

ROSES FOR AVALON CH. 6

THE SACRAMENT OF FIRMAMENT

by

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(purplebirdman)

"...seeing this, the Pale King turned to the others, saying:
'Must every strike of the sculptor be questioned? Each stroke
is neither good nor evil, except as it contributes to the
whole, and who can see the whole before it is made but the
sculptor himself? As a body knows its inner from its outer, so
must a community know itself from not-itself. As the
functioning body is composed of functioning members, each given
to their task and place in the anatomy, so too the functioning
community. One must draw boundaries to separate one from
another; thus I maintain.'"

The Book of the Sacred Star, verse 874, Cephus bin Soolaimon

EXT. MONT HALI

For two more days Roshim and Avalon and Ladulai remain upon the mont, recovering from their journey to Hali Ridge. Rather than being permitted to mingle with the crowd as he pleases, Roshim finds himself paraded about the mont and the city below along with a group of other missionaries, wearing the same white robes of service that were bestowed upon Ladulai. The pale people of the mont are impressed by his big build and woolly arms, but Roshim sees a certain derision in the eyes of some. The handful of other missionaries in white robes do not speak to him or Avalon. Lucea greets him warmly, but there are no further audiences with her or Laurientus.

Ladulai seems ever grateful for this chance to do service for the Sangriel, and his obvious joy at the attention of the people is somewhat pathetic, though Roshim sternly reprimands himself when he realizes his thoughts are judgmental. Let Ladulai find his happiness where he can, Roshim thinks finally, and it need not please me.

Avalon remains quiet but Roshim sees his restless aspect, and begins to share it. The dull ceremonies in a language he does not understand drag on, and the reverence and applause of sacrifice bother him. He wishes he could walk about outside Hali in peace, but reminds himself that there will be plenty of walking in his future soon enough.

At last on the dawn of the third day, the three of them set out along with the handful of others. Roshim trades in his

white Sangriel cloak for his old travel cloak, though he keeps the fine boots and sandals that were made for him. With Lucea's silver scroll clasped in a pocket close to his heart, he trails behind the rest of the group, hardly glancing at the spires of Hali as they shrink behind him, eager to return to his home.

EXT. OUTPOST OVERLOOKING HALI PLAIN EVENING

By early evening, the eight of them reach a small shelter in a copse of spruce at the base of the Ridge at the north end of the great ice plain. The shelter is worn and battered, but most of the roof is still intact. The other missionaries build a fire and prepare supper. They speak among themselves, but look in an unfriendly fashion at Roshim in particular. Ladulai assures Roshim that there is no problem resting together that night, but that the other missionaries would be setting out on their own trip come morn.

The next morning, the five others leave at first light, and Roshim surprised to find they left some breakfast behind.

LADULAI

See, they are not such bad fellows. They are not used to someone like you is all. You must admit you are intimidating!

Roshim scratches his beard, which has gotten long and knotted. He feels the scars on his face and nose, rolls his shoulders, feels the weight of his curling horns. He turns to Avalon.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

Am I? Have I changed much?

AVALON

(nodding)

I think you were a remarkable boy then; now you are quite a man. I do not think your own family will recognize you. This road has been a road for you, indeed!

They sit together and eat the breakfast at a low table. Afterwards Ladulai draws out his scribbled map, and charts the route.

LADULAI

(muttering)

Now, we proceed north, far north, far from the seat of the river in Carcos to the Eternal Sea itself. We descend the ridge on the opposite side we came, around the desert, to the black shores. In effect, you have journeyed around the Loraine desert; when you leave me at the black shores and head back, you shall pass Carcos, and leave this place the way you came.

AVALON

(studying the map)

Have you taken this route?

LADULAI

(not looking at Avalon)

Not altogether. When I left the White City with my master, I traveled by road to neighboring cities. I know the merchant roads from the White City to Hindel; once we descend the ridge we shall strike out across the fens to those roads.

AVALON

Are you as well known among the people there as you were in Hindel?

Ladulai grimaces, smiling painfully, looking at Roshim. He bends over his map again, muttering to himself. Avalon gets up to go outside and smoke. Roshim pats Ladulai's back.

ROSHIM

(softly)

Warn me of whatever dangers you know of, that I might better protect you. For I will protect you.

LADULAI

My master was known in these parts but I was nothing. Still-- some may recall my face. I am-- I am more concerned that I will be recognized as a child of the Pale King. There are many of the King's Churches on the latter end of our road. Yet I must have faith in my protection.

ROSHI

Should you change your mind, you may accompany me back to Aphaelia.

LADULAI

(lips quivering)

How cruel of you to tempt me so, Lord Roshim. Please do not make me such offers. I would only ask your assistance in my mission.

ROSHI

I mean no disrespect. I will do what I can for you. If your heart compels you to the White City, I will take you there. If your heart would turn elsewhere, I will help you.

Ladulai wordlessly gathers up his things and walks out without looking at Roshim again.

EXT. NORTHERN ROAD TO FEN DAY

With a blazing sun in a cloudless sky overhead the three set out, moving up the Hali basin and cresting the ridge by sunset. One final time, Roshim glimpses the spires of the monastery, and then they disappear behind the ridge as the long, slow descent begins.

Unlike the bare rock path of the Sangriel ascent from Hindel, the descent is forested with evergreens and there is no path to speak of. The snow gives way to moss and rock and damp, and the footing is slow and unsure. The evergreens fade and give way to deciduous trees, birch and aspen and oak, and the undergrowth of berry bushes and soft moss become thick.

It takes three more days to reach the foot of the ridge, and by then Roshim's ankles are quite sore. They rest a full day before striking out across the flat countryside, a heath peppered with thick forests and underbrush. Roshim soon realizes that the countryside in between these forests is growing soft and muddy, and nothing but small trees and bushes can root themselves there. Soon the heath gives way to a proper fen as they leave the shadow of the ridge.

The weather is humid and there is always a fog in the morning. Roshim's feet grow quite soggy treading in the muck and the rest of him is not much drier, and he begins to lose his wool coat in great patches after a week, drawing teasing remarks from Avalon. The bugs begin to find his skin too, biting viciously and making it difficult to sleep. Roshim

begins to feel like his size makes him too tempting a target.

After another week of trudging through the fen, a great empty plain looms ahead, pools of water peeking between great mossy lumps of earth. Ladulai pauses here and advises they fashion great sticks out of young birch to carry and prevent them falling into the marshes.

Sure enough, Roshim finds that soggy patches that Avalon and Ladulai tread on do not hold his weight, and he finds himself falling behind the two of them as he picks his footing carefully, prodding the earth with his stick. He is out of breath and patience after a day of this, but according to Ladulai there is nearly a week of marshes to wade through.

The second day Roshim missteps and sinks to his chest in mud and water. He shouts, and Avalon and Ladulai return to retrieve him, pulling him by his wrists out of the muck. Avalon cannot stop laughing at Roshim's expression, and Roshim is quite sullen, stripping and wringing out his clothes as best he can. Even Ladulai is smiling.

AVALON

(laughing)

It reminds you of the fields of Aphaelia, eh?

Shall we all strip to our underwear?

ROSHIM

(testily)

It is nothing like Aphaelia. Strip if you wish! May the bugs eat you alive! How you cackle.

Roshim walks in his underwear the rest of the day, and they dry his clothes over the fire. That night, a naked Avalon gets up at the same time Roshim awakens to piss, and after Roshim is done with his business they go to the far rocky end of the dry land and fuck. Roshim grips Avalon's neck and comes twice inside, and notes the mess of jizz spilling out over Avalon's thighs with satisfaction after he withdraws. Their bodies steam in the cold humid night air as they both silently clean each other up. The sweat and semen on the rocks continues to steam as Avalon fetches his pipe, and they share a smoke together, looking out over the moonlit marshlands.

Finally Roshim breaks the comfortable silence, his eyes fixed on the faint light of the horizon.

ROSHIM

What awaits us northward? I know what Ladulai said; you have been silent. You beheld the Pale King before, yes?

Avalon is quiet for a long time. Roshim sees his eyes flicker to and fro beneath their long lashes. Roshim is reminded of the shape of Oidecalla's face, cast in shadow.

AVALON

(slowly)

I do not know what became of Astheopithicus.
All I know was told to me by my father: that
he walled himself in firmament and that he
built a tower in the same spirit as Aphaelia.
I never traveled this far north; I do not know
this road. It did occur to me many years ago
to look at his Tower, as a point of curiosity,
but I was-- I did not make the trip.

ROSHI

(thoughtful)

This reminds me. What of the final Lord; what
of Rhodowyn? I recall from lessons of my
youth that he raised the concept of the
Towers, that he drew the very outline of the
Hand of the Stranger and its mission; he must
have been the origin of the White City, as he
was Aphaelia. Where is he?

AVALON

(blowing smoke rings)

Ah. It hardly matters now, does it? Unless
you wish to speak to every Lord, just to notch
your belt!

ROS HIM

My belt has enough notches, I think. Have you seen how far I must let it out, now? Why, I have added six new holes since Under-Epha!

AVALON

(giggling)

Yes, you are nearly as large as Sodon himself, lambkin. Soon you shall be too large to enter anyone at all! My poor tail... and with all this walking, as well.

ROS HIM

You like it well enough, if your continual return is a sign of anything.

(pauses)

No, I do not think I shall pursue the other Lords. I have what I came here for, and more besides. I suppose I ought to have expected it; all the expeditions from Aphaelia are grander tales than a neophyte might expect from what is delivered to the shelves. Why, Balthius-- he began with his partner by cataloging species of fish along the Bay of Palms, and in tracing a migration route of a particular school, was cast into a three year trip when his ship was stranded-- ah, he will quite enjoy my own journal, I'm sure.

Roshim casts a glance back at the campsite, where his thick

journal lays snugly in its oilcloth in his pack, and he looks back at Avalon's amused expression with a frown.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

Well, it may seem trite to one such as you,
who has lived so much.

AVALON

No, my dear. I see it anew through your eyes.

They finish the pipe and retire. For awhile Roshim cannot sleep, but stares up, thinking of his return to Aphaelia. The sky is clear and full of stars.

EXT. NORTHERN MARSH

The days drag on. Moving through the marshlands is slow and difficult, particularly for Roshim. On the fourth miserable evening, fly-bitten and dirty, they spy lamps glittering in the distance, but traveling in the marsh by only the dimming sunlight is deemed too dangerous and so they camp under a leaning copse, hungrily eyeing the promise of a proper road just within reach.

Though Roshim and Avalon are eager to find the northern road the next morning, Ladulai is reluctant, and even suggests that they walk alongside it at a distance, but Roshim cannot abide more days of trudging through the muck.

LADULAI

(whining)

I am afraid-- I am afraid to be seen as a child of the Pale King. These places-- these are places that will know who I am.

AVALON

Come, come, they will think twice before trying anything; you walk alongside the child of gold and the greatest stonemason in Aphaelia. You have nothing to fear but being outshone by our combined brilliance.

Roshim rolls his eyes, and takes Ladulai's hands. He looks down at Ladulai firmly. The white and blue eye look up at him

beneath Ladulai's ragged hood.

ROSHIM

(gently)

You have your faith and me besides, do you not? Will your God not protect you?

LADULAI

(nodding)

My protection is against my brothers, my allfather. Not the common man. But oh, you are right, Lord Roshim. I am crippled by weakness. Walk with me and I shall overcome it with your example.

Thus they proceeded to the road, and setting foot upon the raised gravel and packed earth gave Roshim such relief that he nearly danced. Avalon skipped and stamped without self consciousness. Though the day was gray and overcast, it felt radiant and sunny.

AVALON

Who would have guessed? At the end of the day, all one really needs is solid ground beneath one's feet.

Ladulai seems startled by their joy but is caught up in the energy, and smiles self-consciously, glancing in a confused way from Roshim to Avalon.

AVALON

Wherever this road leads, I shall be glad to follow it!

ROSHI

(glancing to Ladulai)

To a soft bed and bath, I hope!

LADULAI

(muttering)

This is the tail of the Northern Way, a road that traces the edge of the holy land here. It was built by one of the old empires; now it is not well maintained, this far north. South from here some distance is the large city of Ur, where my master conducted his business; up here there is a network of old roads and half-destroyed townships, small settlements of men. Mostly agrarian, before it comes to the Eternal Sea. A place to be easily lost in. An place for much to happen that remains unseen.

