of water, and he drinks it gratefully. Roshim leans his head back against the brickwork, and closes his eyes for a moment.

The children titter as they realize he has fallen asleep.

INT. DREAM OF THE GREAT HALL NIGHT

Roshim awakens with a start. He shakes his head blearily, then blinks; he has awoken in the great hall, dark and silent. The moon shines through the waxed window like a mirage, scattered across a hundred tiny scales of glass. The cold is intense and biting.

Roshim stands and shakes himself, his great cloak flapping loudly in the quiet hall. He stares at the broken moon. Something inside him stirs.

ROSHIM

This is a dream. Avalon?

There is no reply, no sensation of reply. Suddenly, Roshim is drawn through the exit of the great hall, and finds himself outside before the door of the isolated tower. He stares at the blackened pine door, feeling a sudden uneasiness in his guts. To either side, the white plain of Hali shines. The moon seems dreadfully close, large and bright. The stars are hard and cold. It is deathly silent. He feels the sensation again of an approaching gaze, of the proximity of heaven.

Roshim pushes open the long narrow pine door, and though the interior is black as pitch he sees the outlines of things, as if they are lit at the edges by a cold blue light. He crosses past the unlit brazier, past the lumps of candle wax, and opens the inner door.

In the crucifixion chamber the great cross still stands, but it is empty. The same blue cold light fills the room, though it has no source; the pine planks themselves seem to emit this strange shadowless light. Roshim's eyes follow the walls to the ceiling of the chamber, but there is none, merely a wall that stretches vast toward the sky, and he sees the stars, trembling as through a veil, as if they are being drawn down to the tower, as if the earth and heaven are both reaching and straining to touch.

At the base of the cross Roshim sees a kneeling figure, tall and featureless in the dark, with one broken horn. It stands, and turns towards Roshim, and he again feels the full regard of the host upon him. He reels, but stands firm. Blue eyes pierce him from beneath the cowl's shadow.

LAURIENTUS

From the west you come to me, wreathed in penitent fire, and with false humbleness you enter my walls. You give of yourself wantonly from your great reservoir, yet you expect the same of others in your heart of hearts. But I say to you: to whom much is given, much is expected; and to whom little is given, little is asked. For it is not enough to be silent; I tell you, he who holds himself above others in his heart of hearts has no hope of redemption.

ROSHIM

My Lord Laurientus. I do not understand what you mean.

LAURIENTUS

You are a proud man, Roshim, and that will destroy you. Your heart is hardened. You will not listen to the servant of God, and in the blindness of your strength you will tread on the weak and grow contemptuous of them. If you truly care for your people, if you truly respect the people who brought you forth, you must understand that you are as weak as the weakest of your kind, and that beside God, we are all weak. Trust in strength is folly.

ROSHIM

You are right, Lord. I know I am still too proud, still too fixated on my own strength. But my strength is for my people; surely that is not all folly.

LAURIENTUS

(harshly)

No! You must attend this: your strength is *sickness*, a sickness will detach you from your humanity. It will strip you of your need for community, of your desire for fellowship, and it will poison your spirit of kindness. I tell you, yearning for strength is yearning for detachment.

Roshim steps forward beneath the shadow of Laurientus to better see him. The angel stands tall, dressed in white with a red sash across his throat that looks like a spill of blood. The long face droops, as if Laurientus is about to weep, and the eyes are intense but distant, distracted. His long-fingered hands are clasped together, twisting uneasily.

ROSHIM

My Lord, I am not asking for more strength; I am asking for knowledge. The foundation of the tower is shattered. You know this. Will you not help your children?

LAURIENTUS

Foolishness. Foolishness! One cannot fill a cup that is already full; a stone that has been carved cannot be restored; flesh that is torn may heal but it will remember its wounds. The path of your people is as fixed as the roots of your tower-- you are condemned, set against the almighty God by your pride. The very stones will rise and crush you; the very sea will rise and swallow the tower. It is foolishness.

Laurientus doubles over, and groans. His hands squeeze each other tightly.

Roshim becomes angry, but then realizes Laurientus is in great pain. He thinks back to the body lashed to the cross.

ROSHIM

My Lord, do you suffer greatly? Might I do something to relieve you?

Laurientus stands again, his cowl trembling, and seems to recover himself. He strokes his face with his fingertips, and his eyes wander.

LAURIENTUS

No, child, you shall do nothing. The pain is sacred. The servant of God told you. The pain will end, it will end, when God wills it. Pain is easier to bear with a purpose. That is relief enough. This is my burden. You also bear a burden, and scars upon your body; you understand the privilege of suffering.

Laurientus sinks to his knees again, his broken horn catching Roshim's eyes. In no relief or writing does Roshim recall mention of Laurientus's broken horn.

Roshim kneels before Laurientus, and reaches out for the latter's trembling hands.

ROSHIM

Lord, may I take your hand, and show you my home?

LAURIENTUS

Have you that skill, weaving dreams and visions? Is this now taught among your people? Indeed, I supposed it would be Aphael that brought you to me, yet he lingers elsewhere. Did you find me on your own?

ROSHIM

...I suppose he has taught me, somewhat. We have walked many nights together. Let me take you from this cold tower.

Laurientus nods, and Roshim takes the long, soft fingers into his calloused hands. He pauses, feeling the resonance of Laurientus's pain within himself, rising, rising. Sweat breaks out on Roshim's brow as the pain reaches a screaming crescendo. He hesitates, searching for the thread that leads him back home to the Library, trying to reach through the pain, then feels as if the hand of Oidecalla touches his shoulder. Roshim finds the thread and wrenches them out of the tower.

The pain ceases immediately. They are in the great terraced fields of Aphaelia, above the rice paddies, surrounded by cool, fragrant grass. The morning sun lights the tower like a beacon. The bay of palms shimmers pale aquamarine, and the great horizon is piled with soft clouds.

Roshim rises to his feet, drawing up Laurientus beside him. He feels the warmth of the sun on his back. He looks at the strange, long face of the angel, now gazing out to the horizon. The distant look in those eyes are gone now, replaced with focus on the present.

ROSHIM

(softly)

When did you last see this place, Lord?

A great shudder runs through Laurientus's body, and he lets down his cowl. Long dark hair, ornately braided, sways gently as he peers down at the city.

