

ROSES FOR AVALON CH. 4

THE STRENGTH OF IRON

by

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(purplebirdman)

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

| The Red Desert, verse 857, Cephus bin Soolaimon

INT. APHAELIA ROOT ARCHIVES NOON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ROSHIM

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

CRISTIO

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

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

BALTHIUS

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

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

BALTHIUS

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

BALTHIUS

(reading)

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

Balthius looks up at his students, and smiles.

BALTHIUS

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

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

BALTHIUS

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

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

BALTHIUS

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

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

BALTHIUS

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

EXT. AT THE BASE OF CARCOS MORNING

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

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

They pass beneath the great riverward wall of Miriah, and Roshim sees it pass by with some regret, for the towering

buildings and hanging gardens remind him of his home. Soon enough they pass and head south down the river, and the river narrows as it passes the flood plain and into a valley pressed upon by high mountains; Miriah disappears, and there is nothing but the steep rock and greenery of the mountains on either side.

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

AVALON

(softly)

And so we begin again. Another journey.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

One with a more satisfying conclusion, El be willing.

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

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

at him through Avalon's familiar face.

ROSHIM

(annoyed)

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

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

AVALON

Have I? I shall attempt to be more subtle.

ROSHIM

(sharply)

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

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

AVALON

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

Avalon hesitates, licking his lips, the frenetic light still

in his eyes.

AVALON

I am terrified.

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

ROSHYM

You have never spoken this way before.

Terrified? Terrified of what?

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

AVALON

Oh, what a joke this is!

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

ROSHIM

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

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

AVALON

(softly)

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

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

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

AVALON

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

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

ROSHIM

(growling)

You've been laid bare a few times already.

AVALON

(slyly)

And I intend to bare myself to you again, O hammer of Aphaelia!

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

AVALON

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

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

ROSHIM

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

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

AVALON

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

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

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

SAILOR

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

Roshim's stomach gurgles. He follows the sailor and returns from the galley with a generous helping of dried and fresh fruits, meats, and bread. Avalon watches him eat, shakes his head, and returns to his game of cards. They both have a sealed jar of beer. Roshim's mood is improved after eating and drinking. He sighs contentedly, lounging on the deck, and watches Avalon play.

ROSHIM

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

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

AVALON

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

ROSHIM

(blinking sluggishly)

A wall?

AVALON

Yes, a wall. The outer wall of Loraine.

Roshim blinks again. He sits up. Slowly he recalls some lessons of his youth; the great iron fortress of Loraine, the general Sodon, the war against heaven at the end of the First Age when the Hand of the Stranger stood firm against the tyrant god.

ROSHI

(reverently)

The iron city...

Avalon snorts and turns over more cards. He fidgets.

AVALON

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

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

ROSHI

Were that Cristio was here, he could tell us the exact dimensions of Loraine, but in his stead I recall it somewhat; four walls, separated by five thousand cubits each-- so that's twenty thousand cubits from Epha to the fortress. Nearly a fortnight on foot...

Avalon groans and rubs his foot in sympathy.

AVALON

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

ROSHI

(in wonder, not listening)

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

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

AVALON

(scornful)

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

ROSHIM

(uncertain)

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

AVALON

(sharply)

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

Avalon upends his deck of cards, spilling them on the floor.
He grips Roshim's forearm and gestures towards them with his
free hand, speaking in a low, passionate voice, looking Roshim
in the eye intently.

AVALON

(intently)

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

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

AVALON

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

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

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

AVALON

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

EXT. THE CITY OF UNDER-EPHA DAY

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

The boat docks at Under-Epha, and Avalon and Roshim get

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

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

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

Finally, loaded down with goods, with Roshim towing a sand-cart and harnessed like a beast of burden, the two set out on foot across the salt plains in desert boots and sun cloaks.

EXT. THE IRON DESERT DAY

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

cart's harness strain against his muscles, but they hardly leave marks on his skin.

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

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

ROSHIM

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

Avalon shakes his head when Roshim looks at him.

AVALON

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

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

AVALON

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

EXT. UNDER THE SHADE OF ISHA MIDDAY

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

ROSHIM

What did you want to tell me?