Ladulai points north, up the road, which lays straight and narrow above the marshlands. In the distance, gray hills promise an end to the sallow marsh.

LADULAI

There is a small city in those hills named Ush-Kana, in the tongue of the conquered people. I know it well, for it houses the southmost church of the Stars. Beds and baths it may have, but should you wish to avoid the eyes of the Allfather, we must bear wide around it. I have my mission, and I do not fear them; but if you are seen with me, you may be perceived as well.

Roshim looks to Avalon, who shrugs at him.

ROSHIM

Are they dangerous? Should they be avoided?
We are not close to the White City.

Ladulai closes his eyes and wags his head, in the throes of some sort of strange reverie. He licks his lips and looks at the sky, then the ground. Finally he speaks, not looking at Roshim.

LADULAI

They might be dangerous. Might be dangerous.
Yet I cannot say. The true danger will face
me, not you, and yet-- as a child of the
Western Tower, perhaps you will attract
interest? Perhaps the blessing of gold will
attract interest? I do not know the mind of
the Allfather, but he has always seemed
singularly fixed on his own purpose, with
little heed to the outside world. The
churches-- they are the true gates to the
White City, the only concession he has made to
puncture the shell of his kingdom. He has--
it seems to me, he has forsaken the world for
a world of his own strict design. With his
command of the firmament, he has withdrawn as
far as he can-- but he cannot withdrawn
completely, not completely.

Ladulai falls silent. Roshim waits, but realizes Ladulai is
done speaking.

ROSHIM

Well. Let us go to-- to Ush-Kana, and see
what there is to see. I have said I will see
you to the gates; so to the gates we shall go.

EXT. THE ROAD TO USH-KANA

Long and straight leads the gray road to Ush-Kana, and the trio follow it with spritely steps. The nondescript miles fall behind them and the hills beckon them ahead; Avalon claims to see smoke from the city, but it is some hours before Roshim can convince himself that he sees anything besides the great forest that sprawls out from the roots of the mountains. Ladulai leads them after donning his white robes of the Sangriel, which were carefully packed away for their journey through the fen.

They encounter no other travelers for the rest of the day, though when dusk falls, they see the same twinkling of lamplight on the road ahead, tantalizingly close; the hills are scattered with twinkling lights as well, and the city of Ush-Kana is clearly outlined.

LADULAI

(combing out his hair)

They may be merchants of Ur, like my master;
the lamps look to be raised, see, as if on the
tops of great poles, as is customary.

AVALON

(lazily playing his flute)

What do people trade around here?

LADULAI

(looking at Roshim)

Barley, wheat, millet, and rye-- cattle, goats, sheep besides. To the south past that fen lies a great floodplain, rich and bountiful, and Ur manages the production of grain. It is-- ah, it is the reason my Allfather decided to plant his city by this place. Should he seize Ur, there will be no shortage of raw foodstuffs.

ROSHIM

(glancing to Avalon)

Seize Ur? Is that his ambition?

LADULAI

I should think no ambition is too lofty for him. But the Pale King is patient, and so long as the city of Ur bends to his will I do not believe he will have a reason to act. He prefers decisive force applied quickly, not a protracted struggle. But yes; he will take Ur, someday. His plans are long-laid and his stride is measured. All things will happen in their time, he would say.

ROSHIM

But what of your mission, then? Do you hope to convince him otherwise?

LADULAI

(blinking rapidly)

Oh, my Lord Roshim, of course, of course I must have hope. I will beg my Allfather to see reason, and lay down his arms, and put aside his plans, for though his designs are subtle and his spirit is fierce he is no god. As Laurientus tells us, God the Creator is swift to anger and punishment, but also quick to forgive those who submit and pay for their sins; there is always hope, indeed.

Ladulai pauses, and licks his lips, looking at the fire. His ragged mouth twitches, in a smile or a snarl.

LADULAI

Yet should the Allfather's heart be hardened, should the offer be unheeded, I know that there will be wrath and fury, such wrath and fury as is reserved for the vainglory of those who would displace their God. The storehouses of wrath are full, and the casks are heavy with the fruit of the harvest. So says the servant of God.

AVALON

You sound eager.

LADULAI

Who among us is not eager for justice? No people deserve it more than the children of the Allfather. If only it had come sooner-- ah, but who am I to understand the will of God! It is foolish, foolish to say "this should have happened sooner" or "that will happen later" as if one were God himself. Forgive me, Creator--

AVALON

(sharply)

Look! Someone is coming down the road. Two men.

Roshim stands to his full height, and Ladulai shrinks beside him. Avalon puts aside his flute.

The two men are silhouetted against the lights further down the road. As they step into the light of the campfire, Roshim sees one is older and one younger, in similar flowing garb, brown-skinned with noble features. Long sashes of many brightly-colored cords are draped over their shoulders, and gold rings glitter on their fingers. The older man's head is wrapped, and his long gray beard is cut short; the younger man's hair flows long and his beard is braided.

Upon coming into the light, the older man bows. His face is lined but his eyes twinkle; Roshim is reminded of Adamus' ancient face, amused and careworn. The younger man is handsome

but appears less friendly.

OLDER MAN

Good evening and many blessings, friends. The night is underway, and I see you from afar from my wagon, with no cover tonight; myself and my son extend an invitation to join us in our tent at the rear of the caravan.

YOUNGER MAN

(quietly to the older)

They are beastmen, father.

Though the young man mutters very quietly, Roshim and Avalon hear this, though Ladulai does not. Roshim ignores the statement, preparing to act as if he did not hear, but the older man turns to his son and rebukes him.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

(loudly)

Out here on the wild roads, men are men, and we shall act as men do toward each other.

(to Roshim)

Forgive my foolish son. You are welcome, I assure you. My name is Daveed bin Kanesh. This is Solumn. Please share my tent; though it is meager enough, it is better than sleeping on the road.

A flash of anger at the rebuke crosses Solumn's face, but

he bows alongside his father, and raises his eyes to look firmly at Ladulai, Avalon, and Roshim in turn.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(bowing)

I apologize. I am overly cautious at times.
I did not mean to insult you. Please
introduce yourselves, fellows of the road.

ROSHIM

(bowing back)

I am Roshim, a traveling stonemason. Daveed
and Soolumn, I appreciate your offer and would
gladly spend the night in a tent after a week
on the fen. Thank you!

AVALON

(clapping)

I second this notion and thanks. I am Avalon,
Roshim's somewhat useless tag-along in this
northern land. Should your ear fancy a tune
on my flute you need only ask, O gracious
hosts.

LADULAI

(looking down)

Ladulai of the Sangriel. Thank you.

Daveed approaches and clasps Roshim's rugged hands, looking

up at him. Soolumn approaches but stays behind his father. Roshim sees a long curved sword slung behind him.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

A stonemason? Well, there's not much work for you in my caravan, but I expect you can find something in Ush-Kana just up the road. I delight in traveling stories; come, drink and tell us of your journey.

Daveed looks at Ladulai, who shrinks behind Roshim, and Daveed's eyes twinkle shrewdly. He sucks air through his teeth.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

You are of the White City. Well! Let the White City know there are friends among the family of Kanesh.

Ladulai nods miserably. He glances at Roshim then turns his gaze down. Soolumn approaches Roshim as Daveed approaches Avalon. Roshim suddenly feels clumsy, too big, as the man grasps his hand. He is smooth and fine featured, yet broad and strong, sculpted like a fine Aphaelite figure, Roshim thinks to himself.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

We do not often see your kind this far north. I have not seen a head of horns like yours before. You must be careful; some may mistake you for a demon.

ROSHIM

If only I were, perhaps my life would be simpler. I am bringing one of my companions to Celia Mons on my way back home.

Soolumn's large black eyes search Roshim's face. He tilts his head, polite but sardonic.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Ah? You are in the White City's service as well?

ROSHIM

Not at all. I made a promise to do this-- a promise to him.

Soolumn nods and moves on to greet Ladulai. Roshim wonders why his tongue is so thick and clumsy. He packs the traveling bags and hefts them over his shoulder as the others talk. Avalon's laughter makes his ears twitch.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

Come, let us head back-- the night is cold and my tent is warm! Do you folk drink? Well, luckily I happen to have a barrel of hearty wine-- not bad, not bad at all--

They walk up the road, Avalon and Daveed talking loudly in front, Roshim and Soolumn walking silently, with Ladulai trailing behind. The glimmering lamps grow brighter as the

cloudy sky hides the moon, and behind the silhouettes of great wagons Roshim sees the homely glow of fires in tents, and thin tails of smoke, men walking to and fro as the caravan settles in for the night. Oxen low from somewhere nearby, deep plaintive voices.

Their host leads them to a tent at the rear, plain but draped with a cloth curtain of fine make. Two young men with spears are laughing amongst each other at the entrance, but stiffen up as Daveed approaches with his guests. They bow and open the curtain, and a silken foyer yawns beyond, supported by carved beams of cedar planted in the earth.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

(leading the way)

Come, take your things in, we shall sort it out. No ceremony here, my friends, we are on the road! Quite literally in this case.

The tent interior is gorgeous, with fractal woven patterns of blue and yellow and red draped along the walls, lamps behind amber glass and bronze, all carved and detailed. The ground is carpeted with equally beautiful patterns; soft chairs and lounges are arrayed in a rough circle in the center of the tent. A great panel of cloth stretched on a folding frame hides the rear of the tent. In the center of the tent is a small fire. A dark-faced woman looks up from tending it as they come in. Four or five children between the ages of three to ten are running around, barefoot on the soft carpet. They stop and stare as Daveed enters with his guests. Carved beams

hold up the roof. The smell of incense is heavy in the cloth folds.

Roshim deposits their traveling bags by the door at Daveed's indication, then stands to his full height and stares at it all. Roshim becomes aware Soolumn is watching him gawping with some amusement, and Roshim feels uncharacteristically embarrassed.

AVALON

A beautiful place!

DAVEED BIN KANESH

Oh, it does well enough for us. One doesn't like to block the road, but the margins are quite wet. As you ought to know! What possessed you to cross the wetlands? There's a perfectly good road here!

ROSHIM

We came down from the mountains-- the Hali ridge to the south. There was no road to speak of.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

The southern mountains! That is quite a walk. How came you-- oh, I forget myself. This is my wife Jazeel, my other children--

JAZEEL

(rising from the fire)

Are these the guests you left to find?

(to Roshim)

Come, come; there is a washbasin back here.
Refresh yourselves please before answering
more of his questions. He will never stop
asking no matter how many you answer.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(to Roshim)

Come along. Wash the road off. Mother?

JAZEEL

Yes, show him. One at a time. There's a
little water left.

Roshim glances at Avalon and Ladulai. Avalon looks quite
content, and Ladulai lets down his hood. Avalon nods to
Roshim, and Roshim feels reassured of their safety.

Roshim looks to Soolumn, and follows the young man to the
back of the tent. His horn brushes a tent wall hanging, and
Soolumn turns to him sharply at the sound.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Please do not tear a hole in my father's tent.

ROSHYM

Sorry. I'll be more careful.

They proceed behind the cloth curtains into a rear foyer, open to the view of the marsh and away from the caravan. A great covered barrel sits steaming under the warm glow of a hanging lamp. Soolumn takes off the cedar lid with practiced effort and sets it aside to reveal the dark steaming water, and indicates Roshim should strip and hand over his garments.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Our servants have retired for the night, but Mother will see these are cleaned. I will bring you clothes. Wash quickly.

Roshim strips obligingly, and lays his clothes across Soolumn's outstretched arms. Soolumn's eyes travel over him, noting the size of his limbs, the great chest, the scars. Roshim sees something of Soolumn's aspect change, a softening.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

You look like you've had a hard road.

ROSHIM

Yes, it was. I shall be glad to see my home again.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(nods gruffly)

Wash. There are steps there, should you wish to sit in the tub. I will return soon.

Roshim finds the steps and climbs into the big barrel,

lowering himself as far as he can and making sure the water does not overflow. His vast back is pinched by the rim, but he does not notice, reveling in the warm, cleansing water. He splashes his face and tilts his head back, letting it run over his cheeks and beard, seeing the warm glow of the light through his closed eyelids.