LAURIENTUS

An age and an age. The tower is quite tall, now. And it holds true to its purpose?

ROSHI

Yes. The stewards of the Library have held true, course set by the wisdom of the Archmasons and propelled by the addition of knowledge, by the tireless work of mothers and fathers, by scribes from every corner of the earth who come to share and partake. Mankind comes to Aphaelia for enlightenment: to cure disease of body and spirit; to learn to plant and harvest and steward their lands; to trade even the permutations of culture and philosophy. This city is a beacon for those who love knowledge. And I am glad to be part of it. I come to you, grateful for your guidance, on behalf of the life we live here.

LAURIENTUS

I suppose it is encouraging that some of the seeds I helped to plant have bloomed. I accept your gratitude for my part in this, while acknowledging it is small. It is well for all things to have a goodly home.

Laurientus turns his pale face away from the city and towards Roshim, his face unreadable.

LAURIENTUS

What is the worth of one city, compared to the worth of the earth itself? Should God demand this tower fall so that He spares the earth, would you obey God?

ROS HIM

I would never accept the premise of this bargain. The Tyrant may claim omnipotence, but so do all tyrants, be they gods or men. To accept omnipotence is to accept defeat. What was the task of the Hand of the Stranger, if not to rebel? If Sodon himself held back the wrath of heaven at Loraine, how much greater strength do men have now that could be mustered to stand against the Tyrant? The tower will not fall. If the Tyrant could have crushed us himself, that would have happened long ago, I'm sure.

They stand now on the great raised aqueduct overlooking the rings of the city. Laurientus raises his palms out over the city, towards the bay.

LAURIENTUS

Who is this who darkens my counsel with words without wisdom? You are but a man. I tell you: this place is built in faith; it will fall to faith. It is not the only tower built by the Hand. There is one other, a place with an ambition to rule. Do you know this?

ROSHM

(stunned)

There is no record of another tower, Lord. But I have in my travels encountered a child of Astheopithicus who mentioned an eastern tower. I did not think much of it, for his mind seems-- well, I do not trust in all that he says.

LAURIENTUS

Yes, yes, the child of the king of stars-- yes, that dreg. I see now he has returned with you. This is the Western Tower, what you call Aphaelia; he came from the Eastern Tower, domain of the Lord of Firmament.

ROSHM

Is it another library? I do not understand. None have spoken of it save Ladulai.

LAURIENTUS

No, it is of a different character. The Hand was not in a unified mind, pulled this way and that by the ambitions of its members; it was agreed when the roots of your tower were laid, that the roots of another tower must be laid after, to be ruled by Astheopithicus. He fought bitterly against the idea that none should rule your Tower, that the stewards of knowledge would be the best cultivators of their civilization. He held the longevity and character of the blood of heaven would serve to guide all knowledge, that immortal experience across generations was needed to employ wisdom. He rules the White City.

Laurientus raises his hands higher, and with a sound like a sigh, the dream of Aphaelia slips away. Roshim stands now on the rocky shore of a quiet ocean, flat and gray, with great piles of broken boulders dotted here and there along the shore. Laurientus points, and Roshim sees a distant white gleam amidst all the gray, far out on the ocean. A gathering storm rumbles inland; lightning flashes among the swollen clouds.

LAURIENTUS

Celia Mons, where the Lord of Firmament sits without peer, once one but now many. The city of the blood of heaven. The servant of God tells me Celia Mons stirs, that the Pale King believes his poison is nearly ready. She tells me God has foreseen this, and to have faith, have faith...

ROSHIM

I see neither road nor bridge. How does one reach the city? By boat?

LAURIENTUS

That is the deception; should you row out to Celia Mons, you would surely be swallowed up by the pale firmament, and die in terror; the isle is isolated and moated by firmament, and no boat can cross it. The Lord constructed his own bit of the causeway, from the shore to the city, here and there. He has authority to remake the firmament as he sees fit. It is his mandate.

As Roshim ponders another question, there is a loud rumble of thunder, and the croak of a distant bird. Laurientus flinches as if struck, and the shore begins to slide away beneath them. The air grows heavy.

Laurientus turns to Roshim, and his eyes are red, tears

spilling down his face. He begins to shake.

LAURIENTUS

Enough. I cannot further incite the wrath of God upon the faithful here, upon the men of the earth, Roshim of Aphaelia. Even for this audience, I invite penance. I should not even have considered it. Weak as I am, I shall stand in my weakness and beg for mercy. Mercy for us all!

They are back in the cold, dark tower, beneath the moon, beneath the three windows and the silhouette of the cross. The rush of bitter, bitter cold wipes away the memory of the warm fields of Aphaelia in an instant, and seems to burrow all the way to the bone.

A large crow flies through the open windows and perches on the right arm of the cross. It looks down at them, and covers its face with a wing.

Laurientus clumsily kneels again on the stone floor in front of his cross. His long hair brushes the floor as he bows his head, shaking fitfully.

ROSHIM

My Lord? Will I speak to you again?

Laurientus does not answer. Roshim finds himself swept out of the chamber, out under the moon, out upon the white fields

of Hali. The isolated tower stands in front of him, black against the stars.

Roshim seems to hear Laurientus's voice, but sees nothing.

LAURIENTUS

My Voice shall speak for me. Listen to the servant of God. May we never meet again!

INT. SANGRIEL CHILDREN'S DORMITORY EVENING

Roshim awakes with a start. He rubs his eyes, the feel of a sleep receding as if emerging from a deep water. He sees some child has placed a straw crown on his head, and gently takes it off, setting it aside. All around him, children are sleeping in the fresh straw.

Roshim gets up carefully and brushes himself off. He leaves the dormitory, and outside meets a contingent of three women in red robes. They cluck-cluck disapprovingly at him, and without anything as direct as seizing an arm, herd him out of the wing by surrounding him and making their intentions quite clear.

At last he recognizes the great hall again, and sees the torches being lit, and the sunset through the waxed window. There he is left in the company of some old men around the great fireplace, who are weaving straw into sandals and drinking tea out of crude clay mugs. They talk amongst themselves in the Sangriel tongue, ignoring Roshim.