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

AVALON

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

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

ROS HIM

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

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

AVALON

Do you see me, perhaps? Without your eyes?

ROS HIM

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

AVALON

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

ROSIM

I do not.

Avalon hums to himself, uncertainly.

AVALON

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

ROSIM

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

AVALON

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

ROSIM

The Lords? They will see... what?

AVALON

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

EXT. KEEPWAY ROAD MORNING

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

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

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

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

ROSHIM

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

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

AVALON

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

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

relief absently.

ROSHIM

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

AVALON

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

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

ROSHIM

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

AVALON

(annoyed)

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

Despite this warning, Roshim cannot help but feel strong and
empowered. He has been enjoying this sensation, this new

feeling of Avalon not being able to keep up with him. He makes a fist, feeling the cords of muscle in his forearms. Avalon sees this and rolls his eyes.

Suddenly, Avalon tenses, and draws the wet cloth off his face. He stands, wrapping his sun cloak around his face, to minimize the glare of the sun, and scans the sunken road before them. Roshim strains to follow Avalon's gaze, but sees nothing.

ROSHIM

What is it?

AVALON

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

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

ROSHIM

Bandits? Watching the road?

AVALON

(with irritation)

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

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

AVALON

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

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

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

AVALON

(loudly)

Peace be with you.

MAN

And also with you.

AVALON

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

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

KENDA

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

AVALON

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

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

KENDA

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

ROSHI

The nature of the world and the gods themselves.

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

KENDA

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

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

Kenda.

AVALON

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

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

KENDA

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

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

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

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

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

KENDA

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

ROSHIM

Very well.

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

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

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

KENDA

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

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

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

EXT. CAMP OF THE CHILDREN OF IRON TWILIGHT

At last the narrow ravine opens up. Kenda guides them to an underhang lit by the light of the sun and pockmarked with cave entrances, standing three or four stories tall, cut with

handholds and footholds and rude stairs. A brazier burns near the base; though sunlight reaches the upper part, the lower is in perpetual shadow, and the rocks are cool to the touch.

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

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

KENDA

Where is the master?

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

OLD MAN

(staring at Roshim)

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

KENDA

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

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

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

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

DEMIMAN

Welcome! Who are you two?

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

AVALON

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

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

DEMIMAN

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

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

ROSHIM

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

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

DEMIMAN

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

Around the table, a murmured negative from the crowd.

ROSHIM

I do not lie.

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

MALEKI

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

At Maleki's command, the low table is cleared and food is brought; heaps of coarsely prepared meat and vegetables, fried in a slurry, and great vessels of cold water with chunks of vegetables floating in them. Roshim and Avalon eat and drink

without speaking, for the food is good and spiced well, and quite a relief after the desert. Maleki laughs aloud at their expressions, and slaps his belly jovially, and shakes his mane.

MALEKI

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

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

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

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

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

MALEKI

(looking at them both)

So, my father did not send for you?

ROSHIM

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

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

MALEKI

The old temple? The Lord of Gold, eh?

ROSHIM

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

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

MALEKI

(to Avalon)

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

AVALON

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

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

MALEKI

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

AVALON

(evenly)

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

MALEKI

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

AVALON

There are none but I.

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

MALEKI

(breathing heavily)

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

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

Kenda's sword flashes, and faster than Roshim can react, the

man strikes towards Avalon, whether to merely threaten or to inflict hurt Roshim cannot tell. As the blow falls, Maleki turns toward Kenda, as if anticipating it, as if to stop it--

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

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

MALEKI

Enough, enough! Return him, if you would!

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

MALEKI

(softly)

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

Avalon bows, gestures with his slender hands. Kenda

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

MALEKI

What did he show you?

KENDA

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

MALEKI

(to Avalon)

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

ROSHIM

What happened?

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

MALEKI

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

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

KENDA

(urgently)

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

MALEKI

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

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

MALEKI

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

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

AVALON

(softly)

I was told he resented me.

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

MALEKI

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

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

MALEKI

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

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

MALEKI

(passionately)

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

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

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

MALEKI

(angry)

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

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

MALEKI

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

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

MALEKI

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

ROSHIM

No. I bear them on MY behalf.