A brush at the end of a long handle hangs off the side, and a bag of soap. Roshim takes the brush and soaps himself well, rubbing it over his cheeks and neck with relish. His nostrils flare at the delicate smell of lavender. He hums and begins scrubbing his woolly chest, back. He stares out at the marshland, the dim shape of the mountains, and the reflections of the moonlit clouds on the plains.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(suddenly from behind)

Here. That beard is a mess. When was the last time you visited a barber?

Roshim starts, and a good bit of water rises over the rim of the barrel, sluicing down with loud splash. He turns awkwardly, craning his neck to see Soolumn arraying a shaving kit of fine gold implements.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(eyebrows raised)

El above, you do not fit in that tub. Are you stuck?

ROSHIM

(bewildered)

No. I am not stuck.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(briskly)

Good. I thought you might be sheared before finishing your bath.

ROSHIM

(gruffly)

I did not realize my beard was so offensive.

Soolumn walks in front of him and runs his thumbs through his own fine flowing beard, tilting an eyebrow. In the lamplight, Roshim realizes Soolumn is quite well groomed, with fine attention to the shapes of his beard, eyebrows, and hairline.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(wryly)

It is offensive to me, a man of taste. But like my father, I am also a man of action, and I happen to be well-trained in matters hirsute. I see someone has been hacking at your beard and hair, no doubt with some sort of farming or cooking implement. I owe you an apology for my bad manners earlier, so allow me to restore you to dignity.

Roshim realizes Soolumn is attempting to be lighter, in the self-conscious way of young men. Roshim nods and Soolumn gestures him out of the tub. Reluctantly Roshim leaves the warm water, and is seated on a bench across from Soolumn. Soolumn does not offer him a towel to cover up, and Roshim finds the situation somewhat exciting when the young man leans in close, inspecting his beard. Soolumn's eyelashes are long and dark.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

I have never been this close to a beastman.
You are handsome, in an odd way. And quite
sturdy. Tell me; how does a man like you care
for his horns?

ROSHYM

Some of my people varnish and resin them. I
have-- not done so often, though my friends
have tried to encourage me.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Mmm. Varnish and wax, like a piece of
furniture! How amusing. They are a strong
feature. You ought to take care of them.
Now, then. Please be still.

His long brown hand reaches to take Roshim gently under the chin, and he lifts a golden comb in the other. Soolumn untangles what he can, then brings out the scissors and begins to trim. Roshim relaxes slowly, enjoying this closeness.

Their knees are touching, and the warm air from the outside feels good on his naked body. Roshim becomes aware of Soolumn glancing at him curiously.

After the trim, Soolumn oils his hands and applies it gently to Roshim's beard, hair, and face. His touch is quick, not tender, but as a sculptor molding clay.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

There. Quite an improvement. You look like a warrior in the old myths.

Suddenly Soolumn leans in and kisses Roshim on the mouth. Roshim leans forward immediately, letting Soolumn in. The kiss is passionate, quick. Soolumn draws back, pushing Roshim away with a hand on Roshim's chest. Soolumn is smiling.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Now you are as you should be. Come put on your robes. Join me and my father in the common area and let your companions bathe. I shall see about that wax for your horns.

Soolumn gathers his implements and leaves. Roshim is dazed and excited, but he calms himself and finishes his washing up. He oils himself, dons the wide loose white robes laid out for him, tying them about his waist with a vibrant cloth belt, and walks back to the tent proper.

Avalon, Ladulai, and the others are seated around the center

fire, laying on the great pillowy cushions. A wide platter of gravy and flatbread and another of fruit are before the visitors. Roshim seats himself next to Avalon, who turns to regard him with a smile.

One at a time his companions bathe and return in loose white robes, and they all eat their fill of fine curried meats, bread, and dried fruit. In the meanwhile Daveed and Soolumn ask many questions, and Roshim finds himself relaying nearly the whole of his journey, talking about Aphaelia and its grand library, the legacy of the archmasons, the glory of Carcosa, the starkness of Loraine, and the strangeness of the Sangriel. Avalon answers some questions also, while Ladulai is almost completely quiet. The mood is cheery, and Daveed is a pleasant host. He also shares news of the road, the great merchant caravan and the city of Ur. True to his word, the wine emerges and the mood becomes merrier. Jazeel and her children retire, but the fire continues to burn for awhile, as Daveed remains up with his guests, laughing and talking.

At last seeing their tired faces, Daveed rolls out great mattresses and they sprawl gratefully on the clean, warm cloth as he returns to rest of the family, sleeping behind the cloth divider on the floor like their guests. Roshim sees Soolumn looking at him, and dimly recalls something about waxing his horns, but he is very nearly asleep as soon as he lays down. In his dreams, he hears Avalon's flute, as if a long distance away, and Roshim rests well, assured of his companion's vigilance.

EXT. TENT BIN DAVEED MORNING

They rise late the next morning. Daveed and Soolumn have left to feed the animals and speak to other members of the caravan; Jazeel lays out a hasty breakfast, what leftovers remained from last night.

ROSHIM

Thank you. Have you our clothes?

JAZEEL

No. They were destroyed. The swamp ruined them. You shall wear what I give you until Ush-Kana.

When Daveed and Soolumn return, they find Roshim, Avalon, and Ladulai assisting in disassembling the great tent and preparing Daveed's wagon to leave with the servants of Daveed's household. The men are impressed by Roshim's hefting of the great cedar beams, and Roshim sees Soolumn watching him with a faint smile.

ROSHIM

(to Daveed)

Our thanks for your hospitality. My masonry skills may be no use to you, but we can lend our arms.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

You are worth three men at least! If my wife allows it, you may all come to Ush-Kana with me. It is a mere two days. My tent is better than than sleeping on the road.

Roshim glances to Avalon, and Ladulai. He sees the shrinking in Ladulai's one good eye. Avalon appears unconcerned.

ROSHIM

We shall come to the gates with you.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

Very good!

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

(smiling)

Very good.

After everyone has dispersed, Roshim waits a bit before he returns to Ladulai, who has changed into his white Sangriel robes and struggles under the weight of his pack. Roshim takes it from him and lifts it easily over one shoulder, and Ladulai mutters something of thanks, not meeting Roshim's eyes.

ROSHIM

(gently)

My friend. Tell me if I ought to steer us different. This is your journey.

LADULAI

(fretfully)

Oh, I suppose it is as it should be. As it should be. Oh, it is nothing, save my own weakness gripping my throat. I do not trust these people. I am-- I fear we will be robbed. I do not fear my brothers. I fear-- come closer.

Ladulai nestles against Roshim, so close his shoulder is flush to Roshim's chest, and the sound of Ladulai's harried breathing is loud. It is unnerving to be so close to that wet mouth and those bloodshot eyes, but Ladulai draws out his pendant from under his shirt and holds it between them, and Roshim sees that the pendant is new. It the symbol of the Sangriel, but pure silver, and as Ladulai turns it, oddly large in those thin nervous fingers. The polished silver is marked with thin symbols that Roshim does not recognize: the language of the Book of Silver.

LADULAI

(trembling)

This is the gift of the servant of God. This is my blessing, Lord Roshim. I am afraid it will be taken from me. Some fool may take this from me, not knowing it is a gift of God. Oh, what a worthless ruin of a thing I would be, to let this slip from my fingers! I have considered giving it to you, for safekeeping-- but it is my burden, not to be delivered by anyone else.

ROSHI

What is it?

LADULAI

It is a message. A dire message at that, from the Lord of Silver to the Lord of Firmament. None must deliver it save myself.

ROSHI

(nods)

I see. Stay close to me, then. I will protect you and your gift.

LADULAI

(hastily puts it away)

Speak nothing of it. Not even to the child of gold. None need know of this save you and me.

EXT. DAVEED'S GREAT WAGON MORNING

Daveed's wagon is a monstrous thing, like a ship on wheels. There are rows of great double-wheels nearly as tall as Roshim himself and two entire floors, with almost all the first floor taken by barrels of grain and herds of goats, and the second floor loaded with cloth, carpet, dried goods, and fine metalwork. It is hitched to a team of four dozen oxen, and the driver's carriage is a separate compartment, curtained and cushioned. There are nine other wagons in the caravan like Daveed's, but the detailing on Daveed's is more intricate and fine, and gradually Roshim realizes that the place of honor in this caravan is the rear, not the front, and that his host is a man of some importance.

The amount of cargo leaves little room for living space, so it is no wonder the family prefers the tent for sleeping. The wagon ceiling is so low that Roshim spends most of the journey outside on the top deck to save himself from being bent nearly double!

Avalon spends much of his time talking to Daveed, and the two of them speak endlessly of this and that. Daveed and Soolumn alternate steering the wagon, and Soolumn comes to sit with Roshim on the deck frequently. Though boastful and arrogant, Soolumn is intelligent and quick to smile, and Roshim finds these talks refreshing. Soolumn tells many stories of his own travels with his father and the ways of the road, and though Roshim does not believe all of what the young man says, he makes entertaining conversation.

Ladulai is silent and remains by Roshim's side most of the time. Roshim sees Ladulai praying silently, and sometimes hears a whisper of those prayers, in the Sangriel tongue.

That second night, after the tent is set up again and the gray hills of Ush-Kana loom close, Ladulai takes Roshim and Avalon outside down the road a short ways. The moon is rising, waxing clear and bright, and it lends Ladulai's fur a ghostly sheen.

LADULAI

(softly)

I have decided what I shall do. We shall disembark at Ush-Kana and I shall go to the Church of the Stars. They can deliver me unto the White City and you can return to Aphaelia. Once I am with the Church, I shall need no further protection.

Though Ladulai tries to hide it, Roshim still sees fear in his aspect. Avalon is silent.

ROSHIM

Are you certain? I thought you meant to journey all the way to the Eternal Sea, and cross to Celia Mons.

LADULAI

Yes, I meant to pass the city gates myself.
But I fear-- there are many things on such a
journey, things to turn me aside from my path.
I am grateful, so grateful to you, Roshim--
and Avalon. But I must account for my
weakness. We should part at Ush-Kana. The
Church will see me to the White City, I am
sure of that.

Roshim glances to Avalon, who still says nothing. Roshim
turns back to Ladulai, who gazes at him steadfastly.

ROSHI

If that is what you wish. But I would feel
better if we wait for you to tell us that you
are on your way to the White City. I would
stay in Ush-Kana until you tell me that all is
well.

LADULAI

Thank you. Yes, thank you, that is quite all
right. Perhaps Daveed knows a place you could
stay. There are not many beastmen this far
north. You may not be welcome everywhere.

AVALON

It makes no difference to me. I would like to
see the White City, but perhaps some other
time.

LADULAI

(horrified)

Oh, do not even wish to see it! Do not even dream it!

Avalon looks startled, but shrugs.

AVALON

I have my own duties, besides.

(to Roshim)

I must see you home before you become an old man!

They return to Daveed's tent, and that night there is but a brief vision. Roshim sees the flower-filled kingdom of Avalon, the white-stone house by the trickling stream with a pale smoke rising from its clay chimney, but as he sets down the path towards it the dream vanishes.

EXT. THE GATES OF USH-KANA AFTERNOON

The next day after packing the tent and assuming his place on the roof of the wagon, Roshim watches as the broad gates of Ush-Kana approach. First they are a dim pale line under the gray side of the mountain; then gradually he can make out the bastions, the blue tiled rooftops beyond the walls. By mid-afternoon they are clearly visible, long broad walls of rough white stone with towering arches. A narrow moat cuts in front of the south gate, and the heavy timbers of the bridge are as wide as an ordinary wagon! Before the gates are many travelers, who seem to file gradually through a smaller gate off to the side of the large south gate. The long spears of the gate guards glitter iridescent in the sun that peeks from behind the clouds over the fen.

The vast wagons of Daveed and his ilk slow down, maneuvering carefully along the large bridge and into the city, through the outer and inner wall into a vast courtyard. Roshim retreats into the wagon and sits with Avalon and Ladulai and the family in the forward deck, waiting patiently as the wagons line up with the great merchant docks.

At last, a great jolt shudders through the wagon. Shortly after, Soolumn pokes his head into the room and commands them to all exit before the city's merchants swarm the wagon. Soolumn leads them out of the dim interior of the wagon into the bright light and noise of the city. Roshim sees a large scaffolding being erected around the rear of the wagon, and many men unloading pallets of grain and herding livestock out

into nearby pens.