Roshim watches them weave, and half-heartedly attempts the same, using his own huge foot as a guide. That leads to nothing; after awhile, he finds that the great knife they are using to cut straw serves quite well as a whittling-knife, and he begins to carve a stray piece of firewood. This attracts much interest; the resultant crude figure of a hooded Sangriel is passed solemnly from hand to hand, and someone marks the bottom with the symbol of the cross.

Roshim carves more pieces of wood into the symbol of the Sangriel cross, and these draw great interest indeed!

One of the men, through gestures, communicates his desire to exchange the a pair of straw sandals for his carving, and so Roshim finds himself with his feet up, cup of tea by his side, carving crosses, while the sandals are woven around his feet.

It is nightfall when Ladulai finds Roshim, helping bring in more stacks of wood from the courtyard. The tense, agitated twisting of the former's hands reminds Roshim of Laurientus's painful contortions.

LADULAI

(angrily)

You did not stay at your post! I could not find you, Roshim. How I looked!

Roshim puts down the wood. He stares at Ladulai, who shrinks back, grinning but angry, like a snarling dog begging. Roshim shakes the pine bark and straw off his woolly hair and shoulders, and flexes his rough hands.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

Yes, I have been adrift. I apologize, Ladulai. But it is my habit to move where I am needed. You need not worry for me.

Ladulai looks resentful but tries to hide it behind his

usual placating grin.

LADULAI

Yes. Yes of course. Do try to stay anchored, somewhat. This is not a place to wander about, do you understand? We must not interrupt others' work.

ROSHIM

Very well. I will remain where you leave me tomorrow. Where is Avalon?

LADULAI

He is-- ah, there. He accompanied Lucea in the sick ward today. She-- I do not know why.

Avalon comes towards them, emerging from a crowd spilling out of the main stair. Roshim feels Avalon's sour mood keenly, though Avalon's face is neutral as Ladulai greets him. Avalon glances at Roshim's straw-speckled hair, and his green eyes lock with Roshim's brown ones; Roshim also feels Avalon's hot desire, a desire for nakedness and closeness and passion so strong that he gets half-hard.

AVALON

Well, quite a day. I suppose the woodyard gave you plenty to do, eh? Perhaps I ought to split wood tomorrow. Shall we sit and have some wine?

LADULAI

There is no wine, no alcohol here--

AVALON

I should have known. Will you fetch a bit of water for us? Thank you.

Avalon sits heavily at one of the table benches. He is wearing a white robe of the Sangriel, his fiery hair tucked into the ruffed collar. As Ladulai retreats to get water, Avalon looks up at Roshim with open lasciviousness and self-mockery.

AVALON

I should like you to fuck me in this robe. What it lacks in flattery it makes up for in potential blasphemy. El above, you look good.

ROSHIM

Mmm. What's got you like this, you whore?

AVALON

After a day surrounded by death, I want to feel alive for a moment. Gah! What a place. While the white-snout is away, I will tell you what I have seen. Come here.

Roshim scoots closer to him, and Avalon places a hand on Roshim's inner thigh, leaning very close so as not to be overheard.

ROSHI

I do not believe they can understand us.

AVALON

Ha! I believe you are naive, lambkin. Why trust so readily? Especially here.

(lowers his voice)

Now, listen. There is something afoot. I know not what, only that I have got the barest glimpse of a part of it. I was attending Lucea, who spoke to me at length-- oh, what pretty words she spoke! I suppose she wanted to understand further the relationship between you and I. I suspect Ladulai has told her quite a lot more. But no matter!

AVALON

(quietly)

Afterwards, she invited me to walk the sick ward with her and her maidens. She said to me, "a child of a son of heaven will know a sign of heaven". We went to the ward, and I saw rows and rows of little beds, long sanatorium rooms filled with the fuge of the sick and dying. The cries they made when she passed, and when she laid hands on their afflicted bodies! I have not known such wailing lamentation, nor such joy. And I tell you Roshim, as one who knows the laying of hands: she does not heal as my father did, but she does heal. She, as a child of earth!

Roshim stares blankly at Avalon, which only increases Avalon's agitation.

ROSHIM

(uncertain)

The Lord of Gold healed many. Surely Laurientus has lent his power to her--

AVALON

(urgently)

No, no, no! You must trust my sight. He has not given her his power, nor does he act on her behalf, nor can the Lord of Silver heal in the first place! Healing is sister act to creation, a highly refined balance of power and gnosis. I have seen few who can heal and all were direct children of heaven-- this woman, this Lucea, she cannot heal like my father did, and yet she brought relief, she mended wounds and calmed the fevered. I know not how! And she knew how it would unsettle me-- El above, why is there no wine--?

AVALON

Now, don't interrupt, here's the capstone: sometimes she healed more, sometimes less, but never entirely. A man with two lame legs might have one healed, a woman with leprosy might have her face cured but not her hands, and so on. I first thought that her power had some unfortunate limits! However-- each child she touched was healed entire. How its parents would weep, afore and after! The chanting yet rings in my ears and my nose is full of incense and sickness.

ROSHIM

Come, come! You are quite shaken, but it will pass.

AVALON

I must find out what it all means. Perhaps she is a true servant of her god; perhaps the Tyrant works through her. After all, I have never seen a god work a miracle.

Ladulai returns with three mugs of warm water to find Roshim's arm around Avalon. Ladulai's one blue eye glitters venomously at Avalon, but he lowers his gaze when Roshim stares at him.

LADULAI

Come, friends: refresh yourselves. It is almost time for evening meal and service. How much better this is than wandering the wilderness! Bread and water and fellowship, eh?

INT. THE GREAT HALL NIGHT

That night Roshim and Avalon and Ladulai help rearrange the great hall into a dining room, and sit together. Sangriel sit shoulder-to-shoulder on the long benches, and at the head of the tables, the white-robed priests begin to intone a call-and-response. Great vats of stewed meat and vegetables roll out of the kitchen, and fresh flatbread, and jugs of some slightly fermented tea. The food is distributed as a short worship is held. The sun shines through the wax window, and for a brief time, the hall is bright.

The server sees Roshim's bulk and hesitates, then she ladles out an extra portion. Roshim nods gratefully; he is quite hungry! The food is simple and rather tasteless, but he eats it all so quickly that he looks up to see his tablemates laughing quietly at him. A few pieces of bread are pushed over to him, and he smiles back self-consciously at the laughing faces.