MALEKI

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

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

Roshim speaks, halting at first but gaining confidence:

ROSHI

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

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

MALEKI

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

Maleki leans forward, licking his tongue over his teeth.

MALEKI

(slyly)

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

KENDA

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

MALEKI

(impatiently)

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

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

MALEKI

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

AVALON

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

MALEKI

(eagerly)

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

(gnashes his teeth and claws the air)

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

AVALON

It is not far from the truth!

MALEKI

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

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

ROSHIIM

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

AVALON

Yes, indeed!

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

MALEKI

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

INT. CAMP OF THE CHILDREN OF IRON, BEDCHAMBER

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

KENDA

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

Kenda hesitates, looking at Avalon firmly, and bows.

KENDA

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

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

ROSHIM

(quietly to Avalon)

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

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

AVALON

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

ROSHIM

Perhaps he is letting us proceed as a distraction?

AVALON

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

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

ROSHIM

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

AVALON

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

ROSHIM

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

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

AVALON

(softly)

No. I shall accompany you.

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

ROSHIM

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

Avalon shivers again, but says nothing.

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

EXT. THE IRON KEEP MORNING

Early the next day, Kenda appears with a trio of guards to escort them out of the camp. At the edge of the keepway road, Roshim retrieves the sand-cart, and by the time Roshim and Avalon reach the road, the rocky hills appear empty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAELLUM

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

ROSHIM

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

AVALON

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

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

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

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

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

INT. THE IRON KEEP THRONEROOM DAY

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

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

MAELLUM

(loudly)

Namabeth, your lordship, I beg your pardon.

These two approached the south gate to speak
with Lord Sodon.

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

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

NAMABETH

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

Roshim and Avalon repeat to Namabeth their reasons told to Maellum. Namabeth stares at them, and his red eyes trace Avalon's face with particular animosity. The tension in the room does not abate.

NAMABETH

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

Avalon begins to speak, but Namabeth gestures to Roshim.

NAMABETH

You talk, sheep-man. Not him.

ROSIM

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

NAMABETH

And what did you hear, in Under-Epha?

ROSIM

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

NAMABETH

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

A man in garb of the south gate rushes in and speaks to
Maellum. Maellum turns to Namabeth and nods. Namabeth's face
twists in annoyance and fear for a brief moment before his
stone-faced aspect returns.

MAELLUM

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

NAMABETH

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

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

After a period of tense silence, the door is flung open with
a bang. A vast beast unfolds himself out of the frame,
standing a full head higher than Roshim as he emerges; at first

merely a fluttering trail of cape and mane and lumpen shapes, Roshim realizes this is Sodon, a parody of grotesque physical strength, his swollen muscles heaving as he lopes into the room, horned head twisting on a neck like a horse's, a pattern of vascularity on his mighty chest and arms that looks ready to burst.

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

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

SODON

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

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

Seeing his visitors hesitate, Sodon calls for water and wine, and they sit on cushions at a low table while the Lord

sits on his great throne, which protests under his weight. Namabeth sits beside his father, his aspect still quiet and sullen. Sodon ignores Namabeth and gazes intently at Roshim and Avalon.

SODON

(to Avalon)

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

AVALON

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

SODON

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

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

the weapons and armor girding the walls.

AVALON

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

SODON

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

(to Roshim)

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

ROSHIM

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

SODON

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

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

NAMABETH

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

Sodon nods. He signs for more wine.

SODON

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

ROSHIM

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

SODON

...I see.

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

SODON

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

AVALON

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

SODON

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

AVALON

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

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

SODON

(to Avalon)

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

AVALON

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

Sodon laughs. His loud barks reverberate in the room.

SODON

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

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

SODON

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

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

SODON

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

ROSHIM

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

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

SODON

(mockingly)

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

ROS HIM

I swear, it is the truth.

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

SODON

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

ROSIM

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

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

SODON

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

(to Avalon)

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

Sodon gestures toward the empty seats beside him and Namabeth.

SODON

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

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

NAMABETH

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

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

NAMABETH

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

(to Roshim)

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

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

SODON

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

ROSHIM

Allow me a moment to speak with Avalon, Lord.

SODON

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

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

ROSHIM

I will return for you, I swear it.

AVALON

I believe you.

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

NAMABETH

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

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