Daveed approaches, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. He looks at his great wagon, resting against the dock like a tired beast at the end of a journey, and gives an affectionate hug to Jazeel and Soolumn, then turns to Roshim with a broad smile.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

So pleased that you traveled with us, friends.
For travel binds all men together, does it
not? Our roads all continue separate, but
perhaps they shall join again. Me and my
family thank you for sharing this road with
us. Peace and blessings follow in your
footsteps! Come, children.

Daveed and Soolumn and Jazeel bow to them, and they bow back.

ROSHIM

Indeed, and we are grateful to you, Daveed bin
Kanesh. For all journeys are made easier by
other travelers. My people shall know your
name.

Daveed looks surprised, then pleased. He turns to his wife and remarks.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

Known from one end of the world to another!
Perhaps I shall roll my wagon into your
Aphaelia, should it fit through the gates, ha
ha!

ROSHIM

May I trouble you for one more thing? I do
not know the city; where is a good place to
stay for a few days while I await news from my
companion?

Soolumn immediately steps forward, and glances to his father
as he responds.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

There is an enclave of beastmen by the
northern gates, and hostels there. I warned
you that some may perceive you as a demon; I
did not lie. There are superstitions around
these parts, and you are sure to draw
attention. But if there is a place for men
like you to lay your heads it will be the
northern enclave. Do not linger out in the
city after nightfall, also. I do not fear for
you, Roshim, but for the drunkards you would
surely be forced to incapacitate.

DAVEED BIN KANESH

It is as my son says. And I am sorry to add that Ush-Kana is not a gentle place. I do not believe what people here say about beastmen, but not all are as noble and understanding as me, ha ha! I suggest you enter the inner city gate to the main avenue there! Be safe, friends. Farewell.

Daveed indicates a smaller gate alongside the docks with a half-raised portcullis. Roshim bows once more, and is surprised by a rough pat on the arm by Soolumn, who glances at him with a amused look that hides a trace of something else.

SOOLUMN BIN DAVEED

Next I host one of your kin, I shall have horn-wax on hand. Be well. Defend yourself as well as your companions. It was a pleasure to be your barber.

Roshim feels a warm flush in his skin, but Soolumn returns to his family and they walk away. The children wave to him and he waves back. Ladulai puts up his hood, and Avalon tucks his long hair into his cloak. The amusement in Avalon's eyes reminds Roshim of Soolumn.

AVALON

(softly)

I'm surprised you did not fuck him.

ROSIM

(startled)

What? Hush! Hush. Enough of that. Let us stretch our legs.

Roshim hefts his bag up, and the others follow suit as he leads them to the inner city gate. Ladulai and Avalon exchange a look.

EXT. USH-KANA MAIN AVENUE LATE AFTERNOON

The road beyond the merchant docks tilts steeply upward and wanders up the side of the mountain. The great streets of Ush-Kana are parallel to the curve of the mountain, for nothing solid could be built on the soft marshland below, and one street looks down upon another, so that from the crest of the first hill one can see blue-glazed rooftops and white streets all in neat rows descending to the walls at the base of the mountain.

Between the winding streets there are many stairs for pedestrians, but even Roshim quickly grows winded as they head north up the mountain. Atop the second hill they rest on the stoop of a shop, gazing out over the hazy marshlands below. It is almost dizzying, the verticality of Ush-Kana!

AVALON

(rubbing his calves)

What a wretched place to build a city! Though
I suppose one gets used to it. My poor legs.
I thought I was quite fit too, after all that
trudging through the marshes.

Roshim feels his huge legs bulging as he sweats, leaning back against his pack. He swallows some of the dregs of his canteen and offers the rest to a panting Ladulai.

ROSHIM

It could be worse. There is only one more hill to crest. Then I expect we shall see our destination. At least we are not ascending to the top of the mountain, merely working around it.

Tiredly they get to their feet and traverse the last hill, and as Roshim imagined, reach the height of the city. A great stone plaza with a nondescript monument greets them there, ringed by trees and greenery. Ush-Kana sprawls on all sides of them, vast and busy, though no noise reaches them.

They all sit heavily on the edge of the grass and rest again, looking out over the sunlit marsh behind them and the shadowy descent ahead. A terrible hazy heat has crept up, promising rain, making the sweat drip from Roshim's underarms and the travel pack leave great sweaty patches on his new robe. He wishes for a fountain.

LADULAI

(suddenly)

Look. The church, over there. The white pillar. Do you see it?

Roshim peers dimly out over the shadowy buildings, and sees a white pillar or spire rising to the west, gleaming above the roofs. He nods to Ladulai, who smiles tightly, twisting his hands together.

LADULAI

I do wish, I do wish, Lord Roshim-- that my homeward journey inspired the same feelings in me that you enjoy. Yet the fear that has gripped my heart so long is still at last. I look at the church and I feel naught but relief that it is so close.

Beneath his shirt, Roshim sees Ladulai's hand gripping his pendant.

LADULAI

(whispering to himself)

I shall be there by nightfall.

Roshim reaches out and puts a firm hand on Ladulai's shoulder, who starts, his one blue eye looking at Roshim fiercely before Ladulai's gaze drops.

LADULAI

I am fortunate to have met you. Th-thank you. I have rested enough. Rested enough. Let us finish this.

Avalon watches them both silently.

EXT. NORTHERN USH-KANA TWILIGHT

The descent down the mountainside is not as relaxing as Roshim had hoped. True, it was easier than the ascent, but steep steps and slopes punish his legs regardless. At last as evening comes, the streets level off, and Roshim is able to catch his breath and enjoy the brilliant mosaics of Ush-Kana. The great markets lie far behind them and the sun is hidden by the curve of the mountain and by evening clouds, leaving them in a cool and gentle darkness, broken by oil lamps and burning braziers, windows with lights inside, the inviting interiors of small shops and public houses. The threat of rain leaves the streets mostly empty, but the cozy babble of humanity from inside the buildings comforts Roshim.

They stop at one such public house and buy some warm wine, sitting outside to rest and drink on the narrow porch. The church, Ladulai assures them, is not much further, and Roshim sees one or two other demimen in the streets and feels a sense of relief. Surely the enclave is not far, Roshim thinks, resting his chin in one big hand, gazing aimlessly down the dim street, his pitcher of wine in his other hand. He is tired, but invigorated by the closeness of their goal. He stretches out, feeling the warmth of alcohol, the soothing sound of Avalon talking the finer points of alcohol to a quiet Ladulai.

A pair of well-dressed men walk around the corner with two guardsmen in tow, and Roshim is obliged to pull his feet in so as to make room for them to pass. Nonetheless one of the well-dressed men deliberately strikes Roshim's boot with his

walking stick. He looks Roshim in the eye and smiles.

MAN WITH STICK

Mind your boot, friend.

ROSHIM

You struck me for no reason.

MAN WITH STICK

Oh, I have my reasons. But they do not concern you.

Roshim sits up and rises. The rude man is taken back a bit as he sees Roshim's size, but looks about him at his guards and looks back to Roshim with more assurance. Before he can speak again, his bald companion claps his shoulder.

BALD MAN

Oh, is there reason for such animosity? Come; let us speak as men. An error on each side. One might act hastily and regret it! Mesim, you see, this man is a foreigner.

MAN WITH STICK

(with a sickly smile)

Ah, of course, a foreigner should not know how we do things in Ush-Kana. Forgive me; I thought I was chastising a fellow citizen.

Avalon and Ladulai rise and approach, and at the sight of

Ladulai, both men become solemn. Roshim cannot read all of the complex emotions on their faces, but they are suddenly a great deal less concerned with him.

LADULAI

(to Roshim)

Do these men trouble you?

ROSHIM

One struck my boot with his walking stick.

But it seems a careless mistake. That is all.

MESIM

Indeed, indeed, what with the dark and all,
and your size! A careless mistake on my part.
Thank you for understanding.

(peering at Ladulai)

Pardon my asking, sir. We are men of the
Church; I am Prefect Mesim, and this is
Sub-prefect Abed. I do not know you. Did you
just arrive?

Ladulai hesitates, then draws back his cowl. The two are aghast at his torn visage, but they hide their surprise awkwardly.

LADULAI

I am Ladulai. I arrived this morning at the
south gate with my companions after a long
journey. I am returning to the White City.

MESIM

I see. I see. Yes, I-- you must come to the church. There is one of your brothers there; you have just missed another leaving. This city is not safe to wander without protection.

Ladulai gestures to Roshim and Avalon.

MESIM

Ah. Of course. I meant the protection of the Church. We were not told to expect you. Please come with us. Your brother Elfindar will insist.

LADULAI

I shall come with you. Let my companions go.

Mesim looks surprised. He hesitates.

MESIM

You say these are your companions? If they accompanied you then Elfindar will wish to speak to them.

(to Roshim, Avalon)

Come; it is not far, and when he is done you may go about your business.

Ladulai looks at them helplessly. He looks as if he wishes to speak, but stays silent in front of the men.

Roshim nods briefly. Avalon presses his lips together and gives a quick nod. And so they depart for the church, Mesim in front and Abed bringing up the rear.

EXT. THE SOUTHERN CHURCH OF THE STARS NIGHTFALL

Roshim, Avalon, and Ladulai travel in silence with the four men. Mesim and Abed lead them, and the two guardsmen bring up the rear. They walk out from the narrow streets into a wider avenue, and along a canal, from which Roshim clearly sees the white pillar of the church. Soon they arrive to a wide staircase that leads from the canal to the doors of the church, and ascend. Two more men appear to open the doors, dressed in white robes with black cloaks.

The church facade is pure white, and the doors painted white also. Although many of the shapes that make up the face of the building are triangles, steep-sided and pointed, Roshim sees a fractal recursion to the pattern of triangles, a nested complexity that reminds him of Lucea's cowl. He pauses to examine the archway, and sees tiny triangles continue, so small they appear crystalline. He finds no marks, no evidence of craftsmanship in the stone of the church. Before he can wonder further, he is urged onward by Mesim, and reluctantly leaves the mystery behind.

The interior is less strange, decorated with familiar rich wood and painted plaster, though the exposed vaulted ceiling glitters with the promise of fractals. Despite the dimness, the white aesthetic permits light to spread into every corner, and the few lamps that light the narthex easily subdue the darkness.

The stairs continue up to an ornamental gate. Peering into

the sanctuary that lays beyond, Roshim can make out a great vaulted hall of pews, all white, and the impression of a great figure at the rear of the hall. Another oddity: the interior doors are extremely tall, and look oddly stretched. They look as if built to accommodate men twice as tall as the average.

MESIM

(to Ladulai)

It is no great church, no Sanctum Celia, but it serves its purpose, and rather well. Again, I do apologize for our lack of preparation-- it is not a requirement, of course, but we have grown used to children of the Allfather notifying us to expect them well in advance. Not that I blame you, of course, of course! You shall have my quarters until we can prepare a room for you. That is, if you plan on staying--

The two guards retire to sit by the door. A group of men dressed as sub-prefect Abed emerge from a side passage, talking animatedly until they see the strangers. Upon seeing Ladulai, they bow briefly and become silent.

MESIM

(loudly)

Good, good! You all; stow our guests traveling things, and see that nothing goes missing! Has anyone seen Elfindar?

ANOTHER MAN

We were just speaking with him. He has gone
to his study.

Roshim reluctantly hands his traveling bag and cloak to a ready pair of hands. He touches his robe, feeling the silver scroll in an interior pocket, and feels assured that at least that will remain on his person. Avalon and Ladulai also give up their bags. One or two curious glances are made in the direction of Avalon's fiery hair, but the center of attention does not stray far from Ladulai, who for his part seems very unsure about all this.

MESIM

You shall be given food and rest presently.
But let us meet Elfindar right away. He does
not enjoy being surprised and a delay will
only increase his displeasure.

They follow Mesim and Abed into the side passage, which circumvents the sanctuary and opens to a wide row of halls that appear to be lecture rooms. The ceilings are all high, as are the doors. The stone walls are not made of the same stuff as the church proper; they are ordinary polished granite and malachite. Roshim pauses to examine the masonry.

MESIM

(to Roshim)

Please proceed. We do not have time to tarry.

ROSHM

Sorry. I am curious about this building's construction.

MESIM

You will have opportunity to ask later, I am sure.