After the meal is over, Lucea stands at her place under the wax window. She speaks long and passionately in the Sangriel tongue; Roshim sees again how her words move in the pale faces of the Sangriel, and how even the children stop playing in the straw and attend her.

Several young men and women come up to be adorned in the robes of the Sangriel, and Lucea lays her hands on their heads. When she does, Roshim sees what he saw in his half-dream: a spindle of flame, burning at both ends, appears above her

hands. But when he blinks, the flame is gone.

LADULAI

Our numbers grow day by day. More come from far away to be healed, and to accept the message of Laurientus. Blessed be the true God; blessed be his servant; blessed be the Lord of Silver.

Roshim feels Avalon hold his tongue.

When the service is over, Roshim wants to speak to Avalon privately of his vision of Laurientus, but Ladulai stays close at hand and urges them to bed. They file out with everyone else, into the dormitories, and into their private quarters.

Ladulai brings in a small brass brazier heaping with coals and sprinkles on a little incense; Avalon produces a tall jar of the fermented tea. They sit on the fur and pass the jar, taking some comfort in the warmth of fellowship. Roshim shrugs off his cloak, and smiles inwardly at the two pairs of eyes that are drawn to his heavy chest and naked shoulders.

AVALON

It is rather like being on the road again,
isn't it?

LADULAI

Yes, I was thinking the same. It was not such a bad road, with company. I am as grateful, so grateful for your tolerance of me.

ROSHIM

Don't speak of yourself in that manner. You are an odd fellow but you have brought us here. I am grateful to you.

Ladulai's eyes shine wetly. He bows to Roshim, who shifts uncomfortably. Avalon looks away.

LADULAI

Today I spoke to the servant of God-- to Lucea. She will speak to you tomorrow, but bade me to lay it out to you: She requests that you escort me back to th-the place of my birth, sacred Celia Mons. The Lord of Silver would send me as an evangelist to my brothers.

AVALON

(sardonically)

Ah, Lucea must have been so glad see you return!

Roshim ignores Avalon's rudeness and puts a hand on Ladulai's knee. He stares into the one good eye that stares back at him, trying to read the mix of emotions on Ladulai's face: fear, reverence, lust.

ROSHI

(gruffly)

That will put you in great danger. And us, if we come with you.

LADULAI

(eagerly)

No, you should not enter the White City, no. No, Lord Roshim, that would be too much of a request for anyone! But be not afraid for my sake. L-Lucea laid her hands upon me, and she blessed me. She and the Lord of Silver swore to me that God would protect me, and that any blow to me would be returned a thousandfold by God himself.

Roshim and Avalon glance at each other.

ROSHI

You believe that the Conqueror God-- the God of Earth will protect you?

LADULAI

Y-yes. Lord Roshim and Avalon; I know I am weak. But I am not alone. I have been blessed by the Sangriel. They stand behind me in all that I do, and even ere I suffer, I suffer gladly. Before, I suffered for no purpose at all. Now I suffer for faith and family. I will go to the White City, and I invite you along with me. Not to protect me; to witness me. To witness God.

Roshim looks at Avalon, who seems grave. Thoughts of the strange healing of Lucea, no doubt. What miracles could the Tyrant God be capable of?

ROSHIM

Let me speak my thoughts honestly: you are being used, Ladulai. How long have you already traveled for these people? And upon your return, you are immediately sent forth again. Sent into the jaws of danger, no less!

Ladulai laughs shrilly, and caresses Roshim's hand on his knee with long bony fingers. His blue eye gleams.

LADULAI

(breathlessly)

Of course I am being used! What else ought there be? I choose who uses me; that is my choice. What else ought there be? What else ought there be?

That puts everyone into a quiet mood, and sober for a bit. They put out the lights, and Roshim pulls Ladulai towards him, and the other sobs soundlessly into Roshim's chest, Avalon holding to Roshim's back. At last the sobs cease, and Ladulai snuggles close, kissing and licking gently down Roshim's front while Roshim strokes Ladulai's long scarred backside. Ladulai feels Roshim's heavy erection and slides down to softly suckle on it, and the little room grows warm, quiet except for the soft breathing and shifting. Avalon says nothing but leans his snout against Roshim's neck, hands rubbing up and down Roshim's big side as Ladulai works Roshim's member with his mouth.

At last, Roshim gives a shuddering groan, and Ladulai whimpers as he chokes on the thick rush of semen, burbling softly around his mouthful, still kissing and worshiping the head of Roshim's squirting member. Roshim feels Avalon kiss the back of his neck, and gently recede as his orgasm subsides. He shivers, petting Ladulai's head as the latter cleans him, then returns to his chest. They all sleep soundly.

INT. THE GREAT HALL MORNING

The next morning, the breakfast bowls are being cleared away when Roshim feels a tap on the shoulder. A dark-haired maiden gestures towards the great waxed window; no, to Lucea, standing beneath it. She inclines her head, indicating that he should come to her. With Avalon and Ladulai trailing, he does so, making his way through the crowded great hall.

Lucea's smile is still gracious, but strained. She indicates Avalon and Ladulai.

LUCEA

Brother Ladulai. Please accompany Avalon to the sick ward again, then return to my study. I must speak to Roshim afore his daily toil.

LADULAI

Yes, sister.

Avalon purses his lips but follows. He wonders if Lucea is deliberately splitting them apart, but does not linger.

Roshim follows Lucea to her study behind the chapel. She closes the door behind them and indicates him a seat, but remains standing. Her gaze drifts to the window and the isolated tower.

LUCEA

(abruptly)

You spoke to Laurientus, did you not? Tell me. What transpired between you?

Roshim looks to the tower, then her face. Her expression is placid, unconcerned. With Roshim sitting, their faces are level.

ROSHIM

He told me not to rely on my strength. I showed him my home, the tower of Aphaelia. He told me of a great eastern tower, the White City of Astheopithicus. He spoke of the wrath of God.

LUCEA

Well done. You are no liar, and you are quick to reveal everything. The Lord told me, of course. We know Aphael, the one you call Avalon, the first child of the angels. We do not know you well enough, it seems. I thought you were a simple man in his service. I apologize.

ROSHIM

I am but a man.

LUCEA

And I am but a woman. I now see you are the reason for this visit, not Aphael. You are here rather by accident, yes? Last time I brought you here, I spoke as one who knows all. I find myself humbled, by you and by God. Let me reintroduce myself, without assumptions, as equals. Ask me whatever you would, and I shall answer. I am Lucea, a servant of the one true God, here to grow the faith of this place, and to defend it.

ROSHIM

If I might ask anything: where do you come from? Your face and speech are strange.

LUCEA

An interesting question. Very well.

(pauses to gather her thoughts)

I was born a servant-girl, and my family was owned by a noble line on a continent to the far west. When I was a child, I heard the voice of God clearly, and when I obeyed that voice, miracles followed. My mother and father were struck down by illness and died because they did not believe; the noble family they had served paraded me to and fro, allowing God to work through me, but God saw that they were vain and money-hungry, and they too were struck down by illness and died. I joined a monastery, and grew to be a fair maid, and there I was allowed to learn more of God and God's love. Tales of God's healing brought bishops and priests to me, to see and believe and fall at my feet. Eventually, kings and other rulers knelt before me, and begged God for mercy. Some were healed; some were not. Those of pure heart and conscience knew God's love.

LUCEA

Yet this was not God's plan for me. Despite the church built in my name, despite the pilgrims who beseeched me to stay, God called me to leave that land. I sailed across the great black sea, following God's call. He told me there was another land, a place of great evil, where the fallen angels propped themselves up as kings of men, where ambition to rule turned to putrid malevolence, and where animals walked as God made men to walk. He told me to meet the Lord of Silver on the shore of that place, and that this Lord would fall before my feet, and together we would do great work in redeeming this land. That was eight years ago. Since then, much of God's work has born fruit.

ROSHM

(gruffly)

What else has God brought you here to do?

LUCEA

(spreading her hands)

To help those in need. To explain to those who suffer why their suffering is not in vain. To embrace this land, in God's name. To call to heel those who have wandered from God's path. To restore the rightful ruler of the earth in the hearts and minds of men... and all life.

ROSHIM

(in wonder)

I believe you are my enemy.

LUCEA

(softly)

I do not believe that. I believe you have mistaken your knowledge, your gnosis, for power. That is vanity. True power, true strength; this comes through faith. God cannot be unseated. Even angels must kneel.

ROSHIM

No. No, I cannot abide that. Obedience is not virtue; it is abdication. There is no sacred throne. Indeed, the very idea is tyranny.

LUCEA

Nonsense. Order is the structure of any community. One gives oneself to the community to become part of something greater. Your tower cannot be built without many stones. A book cannot be written without many words. So one becomes part of many, to build something great to honor the creator. As the grass of the fields knows its place, as the birds of the air and fish of the sea know their places, so too must man return to his place in the world as ordained by God.

ROSHIM

I am slow of wit and tongue, so I must thank you; your attempt to hide the truth has illuminated it all the clearer to me. None need be told their place; all of us are bound to discover it for ourselves, for this world is alive and changing endlessly. What is here today is gone tomorrow. The grass finds its own place; the trees find theirs; the animals on the land and sea find their places, as mankind finds its own, as an individual finds his place in his society. We are given eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to learn to observe the world. That truth is greater than your God. And that truth cannot be dominated by any tyrant.

LUCEA

How can you look at the suffering of the world and not see the result of straying from God's path? Our suffering is a sign, the sign of deviance from the perfect will of God, who loves his children, and who knows what is right for us. Have your own eyes not seen the tyranny of those who seat themselves above others, who crave power and domination, who claim to bring freedom but who bring death and misery?

ROSHIM

Yes, indeed I have seen it. I have seen the cruelty of men, and I have seen suffering. And I see this wherever one man says to another, "I am greater than you, and you must obey me or I shall hurt you". I see this whenever one man acts to disempower another. Yes, there is suffering in this world, but I tell you, I believe suffering will exist as long as there are men who want it to exist, and I have seen many such men -- and women.

LUCEA

That is unkind. I assure you I take no pleasure in suffering. Ask your companion Aphael and he will tell you what I do to administer relief to the suffering.

ROSHIM

I would guess the Lord Laurientus met you on
the shore walking upon his own two feet.

Lucea tightens her lips, and for the first time Roshim sees
annoyance in her face. She is silent for a moment.

LUCEA

(looking up at Roshim)

I do not bear you ill will. I admire your
strength, and I am glad you are no fool. I
hope you can set aside your animosity, for I
do not want to provoke you, and indeed, this
meeting took a much different tone than I
intended. For you will be glad to hear that
Laurientus has bequeathed to you what you
desired.

For a moment Roshim does not understand what she means.
Then it hits him in a flash: is his journey over?

ROSHIM

(dumbly)

What I desire--? The construction of the
Tower's--?

LUCEA

Yes. The Lord does not see the harm in it,
and we are grateful for your escort of
Ladulai. Last night when we spoke, he bade me
write it down for you--

Out of her sleeve Lucea withdraws a small scroll, its
handles embossed silver. She goes to her desk and wraps it in
a silk cloth as Roshim watches, his body stiff with shock and
disbelief. Lucea returns and sits across from him, still
holding the scroll. Her face is placid as she watches his
surprise. She holds out the scroll to him.

Dazedly, Roshim takes it. The scroll is very small in his
large hand.

LUCEA

(with faint reproach)

We may not see eye-to-eye on all things, but
it is an odd enemy who gives you the thing you
desire.

ROSHIM

(dazed)

I-- I'm sorry. I am-- I suppose, it has been
so long, part of me imagined it would never
happen. My thanks. To you and the Lord. I
am extremely grateful.

LUCEA

(graciously)

You have journeyed long, and though your body is strong, your spirit is weary. I am glad we could assist you. There is a boon we would have, but you already know it, I think. The Lord asks that you would see Ladulai to the gates of the White City, which lies on your return journey. Ladulai can tell you more. Will you do this for him?

The phrase "return journey" rings in Roshim's ears, and he can hardly think of anything else. Cristio's face flashes in his mind, and his fingers touch his necklace of blue beads, the commemoration of marital promise that Cristio gave to him. When his fingers touch the glass beads, he sees Balthius welcoming him back; the faces of his friends and mentors, Rami and Cephus and Naphta; the great celebration of his return, as he has celebrated others coming back from their journeys; the glorious waves outside the bay of palms; the small bower he and his friends built on the outer peninsula of the bay of palms, where they spent warm summer nights surfing and drinking and laughing together.