At the end of the dim hall is a wide double door with one door ajar, its arch as tall as two men. One of the sconces beside it is lit, and as they approach, a guardsman peers around the door at them. They are ushered through, and two more guards close the door behind them. These guards have filmy white veils across their faces, cowled heads, and bright silver swords. Roshim cannot tell where their eyes are looking beneath the veils.

The interior of the study is of the same build as the church. They pass a pillar and Roshim leans in close, fascinated. Strange triangular shapes repeat in a crystalline way, and the detail is so fine and sharp that Roshim imagines he could cut his hand if he runs it over the pillar. He looks around the rest of the room.

Wooden shelves laden with books separate the most of the space, and at one end is a burning fireplace flanked with benches and chairs. Mesim leads them there, peering between the rows of shelves as if searching for someone. Though the whiteness of the walls carries the light far, so many shelves leave much of the room dark.

MESIM

Ah. Please take seats here and rest. I will fetch him.

A pale light glows between some distant shelves, and Mesim sets off in that direction. Abed gestures towards the long padded benches by the fireplace, and they sit, waiting for Mesim. The two guards remain standing.

Roshim glances at Avalon, and sees a mix of curiosity and tension in those emerald eyes. Avalon tilts his head and shrugs slightly at Roshim.

Ladulai looks into the fire, and does not notice Roshim glance at him. His hands grip the bench, knuckles straining.

The pale light begins to move toward them, and a tingle goes up Roshim's spine. Again I feel the regard of the host, he thinks to himself, and it is no less disconcerting. Mesim appears in silhouette, and behind him, a white light moves into view from behind the shelves.

As Elfindar approaches, Roshim begins to understand what he sees. The shapes of Ladulai are there, but Elfindar stands two heads taller, taller than anyone Roshim has seen walking, and his white clothes blend with his white fur to create a seamless silhouette, flowing effortlessly from one to the other. The pale light comes from between his horns, glossy black and emerging from the soft curls of his pearlescent hair, with a point of cool light suspended between them, too bright to look

at directly. Roshim cannot see Elfindar's eyes. The light creates an ethereal glow on his fur, and Roshim winces, casting down his gaze. He does not see Avalon staring into Elfindar's light, unblinking.

After a moment, Roshim raises his eyes again. The light is gone, and Elfindar is seated on the bench across them, his long face inclined toward Ladulai, legs tucked beneath him. Elfindar's movements are gentle and slow, and he glows in the firelight like marble. Soft, pale eyes slide from one face to another, not deep blue as Ladulai's, but the whitest blue, with stark black pupils. Roshim would later write that those pale eyes did not reflect the warmth of the fire, but a cold and radiant starlight.

Mesim sits beside Abed and bows his head gently. Elfindar does not acknowledge him, but his glacial gaze slides between Ladulai and Avalon, pausing long, before looking at Roshim. Roshim looks up at Elfindar, attempting to meet that vast and silent gaze, but like the light that came before it, he cannot, and drops his eyes.

ELFINDAR

(softly)

Good evening. I am Elfindar, father of this church. How come you to me, brother?

Ladulai licks his lips, and sits forward. He fingers his Sangriel robe, and mutters to himself. Elfindar waits.

LADULAI

(loudly)

Good evening. I am Ladulai. I come to you with my companions, who shared the long and treacherous road with me from Mirah to Ush-Kana. I left the White City thirty years ago. Now I return with a plea for peace from the Sangriel on the Hali Mont.

Elfindar is silent. He gazes again at each in turn. This time, his gaze rests on Avalon, and he speaks to Ladulai without averting his eyes.

ELFINDAR

I do not know you. But I know of you. It was said to me that a feeble star yet flickered upon the mont. Why do you return to us now, on the eve of our Allfather's greatness? Why did you not return earlier?

LADULAI

The time was not yet ripe for my return.

Elfindar leans forward, slowly, and though his voice and manner does not change, Roshim is suddenly brought to mind of the way that a cat moves before it pounces.

ELFINDAR

It is not your place to decide that. How could it be? What could you do to serve Him? How would you know? You could not. You do not. Many creatures exist in this world, born without purpose. You have purpose, a purpose that was begotten as your life was begotten. Do you know your purpose?

LADULAI

(muttering)

Yes. I know my purpose.

Elfindar sits back. His piercing gaze returns to Ladulai. Avalon lets out a long quiet sigh.

ELFINDAR

(softly)

Why do you talk of peace at a time of war?

LADULAI

(loudly)

Because-- and surely the Allfather knows this-- the war will expose the White City at last, will expose Celia Mons. An open gate may be crossed in either direction, as God himself well knows. There will be many vectors of weakness, Elfindar. Do you deny this?

Ladulai's voice is weak, but as he speaks his confidence rises to an urgent crescendo, and Roshim looks at Ladulai in surprise. Elfindar is silent, and the contempt in his eyes subsides, replaced with wariness.

ELFINDAR

What of it? As you say, the Allfather knows this.

LADULAI

(leaning forward)

The Allfather knows what he is told by his counsel. He has not left the White City in an age. I must speak to him, as one who returns from the world, as one who has traveled from Carcosa to the Eternal Sea. I have sat with the Sangriel, and heard the words of the Conqueror God, seen the plans of those who will be set against the Allfather. Who among our brothers has done this save myself?

Elfindar leans back. Roshim sees a fury in those pale eyes, but fury tempered with cold calculation.

ELFINDAR

Enough. You will be sent to the White City, if only so I may be rid of you. Would you have arrived a week earlier, Gebriaha would have been prepared to deal with-- well, no matter.

(pauses, gathers his composure)

And who are these men with you?

LADULAI

This is Roshim, a child of Lornia Mons, what he calls Aphaelia. And Aphael, the child of gold. They traveled with me from Carcosa to the Sangriel's mont, and then here.

Elfindar blinks slowly. Then a slow smile pulls his lips apart, and the familiar grimacing recalls the same pained smile of Ladulai.

ELFINDAR

Oh. Shall they join you, then?

Ladulai hesitates, and looks to Roshim and Avalon as if seeking an answer that he does not have to give himself.

ROSHIM

(to Elfindar)

I would leave Ladulai with you, sir, and then return to my home. It has been a long journey.

Elfindar's smile does not falter, and he does not acknowledge Roshim. He eyes Avalon up and down.

ELFINDAR

(to Avalon)

I am one of the second generation. There were nine hundred of us; eight hundred now. There are now seven generations. I do not often meet a child of the blood of heaven who rises above my station. You-- I know of you, child of gold. How should I greet you? These are strange circumstances.

AVALON

Stranger and stranger! Greet me however you wish. I do not share your father's love of rank and station. Indeed I find little of value in any of the things he does, as you must know.

ELFINDAR

(mocking)

And I do not value the opinion of one who willfully discards power. I respect the blood of heaven, not you. A cracked vessel is thrown away! But you will permit me my fascination. Your light is quite dim. Have you anything left to give at all?

AVALON

Nothing to give to you, I'm afraid. Perhaps the first generation is talented enough to pull a little more from me. Or your Pale King. But you? Second generation is second rate, I expect.

Elfindar stops smiling, and his smooth flowing movements become jerky for a moment. Avalon has wounded him deeply.

ELFINDAR

(recovering his composure)

It matters not. You shall speak to them as well.

Elfindar gestures for his veiled guards, and they stand behind Avalon and Roshim at the ready. They do not draw weapons, but lay their hands upon the hilts. Four more veiled guards appear from the corners of the room.

ELFINDAR

There is more I would ask, if you are inclined to answer.

AVALON

I would be more inclined if you might give me and my companions a cup of water. We have traveled long today and talk is thirsty work.

Elfindar nods. A servant appears shortly with cups and

pours, and a cup is handed to each of the group. Elfindar's cup is crystal, as white as he is, and glitters in his hand. The other cups are lathed wood, painted white exteriors with rough interiors.

Avalon sips his water as if savoring a delicacy, and Elfindar watches his face with an imperceptible smile.

ELFINDAR

(leaning forward)

I too walk through the firmament, and travel
on my father's roads. You will not find it so
easy to leave without my consent.

AVALON

(leaning forward)

Oh, that! I must say, I had expected as much.
But look here, child of the stars-- a lesson
your own father failed to learn, I can teach
you: dignity carries the seeds of its own
defeat!

With that, Avalon flicks his wrist, and the the water from his cup sprays hard across Elfindar's face. Elfindar falls back in surprise, and a great pressure seems to relent as his attention is broken. Immediately there is a sound like thunder, and a yellow flash fills the room. Roshim feels unconsciousness break over him like a wave.

Roshim awakens moments later, sitting up heavily, then

helping up Ladulai. Elfindar is also struggling up with the help of two of his guards, and more guards are shouting at each other. There is commotion in the hall outside. Avalon's cup lies in a pool of water on the marble floor. He is gone.

Elfindar sits heavily back onto the couch. His distant gaze is now present, wrathful. He glares at the cup on the ground, and Roshim sees Elfindar's cup is broken to pieces. A servant kneels and cleans the spill, cleans up the shards.

Not daring to break the silence, Roshim and Ladulai wait. A veiled guard hurries through the door and attempts to speak quietly to Elfindar, but Roshim overhears clearly:

VEILED GUARD

He ran out the front door. Five men stood in his path; they were overcome with a soporific spell. None struck him.

ELFINDAR

Well, then. Lock all entrances. Allow no strangers to pass the threshold without my consent.

Elfindar looks at Ladulai and Roshim, his narrow lips drawn back in a half-smile, half-snarl. His feathery hair is standing, and he speaks with a growl.

ELFINDAR

(to Ladulai)

Should I have the authority, you would die for bringing such pestilence to the halls of our father. You shall go to Celia Mons in haste, and should your words fail to satisfy, then you shall return to my authority, and I tell you now: your death shall not be merciful.

Roshim and Ladulai are led to a small chamber in the rear of the church by a pair of veiled guards. The room is rough stone with a drain in the floor, with no windows and a pair of oil-soaked beds, and a bucket of tepid water in the corner. A single candle gutters in a plaster alcove. The chamber is not private; the door is merely iron bars, and the stone passage echoes with sounds of talking and footsteps. Shortly after arriving, they are rejoined by their traveling bags, dumped onto the floor without ceremony, and the door is locked.

Ladulai is strangely composed, almost relieved. He sits on one of the beds, and Roshim paces about, feeling the iron bars of the door, rummaging through his travel pack to make sure his hammer and journal are still there. Ladulai bows his head and fingers his pendant.

ROSHIM

(sitting heavily)

I suppose your brother does not expect us to escape. I could bend this door with my bare hands. It feels more like a warning.

LADULAI

No, no. No, there are more than iron bars to keep us here. The eyes of Elfindar shall not shut, and should you try to leave we would be struck down. What Aphael managed once will not happen twice.

ROSHIM

You do not seem overly concerned.

LADULAI

(gazing down)

I am not, I am not... I am only concerned for your sake, Lord Roshim. I feared this might happen, should you fall into the hands of the Church. I must go to the White City, after all, and I did not expect a gracious welcome. I am sorry that your journey brought you here.

Roshim fumes, and thinks of breaking down the door and leaving, flexing his big hands, brow furrowed. He reaches into his inner pocket and feels the silver scroll, calming himself.

ROSHIM

I suppose you did warn me. What a dreadful turn of luck.

Roshim sits on his bedding, and stretches out. The new robes given to him by Jazeel strain and pop stitches around his joints. He rubs his beard, smells the faint perfume of

Soolumn, and settles down to rest.

LADULAI

Do you suppose he will return?

Roshim does not reply. After a moment, Ladulai lays down as well. Roshim can hear Ladulai's soft, urgent prayers until he falls asleep.

EXT. THE DREAM OF THE KINGDOM OF AVALON MORNING

Immediately Roshim is pulled into the warm dream of Avalon, as if it was laying in wait below the current of his consciousness. The horn of the far off mountain is bright with a pale pink dawn, and the soft clouds roll briskly over the meadows of wildflowers. The still pond reflects the mountain and the moon beyond it, mirror surface barely stirred by the wind.

Roshim glances to and fro, but sees nobody. A trail of white smoke points him toward the trail that leads down beside the brook to Avalon's house, and he sets off.

Once again, he reaches the white stone house, and sees the arch of white roses above its threshold, and finds he cannot continue down the path, so he circles around to the garden where he took tea. He sits at the rough-hewn table and waits, but there is nothing save the singing of birds and the shimmer of the rising sun on the brook. Nobody comes to join him.