Roshim clutches the scroll in his hand, and breathes deeply. He focuses on Lucea.

ROSHIM

Yes. Yes, of course. I shall be glad to.

LUCEA

I thought so. Thank you. It means so much to him.

Lucea stands, and raises her arms. Roshim stands and finds his legs trembling. She reaches for an embrace, which he returns numbly. Lucea chuckles at his dazed face.

LUCEA

Go in peace, Roshim. Should you need anything else, we welcome your return. The blessing of the Lord go with you!

She opens the door, and Roshim walks out into the chapel. He sees Ladulai there, smiling nervously.

LADULAI

Ah, Lord Roshim, good morning, good morning!
Then it went well with her--?

Roshim steps up to him and embraces Ladulai, who makes a surprised sound.

LADULAI

(softly)
Oh, so you are pleased, then... I am glad, my Lord.

ROSHIM

Lu-- the Lord of Silver has given me what I
desired most. It is done. It is done.

LADULAI

(leading him)

It is done, indeed. Shall you go with me,
then? Come. You must sit and rest. I shall
speak to Lucea and make sure things are
arranged. You rest, now. We must all rest.

Roshim is sat by the fire in the great hall, and Ladulai returns to speak with Lucea. Roshim stares into the fire, his heart beating quick, turning the scroll over and over. He gently unwraps the silk cover, and unrolls it to pore over the spidery, precise writing and diagrams. At last, he sighs and re-rolls it, satisfied with whatever secrets the archmason bequeathed him, and tucks it into a secure pocket. Roshim holds his hands out; they are trembling.

ROSHIM

(to himself)

At last, at last. El above, I am free at
last.

INT. THE GREAT HALL NIGHT

Before the evening meal, Roshim meets with Avalon and shares the news. Avalon is less moved than Roshim was, but he clasps Roshim's hands, and kisses him. If Avalon has reservations, he holds them back in the face of Roshim's happiness.

AVALON

All roads have their end. I am glad ours has
born fruit worth this travel. You have
everything you have wanted, dear lamb.
Rejoice! The road back is merrier than the
road ahead.

That night, there is a long ceremony after the meal, and Lucea speaks long and passionately under the waxed window, and the choir sings, all in the Sangriel tongue. Ladulai is lead up to her, and kneels before her, and before the thousands in the hall she blesses him, and anoints him with oil, and he is given fine new robes.

Ladulai returns to Roshim's side, and the service continues. The singing grows loud, and the heat in the hall is intense; Roshim finds himself sweating, and Avalon fans his face.

Suddenly, everyone stands, and Ladulai pulls Roshim and Avalon up. Red candles and flowers are being passed out, and each person lights his neighbors' candle and takes a single flower from the wicker basket. Roshim sees Ladulai's long nervous face is beaming, scars predominant in the dim

candlelight, white eye lit up as if from within.

LADULAI

We go to visit the Lord. Come, come. This marks the start of our journey, Roshim and Avalon.

A long line files out of the door beneath the waxed window into the clear cold night, and the procession makes its way two-by-two up the path to the isolated tower. The stars and moon blaze overhead; the white field is radiant with cold light. The candles seem to flicker in imitation of the twinkling stars. The Sangriel begin to sing with a bold melody, and Roshim hums along.

Along the path, people plant their candles, and thus the pathway is lit by hundreds of little flames. Roshim hesitates, looking over the heads of the crowd toward the isolated tower; the black pine door is thrown open, and the brazier burns warmly within.

LADULAI

(to Roshim)

Plant your candle whenever you see space; we light the path for one another, we Sangriel.

Avalon nods and plants his candle, and so does Roshim. At last they pass the doorway, single-file, and the line wraps around the brazier and into the room of the crucifixion, and Roshim sees the first of the line returning down the left side

of the path, no flowers in hand.

Inside the tower, the singing is loud, and the very timbers seem to shake with it. Roshim wishes he could sing the words. He sees the chamber has been lit with long torches, and the black pine walls hung with red tapestry; beneath the great cross and body of Laurientus, there is a large pile of fresh flowers, resting among the swords.

Somehow, the sight of the cross is less menacing, and the presence of so many takes away the terror. The Sangriel pause one by one beneath the figure, and offer a prayer, and add a flower to the pile, and touch their palms to the wood of the base of the cross.

Roshim avoids looking up at the desiccated face of Laurientus, but glances up as he passes beneath it. It is still horrifying, but he does not feel the shock he expected.

ROSHIM

(to himself)

I suppose a man can get used to anything.

Roshim bows to Laurientus, and in his heart thanks the Lord for granting him the secrets of the archmasons, and tosses his flower on the pile. Behind him, Ladulai does the same.

Still moving with the procession, Roshim is surprised to see Avalon missing. He peers about then sees the red hair in the narthex; Avalon is waiting there. Avalon falls beside Roshim

as they file out, and sees Roshim's questioning glance.

AVALON

(whispering harshly)

I shall offer nothing to that one, not a thing. Let men do as they may; yet I spent so long in bondage I cannot respect one who submits himself to it, much less leads others to it.

Upon their return to the great hall, warm tea is served, and the chatter of a multitude fills the air as the people mill about. Roshim sips his tea and looks around; he is struck again by the lack of demimen, and pulls Ladulai aside. Avalon is nowhere to be seen.

ROSHIM

(to Ladulai)

There are no men like me here. Why is that?
Do the Sangriel not minister to all people?

LADULAI

Yes, of course. But-- well, you will understand this-- demimen, men like myself-- we are fallen, far from God's grace. The stewardship of the earth is given to humans. They are stewards of the-- animals. The angels, as well. All who walk on the earth and swim in the sea is under mankind's domain.

ROSHI

I do not understand. I am human.

LADULAI

We are half-human. We are not creatures of God; do you understand? Offspring of heavenly host and mankind; the creator did not intend this. So says the Book of Silver. Mankind may return to God's grace; we will never. Our kind will fade. The blood of heaven was never meant to intermingle with the blood of earth.

Roshim grows angry at this, but calms himself when he sees Ladulai shrink away.

ROSHI

I am not angry at you, Ladulai. I do not accept this belief. How I wish to hear the opinion of Balthius on this! A half-man is a full man: this is a saying in Aphaelia. A man who feels as a man is a man. I should like to read this Book of Silver myself-- ah! What am I saying?

LADULAI

(whimpering)

It is the will of God. Lucea may illuminate further--

ROSHI

No, I think I have heard enough. Thank you.
This explains much that has bothered me since
we arrived. Enough of it. Show me that fine
robe of yours instead.

A group of white-robed men approach them. They bow, and one
speaks to Ladulai. He replies in the Sangriel tongue, then
turns to Roshim.

LADULAI

We have a new quarters. Shall we go? They
say there is a hot bath prepared.

ROSHI

Ah! Yes. Let me fetch the bags--

LADULAI

No need, no need. Come, blessed Roshim.
Where is Avalon? It matters not; if they see
him, they shall send him along to us.

Ladulai speaks rapidly to the men, and one leads Roshim and
Ladulai to the rear of the hall. They ascend to another wing
of the monastery, unlocked by a monk holding a great silver
key, and step into a fine hall.

The hall is plain but spotlessly clean, with the stonework
crafted with great skill. Tapestries of red cloth woven with
silver thread line the walls, and Roshim is impressed with

scenes depicting great deeds of Laurientus and the Sangriel. Though only a glimpse, Roshim recognizes some of the pictographs also used in the First Book, and wonders if these tapestries are excerpts of the Book of Silver.

INT. SANGRIEL BATH CHAMBER NIGHT

A pair of women with covered faces greet them wordlessly and usher them into a great bath chamber. Ladulai is taken elsewhere; many handmaidens undress Roshim, who submits and allows himself to be lead about. He is taken to a small room paneled with waxed rosewood, with a dais that lifts a steaming copper tub of water scented with sage and rosemary. It is slightly too small for him; the water splashes over the lip as he settles in, but the scent and steam and warmth is heavenly. The steam fills the small room, and for the first time since ascending Hali Ridge Roshim feels warmth soak him entirely.

An older woman who reminds him a bit of Jilo comes in and fingers his long dreaded hair in a thoughtful manner. She brings out a great lathering basin and instructs the younger women to mix a lather. They scrub Roshim's neck and shoulders with the lather, and work his arms and shoulders roughly. He is made to stand, and scrubbed entirely head to toes before being allowed to soak in the bath more. As he soaks, the older woman kneads his thick woolly hair with oils, and she buffs his horns with a rough cloth. The women laugh and talk quietly among themselves, working swiftly and skillfully.

Clean as he has ever been and smelling like an herb garden, Roshim is guided out of the tub and dried off. He is rubbed with more oils, even his face and cock, and draped in a vast loose robe. As he leaves the bathroom, Roshim turns and bows to the women; they laugh and bow back.

Roshim is taken to a sitting room, plain but comfortable, with a fireplace in the center of the circular room. Ladulai is already there, dressed in a similar robe, his fur brushed and shining, eating dried fruit and laying on a long couch by the fire.

LADULAI

Ah! How was that, my friend?

ROSHIM

The best bath I've ever had. I did not expect it from this place.

LADULAI

Mmm, it is a rare thing. These are the quarters of the missionaries. It is the final comfort before one sets out into the world. Look there; we will sleep on a fine mattress with quilted sheets tonight!

Ladulai points to an curtained alcove, and Roshim realizes this is a bedroom, not a sitting room! He glances around; there is a bed in each of eight alcoves. He goes to one, and presses his hand on it.

ROSHIM

Comfortable!

Ladulai comes to his side, and opens his robe. His slender scarred body shines, and the scents of lavender and coriander

greet Roshim's nose. The blue eye gazes up at him.

LADULAI

(softly)

I would make you more comfortable, if you like.

Roshim glances at the door. He is surprised by his own immediate discomfort and thoughts of Avalon.

Ladulai sees Roshim's hesitation and is immediately hurt. He closes his robe without a word and returns to the couch.

Roshim walks to Ladulai, and rests his hands on Ladulai's skinny shoulders. He squeezes.

LADULAI

I disgust you, don't I?

ROSHIM

Enough of that. I would not risk an audience.

LADULAI

How came you to care for that one? He is so cold and aloof and snide. He despises me openly. I can hardly stand him.

ROSHI

I did not care for him at first. But he is a good companion, and he has been true to me in ways that matter. I can rely on him to be with me. And I can rely on him to accompany me home.

Ladulai is silent for awhile. Roshim kneads his shoulders, staring at the fire.

ROSHI

We will help you to the White City. Perhaps you will find such a relationship for yourself. Someone who supports you. You cannot be the only one like you from the White City. You might have fellowship.

LADULAI

(muttering)

I do not need someone else like myself. I need someone strong, like you.

ROSHI

Do not despise yourself, Ladulai. You must learn to love yourself before you can love another.

LADULAI

(bitterly)

What is there to love? My weak fragile body,
my stupid slow mind? Of course I disgust you.
I disgust everyone.

ROSHIM

You disgust yourself. Consider your body; as
weak as you say it is, it has brought you far.
It has brought you out of the White City, away
from torment; to Hali, to serve your Lord;
with me now, to the White City again to
minister. Look at what it has done, and tell
me truthfully that it has not done you some
good.

Roshim runs his hands along Ladulai's neck and shoulders,
tracing down his sides. Ladulai shivers and shifts in his
seat.

ROSHIM

Now rest. Treat your body graciously, in
preparation for your next journey. Thank it
for what it has done for you.

LADULAI

(muttering)

Very well.

Ladulai rises and retires to one of the alcoves. He

hesitates as he closes the curtain, looking to Roshim.

ROSHIM

I shall wait up for Avalon. Good night.

LADULAI

Good night.

Roshim stares at the fire, and leans back in the couch. The velvet cushions keep the warmth well. He falls asleep within seconds.

EXT. DREAM OF THE ISOLATED TOWER NIGHT

Roshim dreams he is standing outside the great hall, along the path to the isolated tower. He stares up at its sharp black outline, up towards the glittering stars above-- except there are no stars, just a stormcloud, towering huge with silvery outlines hinting at the moon behind it. The sky is dark and covered; the field of Hali hardly shining. Birds circle the tower.