Impatient, Roshim rises again, and walks to the house. He approaches the threshold again, but before he can try to enter, he hears a voice singing.

Going around to the tea table, he sees a path through the garden, and follows it. His thighs brush the green leaves of beans on their poles, and ripening squash and tomatoes, and many plants he does not recognize. The rise of some tall crop blocks his view, but when he steps beyond it, he sees the brook

has joined with a larger river, a great issue from the far-off mountain, and in a rocky pool the water has collected, and there Avalon bathes, singing to himself.

Roshim stands there stupidly for a long moment. Avalon turns and sees him, and shakes out his long red hair. His lean body is glistening, carved with long fit lines as he leans back. He waves.

Roshim steps down to the water. He finds himself naked, and steps into the riverside pool with Avalon. Wordlessly, Roshim closes the distance between them, and though Avalon smiles and grins, Roshim stoically gathers the slim body in his arms and hugs him tightly. For a long, long time Roshim holds Avalon to himself, until the latter wriggles impatiently away and look at him, the gleeful mischief in those green eyes replaced with something more solemn and self-conscious.

AVALON

Come, come, you must have known I would not disappear.

ROSHIM

Where are you?

AVALON

Oh, someplace safe. Safer. Safe-ish. Worry about yourself! I do not envy your quartering.

ROSHI

We are going to be taken to the White City. I do not know our route, nor how soon. Elfindar seems in a hurry to be rid of Ladulai-- and me, I suppose.

AVALON

Well, I shall not leave you so easily. They shall not slip past me. I can see your light from far away.

ROSHI

Will you be able to follow us, even into the White City?

Avalon considers. He climbs out of the pool, upon a flat rock, and towels himself dry, then sits. The dawn plays in his hair. Roshim reaches out, and takes Avalon's hand.

AVALON

I do not know. I will try. You shall not get away so easily. Our dreams are bound tightly together, so tightly... I think you shall always find me here. The Lord of Firmament may strive to divide us, but I am the Lord of Dreams, and dreams do not know boundaries.

INT. THE CHURCH OF THE STARS CELL MORNING

The night is long and Roshim dreams many times before he wakes, long good dreams of his home and Balthius and Cristio and Rami and his people, and he awakens refreshed and fulfilled in manner that feels unsuitable for the dire situation. Ladulai notices his good humor and looks quizzical but asks nothing, and turns back to his prayers.

A pair of veiled guards return and unlock the cell wordlessly, and gesture them out. Roshim hefts the bags and follows their guide back to the church ward, an inner courtyard behind the church, where a carriage is awaiting them in the pale morning. Their bags are stowed on the top and they are prodded into the carriage and shackled facing each other. The carriage interior is comfortable, with padded seating and leather sides, but Roshim finds it a bit cramped, and is obliged to bend his neck or bump the ceiling with his horns.

Outside the carriage window Roshim sees a pale light reflected in Ladulai's glassy eyes, and hears Elfindar speak to the unseen driver and guardsman.

ELFINDAR

Do not tarry til you have delivered them to the city. Do not allow these men out of your sight. Should you meet Gebriaha on the road, all the better; you shall cede authority to him, and give him this letter of my instructions. Should you arrive at the White City, deliver the letter to whoever might receive you there.

Elfindar pauses, and Roshim feels that pale gaze on him, but cannot turn to meet it. Without a word to them, Elfindar leaves, and the carriage sets off.

EXT. THE NORTHERN GATE OF USH-KANA MORNING

The carriage trundles along the wooden streets of Ush-Kana and joins the queue of traffic leaving the great northern gates. Roshim did not see much of the carriage that bears him, but he can see the reactions of passers-by out the window: a mixture of cautious and curious faces turn to gawk at the carriage. The windows are laced and nothing can be made out of the occupants, but apparently the carriage itself is a source of interest.

At the northern gate, Roshim hears the driver speaking to the gate wardens, and the jostling and creaking of men climbing on and off the carriage. Abruptly the door is flung open, and an incurious official peers inside at Roshim and Ladulai, jotting something down and then slamming the door again.

Soon the carriage is moving again, and they pass beneath the great gates onto the highway heading north. Through the laced windows Roshim can see the countryside, lush fields of grass dotted with massive boulders replacing the rank fens. He settles back and tries to get comfortable. Ladulai blinks at him, his lips hanging doggedly open, and appears to be thinking of something to say, but closes his mouth and lays back.

For monotonous hours the countryside rolls past. Intermittently the road changes from mud to gravel to stone, and there is more rain, drizzling miserably over the green fields. Roshim's neck cramps from his bundling himself into the small space, and he leans against the door, blinking blearily at the gray scenery until he dozes. How he wishes for the dream fields of Avalon, or the comfort of Aphaelia! but he cannot sleep. He wonders where Avalon is, and if there is any possible way Avalon could keep pace with them.

At last the carriage stops, and the driver and guard step down from their seats. The guard raps on the door, opens it, and unshackles them. He is a tired-looking middle-aged man with a mustache.

GUARD

Piss break.

Roshim and Ladulai climb out, and they relieve themselves. Roshim has only a moment to stand and stretch and gaze at the wide gray sky before he is commanded back into the carriage. Ush-Kana is already some distance behind them.

ROSHIM

(to the guard)

How many days to the White City?

GUARD

Three days. Four in bad weather.

The journey continues. When they stop that night, Roshim is not allowed his journal, though he and Ladulai sleep unshackled. There are no other travelers on the road, and nowhere to run to. The moon blazes bright and clear over the damp moors. The driver smokes a great pipe from his perch on the carriage seat, and the tail of smoke in the moonlight reminds Roshim of Avalon.

As they bed down behind the carriage, Ladulai huddles in his cloak, and Roshim sees him shiver in the wind. He invites Ladulai to share his blanket, and Ladulai does so eagerly. Ladulai kisses and strokes Roshim's chest, long thin fingers picking apart the ties of Roshim's shirt and pants, and Roshim strokes the long curves of Ladulai's back, letting the warmth build, letting Ladulai fondle him erect and hold him between those thin legs, pushing and puffing at Ladulai's encouragement until at last he groans, filling Ladulai's pants with jets of semen. Roshim kisses and licks over the narrow snout, gripping Ladulai's neck tightly as he finishes inside Ladulai's clothes, and then takes the other's erection and finishes him as well. They fall asleep still holding each other.

That night, Roshim does not dream but briefly. He dreams he

wanders alone on the moors, listening but hearing nothing but the wind. For a brief time, he hears Avalon's flute in the distance, but the hiss of the grass drowns out the sound again.

At last he comes upon Ladulai, white and naked and laying in the grass, not scarred and torn but smooth and soft as Elfindar, with two beautiful blue eyes gazing back at him. His little pink cock is erect, and Roshim falls on him, kissing and licking over that tender body, and feels Ladulai respond with gasps and cries that arouse him further, writhing in his hands. Dimly Roshim feels himself orgasming, and he thrusts himself into that welcoming space, coming slowly awake as he grinds his hips flush to Ladulai's exposed ass, finishing inside his companion, orgasming for a third time that night as he feels the quivering squeeze of Ladulai's tight warmth around him.

LADULAI

(whimpering, writhing)

Oh, my Lord, my Lord... it was a dream, was
it not, my lord?

ROSHIM

(growling)

It was a good dream.

LADULAI

(sighing)

I am sorry, I did not mean to-- it was not a
trick on my part.

ROSHIM

I was not tricked. Such things happen, among friends. My, you are a mess.

LADULAI

I shall treasure it.

ROSHIM

(yawning)

Clean yourself up and sleep. We have a long, dull journey with uncertain end.

LADULAI

I am sorry, Roshim. I am sorry-- I find myself glad that you are with me.

Roshim does not reply. Ladulai turns to find Roshim is already asleep.

EXT. THE NORTHERN HIGHWAY

The journey continues, as does the scattered rain. Roshim broods and his mood darkens as the days of cramped boredom drag on. He finds his mind wandering less and less, the colorful memories of home and family replaced with a flat gray present and idleness of the mind. He desperately wishes for his journal. By contrast with Avalon, Ladulai does not carry conversation well, and often descends into babbling, and Roshim finds himself easily annoyed by his companion's harmless behavior. Ladulai senses this and becomes more withdrawn and nervous, which does not help matters.

The dreams of Avalon are infrequent and brief, and Roshim feels more and more alone. For so long Avalon has stood by my side, Roshim thinks to himself, and for so long I resented his presence until we came to a new understanding, and now I nearly ache for his company. Even in sleep now there is no comfort, for awake and asleep we were together. Now there is nothing.

At last the mustached guard declares the White City not far off, and that they will arrive tomorrow. Roshim sees a certain nervousness in his aspect, and the driver's as well. The two talk quietly to each other that night, and argue about some aspect of their passengers; the driver shakes Elfindar's letter, and then all is quiet.

EXT. DREAM OF THE KINGDOM OF AVALON EARLY MORNING

That night, there is but a brief dream. At first, a sensation of Avalon's slender hand stroking Roshim's own, and the soft lavender rose glow of the eternal dawn on his closed eyelids. Roshim realizes that they are laying beside each other in the soft dewy grasses and flowers by the still pool, and he opens his eyes, and stares up at the stars overhead. It seems right to continue to lay there, hands touching. At last Roshim speaks.

ROSHIM

I hope we see each other a final time.

AVALON

Oh, I do not intend for the Lord of Firmament to swallow you up, Roshim. Take heart! His kin showed me he is still the same: overconfident, overambitious, too trusting in his narrow strengths. Sodon may have been obsessed with strength, but the Pale King's obsessions make him blind to weakness. He may have made the roads, but I have walked many lifetimes upon them.

ROSHIM

So you travel behind us on the Lord's causeway?

AVALON

I travel with you, behind and ahead! They are strange roads, new to me, but built to travel vast distances between certain places. I believe these are the roads of the Pale King's army yet cloistered in his city. There is a road directly from Ush-Kana to the White City itself, and though I walk on my own two legs I can easily outpace your carriage. Such is the causeway.

ROSHIM

Show me, please.

The dream fades, and Roshim is standing with Avalon, on a great gray bridge of shimmering stone on spindly supports that rise out of a roiling fog, the impossibly thin pillars marching off into the darkness. Ahead, the strange piercing stars of the causeway seem to glare unveiled from heaven, and the grand staircases and towers spiral upwards in dark cutaways, lost in the sky. The vast bridge stretches before them, forward and back into the darkness, reflecting only the pale gleam of the stars.

ROSHIM

This is where you are now? It is a terrifying place to sleep.

AVALON

Yes, it is rather. There are many creatures, vast and marvelous and terrible, who travel in this space, and I am naked before them-- but what else can I do? Earlier I saw-- here, I shall show you.

Avalon gestures upwards, and Roshim looks up. From a black cloud, a great blue light breaks loose and speeds across the sky, shedding parts of itself as red flame. Its pale blue light illuminates the causeway for some distance, and stark shadows of odd structures flicker across the road as well. A horrible noise like a long breathless scream follows its course until it disappears over the horizon, and the echoes of its cry tremble for awhile before the darkness and silence resume.

ROSHIM

(shaken)

What was that thing?

AVALON

I do not know. It may have been cast down, or it may be an outsider from the deep heavens, or some thing that was fomented by the causeway. Even the Lords, powerful as they were, are limited by the forms they took in the world. There are no such limits here.

ROSHIM

Will you be all right?

AVALON

Oh, save your worry for yourself! I may not be much for fighting, but I am quite good at running away.

ROSIM

I suppose I have seen the evidence of that.

AVALON

Indeed you have. Now, then-- fortify yourself, and attend closely to your surroundings, like the scholar you are, and I will do my best to pluck you from the Pale King's grasp at the right moment! I wish I could do more, but-- who can say what lies on the road ahead?

EXT. THE GATES OF THE WHITE CITY AFTERNOON

Roshim begins to smell the ocean long before a shout from the driver alerts him that they are approaching the White City. The scent is not the warm familiarity of Aphaelia, but comforting nonetheless, and Roshim breathes in deeply. Ladulai begins to pray, cradling his pendant, and Roshim rests a hand on Ladulai's knee to comfort him.