Walking up the path to the tower, Roshim sees a long yellow cloth, or a serpent, wrapped around the tower. It goes across the black pine door, and he cannot open the door for the cloth binding it. He puts his ear to the door, and hears voices inside: Laurientus and Avalon, speaking softly to each other.

A caw. Roshim looks up; and sees thousands of crows wheeling overhead. A few dozen fly down to him, perching on the lumpen candle wax lining the path, and draw their wings across their faces. Roshim shies away and walks back down the path, but the all the birds turn as if watching him. Roshim feels a heavy presence, and he staggers as if a hand is pulling him down, and falls. On his hands and knees, he crawls away from the tower, terrified and unable to rise.

Suddenly there is a great sound from the tower behind him, like a thunderclap. He looks over his shoulder, and sees the doors burst open, and all the birds take flight. The inside of the tower is billowing yellow cloth, and a tall figure emerges, a waterfall of fiery red hair cascading down his back. It is

Avalon, but not Avalon; beautiful and terrible, so tall his long horns scrape the doorframe, and his forehead wreathed with a circlet of light. In one hand the figure holds a green branch; in the other, a sword wreathed with fire. The yellow cloth billows behind him as he stares down at Roshim. Behind Aphael, Laurientus kneels, his head bowed.

APHAEL

You shall not touch him. He is not your vassal.

Immediately Roshim can stand, and the screaming of the crows rises into a crescendo. The clouds in the sky are split by a howling wind, and the moon shines down, and Roshim feels himself pushed back, as if pulled by that wind, blown off the high mont, wheeling over the white plains of Hali.

INT. SANGRIEL MISSIONARY BEDROOM NIGHT

Roshim awakens with a violent start. He gazes into the fire before him and recalls the blazing eyes of Aphael. Numbly, he exhales, and slows his breathing. He waits; this time, sleep does not trouble him.

No more than half an hour passes before the door opens, and Avalon enters, wearing the same bathrobe, his fiery hair coiled in ribbons and pulled back. He glances at Roshim and sees something in Roshim's face, but says nothing. Avalon seats himself next to Roshim, and puts a hand on his thigh, sliding it up Roshim's leg. Roshim lays his scarred hand on top of Avalon's smooth one.

ROSHIM

What did I dream?

AVALON

You are becoming a bit of an intruder, lambkin. You must restrain yourself from opening every closed door you see. Some doors are closed for good reasons.

ROSHIM

Answer me.

AVALON

(picking at the dried fruit)

I spoke to Laurientus. It was quite useless. Pain or something else has riveted him to this idea of submission to the Conqueror. How I wish I knew what transpired between him and Lucea! That aside, I do not understand why he gave you what you asked for. Of all places for help to come, I would not expect it from a thrall of the Conqueror God. Show me what he gave you.

ROSHIM

(drawing out the scroll and handing it over)

Could it be a trick of some sort?

Avalon examines the small scroll, withdrawing it from its silken cover, unrolling it, squinting at the writing. He sniffs it, and licks the handles.

AVALON

(handing the scroll back)

It seems benign. If there is a trick hidden in this scroll then I do not see it. Here: you are a stonemason; does the instruction seem odd or malicious?

ROSHI

(putting the scroll in his bag)

No. It is odd only in that no mason of
Aphaelia would have discovered a method of
this complexity. It can be tested before it
is applied to the foundation. I am no master,
but I do not think this is a deceit.

They are silent for a moment. Outside, the wind howls;
through a narrow slotted window, Roshim sees snow in the
moonlight.

AVALON

(irritated)

I am not satisfied with this place, not at
all. And yet we must leave so soon. There is
more of this place I would see, could we
linger. We have been confined atop this
blasted mont, with an entire city below! I
wonder if we are being hurried along.

ROSHI

(glancing to Ladulai's bed)

Perhaps it is not us being hurried along.

AVALON

(nodding slowly)

Perhaps. But why?

ROSHI

I do not know. I am curious about this White City, but not curious enough to risk my neck. Perhaps some knowledge is not worth the trouble.

AVALON

(chuckling)

My lambkin, I could not have said it better myself.

ROSHI

(glancing to Ladulai again)

But I am worried for him. I feel as if we have been tasked with delivering him to his death.

AVALON

(rubbing Roshim's arm)

Ah, your soft heart again! I would not be troubled by it. Besides, we have time on the road yet and he may change his mind. In the heart of this righteous throng, he may not be altogether honest with himself or others. And what does it matter to you, if you have what you came here for?

ROSHIM

His kin failed him. If I am the only one who cares for him then so be it. I want to do right by him. Are all the sons of angels so broken?

AVALON

(stroking his arm)

I will not remark on that! But if you offer him a home in Aphaelia, I will abide by it. At the gate of the White City he may yet turn aside, and you can be there for that. Let that comfort you.

ROSHIM

(putting a hand on Avalon's neck)

You could be more kind, you know.

AVALON

(kissing his arm)

Dear boy, you have enough kindness for both of us. Now come; I shall ensure you sleep well tonight.

Avalon reaches into Roshim's robe and takes his big cock, and gently teases it to full erection. Roshim stares into those glittering green eyes, and rubs Avalon's naked back under the robe, breathing through his mouth, trying to keep quiet. His brown cock looks massive in Avalon's slender hands, and he sighs. Ladulai does not stir.

They relax by the fire with each other, Avalon stroking Roshim to full hardness, leaning down occasionally to kiss the massive member and tease with his tongue. Roshim feels his orgasm approaching suddenly, and he makes a soft noise; Avalon immediately opens his robe and straddles Roshim, rubbing the wet cockhead against his stomach and squeezing, edging, until Roshim cannot hold back. Pearly jets of cum spray up Avalon's belly and chest, soaking into the fine robe, and he skillfully catches it all on himself, wiping up the spurts as Roshim shudders beneath him.

It takes awhile for Avalon to clean up the mess, wiping it up with his robe, and Roshim calms down. He admires the beauty of Avalon's face and hair, and sighs gently. Avalon smiles and looks at him, climbing off.

AVALON

Good night, dear. Sleep well.

ROSHIM

Good night, star of mine. And thank you.

The fire soon goes out. In their respective beds, the three slumber. Their sleep is deep and dreamless.

Outside, the wind howls.

THE END