Soon the crashing of the waves is audible over the wind, and the trundling of the carriage comes to a sudden halt. A horse neighs nervously. Roshim strains to look over his shoulder, but he cannot make out the reason for the stop; only the rocky splintered shore stretches before him, and high dry grasses rattle in the wind.

The door jerks open, and the mustached guard unshackles them and urges them out. Roshim stretches gratefully, turning to see the entire long dark shore of rocks, and the sea crashing beneath those craggy cliffs ahead of them. He cannot see the city, because a fog lays over the water.

Overlooking the cliff there is a white stone structure that glistens with a crystalline fleck that recalls the church in Ush-Kana. It looks decorative, too small to be a proper dwelling, and shines with the dim haze behind it. The road ends in an ungraceful mix of cobbles and mulch.

ROSHIM

What now? Where are we to go?

DRIVER

(to the guard)

That snake Gebriaha ought to have been here.

GUARD

(to Roshim, ignoring the driver)

We shall wait a moment. Get your bags.

They unload Roshim's and Ladulai's bags from the carriage and place them on the dirty road, then continue to wait. The wind howls, and the fog dances to and fro a bit on the horizon.

DRIVER

Well, we might as well have a bit to eat,
then. There's a place for a fire, over there,
out of the wind.

GUARD

You'll do no such thing. Be patient.

They are silent for awhile longer. Roshim retrieves their travel cloaks, and wraps his around himself, and Ladulai does the same. The wind is biting. Off on the horizon of the ocean, Roshim sees a sudden glint of light against the backdrop of black clouds, as if the sun is striking a white tower or wall. He starts walking towards the cliff to get a better look.

GUARD

(to Roshim)

Where are you going? Enough of that.

ROSHIM

I thought I saw the city.

GUARD

And so you did because that's where it is.
Stay where you are. The masters like to see
things exactly where they are expected to be.

ROSHIM

The masters?

GUARD

They call themselves that. "The masters of
earth", or some such. I don't know what their
proper name is. I don't enjoy dealing with
them, personally. But everyone here has to
bow their head to the masters or risk getting
it lopped off.

Suddenly Ladulai sighs anxiously. He straightens his
Sangriel robes, a bit dirtier from their journey but still
fair, and he preens his hair gently with his fingertips and
tucks his pendant away. He sees Roshim looking at him, and
smiles painfully. His glassy eye rolls.

LADULAI

They are coming.

Moments later, there is a flash from the structure on the cliff, and a splash. Two figures stand there, tall and white, their pale eyes narrowed in the wind. They look identical to Elfindar, save one has a long scar on his neck and the other a scar on his forehead. They seem to glow in the afternoon light as they walk down towards the carriage. On their backs they carry slender silver spears of tremendous length, twice as tall as themselves, and ornately embossed, holstered in a clever manner to the backs of their glossy armor.

GUARD

(loudly)

Hail, envoys of the White City.

They stop a few paces away, and stare down from their tremendous height. One extends his hand, and Roshim sees though their figures appear slim, the arms are corded with muscle. The guard places the letter from Elfindar in the hands of the master, who opens it and reads it silently, while the other stares at Ladulai. The driver calms the horses.

The master with the scar on his forehead finishes reading the letter and tucks it away in an inner pocket. At last, he glances at Roshim with the same pale eyes as Elfindar. It seems to Roshim that indeed, it is Elfindar again, with the same motions, the same gentle inclination of the head, the same calculating eyes. He purses his lips slightly, then turns back

to Ladulai.

GEBRIAHA

(to Ladulai)

Greetings, sixth brother Ladulai. I am fifth brother Gebriaha. You shall return with me to your proper place, yes? I see you come back to us from a dalliance with the fallen world. Second brother Elfindar complains vigorously, but his exposure to the fallen world has made him paranoid; he has forgotten the strength of his birthright. You did right to return, in my view. Come, then.

(glances at Roshim with curiosity)

Does this one return with us?

LADULAI

Greetings, fifth brother Gebriaha. This one is from Lorna Mons, child of his people there, reared by Aphael of gold. He has been my faithful companion since I left Carcosa. I would let him go and return to his people--should the Allfather not require him, of course.

GEBRIAHA

What? Don't be ridiculous. Well, I suppose he must come, then. It will not do to let ends unravel.

(to Roshim)

I am unfamiliar with your people except by reputation. What is your name and purpose?

ROSHIM

I am Roshim sed Jiro-Balthius. I am a scribe and stonemason at the great library of Aphaelia-- what you call Lorna Mons. I was sent by my people to discover the secrets of-- of our foundation's construction. I met Ladulai at Carcosa.

Gebriaha affects disinterest, but Roshim sees an intrigue kindled in him. The long face comes closer as Gebriaha bends toward him, pale eyes focusing on his face as if straining to see across a great distance.

GEBRIAHA

You bear a strange gift, Roshim sed Jiro-Balthius. Second brother Elfindar did not mention this, merely complained of Aphael's disappearance. What is this fire of yours? Is this the grace of Aphael?

ROSIM

No. This is the blessing of Oidecalla,
bestowed upon my departure of Carcosa.

Gebriaha freezes and stands back. Slowly, his smooth face
crumples into a terrifying rage, and his eyes blaze.

GEBRIAHA

(wrathful)

Mock me not, fallen man! Answer me
truthfully!

ROSIM

(bewildered)

I swear I speak truth!

GEBRIAHA

(to Ladulai)

What say you?

LADULAI

(cowering)

If Roshim says so, it is the truth, brother.
I did not bear witness.

Gebriaha calms down, and his face becomes smooth and serene.
He stares at Roshim silently for several moments, hackles
raised.

GEBRIAHA

If what you say is true, then this is some sign of the times. For that would mean the Lord of Gold has relinquished this world, and delivered his birthright unto fallen men, and diminished entire. But for what benefit? I do not see it.

ROSHIM

I told him what I told you. I asked him for the strength to complete my journey.

GEBRIAHA

Very well. Wait. I must think.

Gebriaha walks to the edge of the cliff and looks out over the water. He remains there for several minutes before he returns.

GEBRIAHA

This design of the Lord of Gold is too subtle for my mind. You must be taken before the Allfather. He will see what there is to see. Both of you: come!

Gebriaha pays the driver and guard, and the other master brings up the rear as Ladulai and Roshim walk up the cliff to the glittering white structure. As the carriage sets off, the sun emerges, and Roshim sees the center of the structure is a silver bath, full of water.

GEBRIAHA

(to Ladulai)

Does he know the Lord's roads?

ROSHIM

Yes, but briefly. Avalon-- Aphael showed me.

GEBRIAHA

Then kneel, and touch the water.

Roshim kneels and puts his hand in the cold water. The others do the same. Gebriaha stares at him.

There is a soft chime.

EXT. THE CAUSEWAY TO CELIA MONS

With a queasy jolt, Roshim yanks his hand back. He is kneeling on a shale beach, and the horrible piercing stars wheel overhead in a black sky. The water, the smell, the darkness of the causeway makes him shiver.

Roshim stands, drying his wet hand, and sees the others there in the dim light of the waves. Gebriaha waves his hand, and a dim point of light appears between his horns, and brightens painfully. The light seems small in the vast darkness around them, casting deep shadows.

Looking away from Gebriaha's light, Roshim sees not all is darkness. The shale beach gives way to a paved road that stretches far off, with tendrils of fog drifting over it-- but through the fog in the far distance something seems to shine.

Briefly, Roshim wonders if Avalon is nearby, and instinctively looks about for him-- but sees nobody but his three companions.

GEBRIAHA

The city is not far. You shall walk ahead of me, through the fog. When you reach the pool at the end of the road beneath the statue of the Allfather, kneel at it. Do not leave the path.

They walk in silence for some time down the road, Gebriaha's

light drifting overhead. The fog makes the stone damp, and the stars are muted behind it; in the distance, Roshim seems to hear strange sounds, and faint lights at times, but the shine he saw first does not waver, but grows brighter as they draw closer. Beneath them, Roshim hears the ever-present sound of water lapping at stone.

OTHER MASTER

(complaining)

The crossing is in need of maintenance.

GEBRIAHA

There is no need. The other roads must be built. This road will only need use a little while longer.

Beside Roshim, Ladulai mutters his prayers in the Sangriel tongue. Roshim touches Ladulai's shoulder to comfort him.

ROSHIM

Did you ever come this way before?

LADULAI

No. Not this road, it is new. I do not often use the roads. My father shapes them and remakes them often as he sees fit, as is his mandate, but-- it is easy to become lost here and it is never truly safe. I have heard him complain that there are other road-builders who trample upon his designs, who build labyrinths and odd things, who change his roads if he does not stay vigilant.

ROSHI

There is no map of the roads, then?

LADULAI

Ah, oh, certainly maps for the King's roads, but old maps cannot be trusted to be correct. In the last age, he planned routes across the world, to network all the cities of men with his roads-- but he has not spoken of that in a long time. The old routes might still exist, but they cannot be trusted. Crumbling, crumbling.

They continue to walk for nearly an hour, then the fog abruptly lifts, and Roshim sees a courtyard ringed by white pillars, with a pool in the middle and a great statue towering over it. The figure is Astheopithicus, and in his left hand there is a spear, and in his right hand a scroll inclined toward the pool. The scroll reads clearly:

THE BLOOD OF HEAVEN SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH

GEBRIAHA

Come. Kneel, and put your hand in the pool.

You shall see something few have seen.

Ladulai shudders, and puts his hand in the pool. Roshim pats him reassuringly, then puts his own hand in. The water is freezing cold, so cold it burns. Roshim squeezes his eyes shut, using all his willpower to avoid withdrawing his hand.

The chime sounds again.

INT. THE WHITE CITY, HALL OF ROADS

Suddenly, the water is warm. Roshim blinks, and realizes the darkness of the causeway is replaced by a pale warm light. He staggers to his feet, blinded by the light after so long in dimness. A long, smooth hand is laid on his shoulder to steady him.

GEBRIAHA

Come. Walk with me. Hebriaha has gone ahead to prepare our audience. The causeway saps the strength of lesser men, I am told. Your strength will come back to you shortly.

Roshim blinks rapidly and nods in assent. He looks about him, and sees a vast hall of well-lit pillars, and between each six pillars, a six-sided pool like the one he stands before. Above each pillar is a skylight, pierced through a thick stone ceiling many cubits deep. The stone itself is glossy white on the surface and carries the light itself, and glows like living flesh in the sunlight. The crystalline glint recalls the church of Ush-Kana, but this stone is overlaid with complex mosaics of dizzying pattern, iterating but never repeating. The size of the hall is disorienting, though it recalls some of the architecture of Aphaelia.

Tall figures walk between the pillars. They all look like Elfidar and Gebriaha, and though there are not many, Roshim is disconcerted by their stares. Many carry silver pitchers to refill the pools.

ROSHI

(to Ladulai)

What is this place?

Ladulai is standing head bowed, and says nothing. Gebriaha answers.

GEBRIAHA

This is the Hall of Roads, a nexus of the
causeway. Many roads lead here, including
yours. This is the true gate of the city.
Now come with me.

Dazed, Roshim walks beside Gebriaha, with Ladulai taking up the rear. Roshim can see Ladulai is fondling his pendant beneath his robe. They walk out of the vast hall, and Roshim marvels at the number of pools; he estimates nearly a thousand in that great chamber!

A sloping hall from one of the sides of the room brings them out onto the streets of Celia Mons, and true to its name, Roshim is nearly blinded by the vast white sides of buildings in full sunlight. The buildings cut sharply against the deep blue sky, their vastness and simple shapes and the pale blue shadows lending everything a sense of unreality. The streets too are white granite, but oddly there are few travelers upon their wide avenues, merely a few clusters of masters moving tightly together. Despite the grandeur, the city seems lifeless.

GEBRIAHA

Welcome to Celia Mons, the city of stars. Few
fallen men have walked these holy streets.
Leave little evidence of your own passing,
should you displease the Lord.

There are no stalls, no markets. Great fountains sparkle in the sunlight, and the light outlines the forms of statues that stand arrested: warring, thoughtful, imperious, all dignified, all perfect, every curl and line and muscle outlined with exhaustive attention to detail. Despite the rowdy array, mouths open in speech or song or shout, there is silence but for the trickling of the fountains.

They walk up the street and enter a main avenue, a broad two-laned affair that stretches from a grand needle-like tower in the center to the walls of the city. Roshim looks up to the spindly tower, and sees faint echoes of Aphaelia in the spiral. He immediately thinks to himself, that is the library, that is the center of this city of stars, not to raise all of man up from this earth, but to raise a few.

Gebriaha points to the tower, his chest puffed with pride.

GEBRIAHA

That is the grand tower, home of the Allfather and heart of the city. The city has grown outward according to his design outward from that first structure. As it is in heaven, so it is on earth.

ROSIM

(to Gebriaha)

The city is very quiet. Where are the people?

GEBRIAHA

They are attending to their business. Some are in education, or ministering their various enterprises, or maintaining civil services.

ROSIM

But it is so quiet. Where are the markets? I see no shops, no places of business.

GEBRIAHA

You see true. There are none because they are not required, for all citizens are delivered precisely what they need. There is no need for anyone to be about on the streets at this time. There is no need for shops or markets or other crude remnants of an ad-hoc community. All those things here are allocated and structured. In a few minutes, you shall see people about.

They begin walking up the avenue toward the tower. After about ten minutes, an unseen bell begins to sound, its deep resonance echoing off the stone.

Then it seemed as if all the doors to the street came open, and a great outpouring of masters walk into the street from

every direction, briskly moving to some other destination. The individuals of the crowd appeared identical, even down to their affect and clothing, all echoes of the King himself. The dizzying height and sameness of those white features makes Roshim uncomfortable, and he feels a hundred unfriendly pale eyes staring at him.

Gebriaha leads them off the street onto a raised plaza, where they stop and watch the traffic on the suddenly busy road.

GEBRIAHA

You see? The streets are used. Citizens are also clothed and fed in bulk at designated times. The administration manages all civil services. It is a more efficient use of resources. I am surprised the cities of the fallen world do not implement similar methods. Lornia Mons is not like this, is it?

ROSHIM

(cautiously)

Ah. No, it is not. It is more similar to-- to Ush-Kana. I imagine the homogeneity of the citizens has something to do with it.

GEBRIAHA

(carelessly)

Of course. A mixed-race city. Well, I understand Lornia Mons to be a dim reflection of this place; still somehow I imagined there would be more dignity, a more serious application of methods to sharpen its citizens-- yet I am not that familiar with the pitfalls of a mixed-race city despite my travels. You have now seen both cities, yes? I believe the results speak for themselves.

Roshim feels a very Avalon-like biting remark rise up his throat, and swallows it.

ROSHIM

(curtly)

Yes, I believe you are right.

Gebriaha nods. The citizenry disappear from the streets as rapidly as they appeared, and the totalizing silence again falls over the city.

EXT. THE TOWER OF CELIA MONS AFTERNOON

The three proceed to the tower, which is set atop a hill that overlooks the city. As they climb the hill, Roshim realizes he can see nothing but sky in all directions around them; nearly at the peak, he sees the White City is indeed on an island, and spots the distant shore they left behind by using the direction of the sun.

At the great arched doorway of the tower, an octet of guards approach them. Gebriaha confers with the guards briefly, then gestures Roshim and Ladulai onward. Roshim sees that the white stone of the tower is the same crystalline structure as that of the church of Ush-Kana, and it is a single piece, as the foundation of Aphaelia; Roshim begins to wonder if the same method to make the foundation was used to make the entire tower of Celia Mons.

The breeze from the sea gusts through the archway, and they walk through a drawn gate into the dim foyer and dimmer interior. Pale lamps glow, the same points of light that rest between the horns of the masters, and Roshim realizes that they are all moving to and fro-- the dim room is full of masters. Eyes regard him and Ladulai from all directions.

Gebriaha leads them to the center of the room, where there is a bit more light coming from the great hollow center of the tower. Up and up it goes in a dizzying spiral; Roshim leans back and stares, for the thin tower is entirely hollow, and he can see a circle of sky out the top of it.

At Gebriaha's insistence, they sit on a reading-couch, placing their bags at its foot. Gebriaha gestures around them, his proud gaze not leaving their faces.

GEBRIAHA

This is the great Library of the Earth, the tower of Celia Mons. It was here before the White City was raised, was cut off from the fallen world, since the very founding of the rebellion against the tyrant god. It carries forward the legacy of that rebellion.

Roshim nods. He looks at Ladulai, who has been quiet and withdrawn throughout the walk. Gebriaha notices Roshim's glance, and also looks to Ladulai, though Gebriaha's gaze has a mockery, a suppressed cruel glint.

ROSHIM

(to Ladulai)

Did you work at this Library?

Ladulai starts, as if deep in thoughts of his own. He blinks his watery eyes at Gebriaha and Roshim, but Gebriaha replies.

GEBRIAHA

My brother Ladulai worked wherever he was most suited. I expect he was not often in this sacred tower.

LADULAI

No. I worked-- I worked in the barracks. I worked with the midwives. One such as myself does not often have a defined role in the city. I have not stepped foot in the tower before today.

GEBRIAHA

(pointedly)

You see, one who scrubs floors and cleans up filth has not much business in a place like this. Ladulai is well suited to the tasks given him, for these things must be done by someone of the blood. The blood of the Allfather flows in him, weak and watery though it may be, and so he has been privileged to serve in this great city. Do I not speak true?

LADULAI

(bowing his head)

It is as you say, brother.

GEBRIAHA

There is value even for being a plaything for the children, or for the barracks. We all contribute here. We all serve our purpose as we are able.

Ladulai does not answer. Gebriaha looks at Roshim and

smiles conspiratorially, as if inviting Roshim to share in the cruelty.

GEBRIAHA

The weak serve the strong here, as they should. But we do not overindulge the weak. For how can a city built on weakness survive? Water with impurities causes sickness; so too the weak cause sickness in society if they are not rooted out. Strength is required to stand against the Tyrant, and in strength, we stand here, and serve our king.

Without waiting for a response, Gebriaha stands. He points up the spiraling tower, to the disc of blue sky at the top.

GEBRIAHA

The Allfather will meet you. His throne is at the peak of the tower. Come, now, climb! He will be eager to hear what you have to say.

As Roshim stoops to pick up his traveling bag, Gebriaha points to Ladulai's bag.

GEBRIAHA

You will carry my brother Ladulai's as well.

Roshim stoops and picks it up, hefting both bags across his shoulders. He stares at Gebriaha. Ladulai says nothing, head down. Gebriaha smiles coldly down at them.

GEBRIAHA

Now climb.

INT. STAIRS OF CELIA MONS DAY

The double stair of Celia Mons wraps around the interior wall of the hollow needle spire. It is wide, so that four men could walk abreast, and the base of the stair is mounted on the second floor of the library. The wall-side of the stair is a single continuous shelf, lined with books; the other side is open to the hollow center of the tower, and the effect is quite dizzying. A slim gilded rail is the only thing that prevents a terrible fall.

On each floor, an arched doorway leads into the tower wall, and Roshim realizes that there are rooms built into the tower--or grown, rather, for no tools could mark the stone so. The entire tower seems to be a crystalline structure, grown from the base, and as they ascend more and more of the fibrous lattice-like naked wall is revealed, as if the tower was still growing. Indeed, Roshim sees that the stair is cleverly mounted into the living crystal.

The climb is long and difficult. Roshim is out of breath after ten stories and Ladulai lags further behind him, but Gebriaha strides forward easily, disappearing up the stair. When Roshim ascends further, he finds Gebriaha waiting in a reading alcove, resting comfortably, a mocking smile on his face. As soon as Roshim comes to him, Gebriaha springs up and continues the ascent.

So they continue for hours, until Roshim cannot feel his legs, and Ladulai is wheezing. The sound of Ladulai's

breathing causes more and more irritation to Roshim, and eventually, he wheels around to confront Ladulai, but the other's haggard aspect makes him pause and hold his tongue.

When they reach another reading alcove with no Gebriaha in sight, Roshim throws the bags down and sits heavily on a reading couch. Ladulai sits beside him, clasping his hands together, foam on his lips. For about ten minutes, they just sit there, chests heaving.

Roshim rises, and looks over the banister. The floor of the tower is now a small disc below; he looks up, and the sky seems close. The translucent crystal lattice glows all around them, and the warm light suffuses every surface. Long windows in the side of the tower overlook the city, which is washed in the glow of sunset, and the sea shines beyond the white walls. It feels like the tower has indeed left the earth and pierces the heavens.

Gebriaha comes back down the stairs two at a time, accompanied by another master. His anger is swift and terrible, and before Roshim realizes his intent, Gebriaha strikes Ladulai across the face with the butt of his spear, knocking Ladulai off the couch and to the floor. Ladulai screams.

Roshim shouts, and steps forward. With a cool grace, Gebriaha pivots and smashes Roshim across the face with the butt of his spear in the same manner, and Roshim staggers. The force of the blow is tremendous, but Roshim grasps the bloody

butt of the spear, and holds it. Dazed, he feels it slip out of his grip, and then another tremendous blow is laid across his face. Again he staggers, but does not fall. Blood drips in his eyes. He spits and grasps blindly at the spear again.

GEBRIAHA

Enough. Enough! It would not please me to beat you to death. Do not interfere with another's punishment, Roshim of Lornia Mons. Be still.

Roshim stands still, chest heaving. He can hear Ladulai sniffing and moving about. He blinks. A wet cloth dabs his forehead. Roshim closes his eyes, then opens them to see Ladulai tending to him. Gebriaha watches in amusement.

LADULAI

Do not trouble yourself for me, Lord Roshim.

ROSHIM

Are you all right?

LADULAI

(muttering)

I have had worse. It does not matter.

GEBRIAHA

Drink this water.

The other master hands Ladulai a flask. Ladulai drinks,

then passes it to Roshim, who empties it. Roshim glares at Gebriaha.

GEBRIAHA

Now climb. Do not give yourself to weakness.

Wearily, Roshim shoulders the bags, and they begin up the stair again. This time, Gebriaha and the other master climb behind them, and urge them forward at a moderate pace. Roshim puts his head down and trudges up, no longer thinking or feeling anything but the feeling of one foot before the other.

After another half hour, they reach a landing. Gebriaha prods the bags on Roshim's back, and he lets them drop, stretching and looking around. The crystalline lattice of the tower is thinner, glassier, so that one can nearly see through the tower.

GEBRIAHA

We shall proceed through this hall, and at the north end, the Allfather waits. Clean yourself up.

Gebriaha begins rummaging through the two bags while the another master gestures toward a basin of water and washcloth. Roshim gingerly washes his face and neck, his sweat clearly visible through his robes, and so does Ladulai. They get another flask of water, then sit while Gebriaha finishes searching the bags.

Four more masters emerge from the inner hall, their white contours fiery in the setting sun. One of them spits at Ladulai as he passes. Ladulai does not react. The rage in Roshim builds until he catches Gebriaha's eye.

ROSHIM

(outraged)

Is this how you treat your brother?

Gebriaha laughs. Ladulai looks terrified and stares at the ground. Gebriaha reaches down and strokes Ladulai's neck with his long fingers.

GEBRIAHA

(gently)

I love my family, my brothers and my father.
Every day I work to realize our beautiful
dream together. Together we sharpen one
another, and tease out the strength of our
blood. To indulge weakness is to indulge our
death. I correct the weak aspect of my
brothers out of love.

Gebriaha tightens his fingers around Ladulai's neck, and pushes his head down. Ladulai makes a stifled cry, and Roshim starts. Gebriaha sees it and smiles.

GEBRIAHA

I love my brother, stranger. I do not even
like you. Remember that, and watch your
tongue. You have no authority here.

Gebriaha releases Ladulai, who stands. Roshim lets out his
breath, and tries to release the heat of his anger with it, and
holds the cold embers to himself.

INT. THE THRONE OF STARS

Roshim and Ladulai walk side by side through the curved hall
of the tower exterior, from south to north end. Gebriaha and a
handful of masters follow them.

The glassy walls of the tower are disconcerting, and the
height is dizzying. The curve of the earth falls away in all
directions, the city a white patchwork around the base of the
tower. Despite the time spent climbing the stairs, Roshim can
hardly believe how high they climbed.

At last, they reach the north end of the tower wall. The
crystal between the lattice is so transparent it looks like
water, with the sky behind. A great hall opens ahead, filled
with light, with glassy pillars and intricate detail on the
floor and walls, filled with masters kneeling in groups on the
floor. At the end of the hall is a massive crystal throne,
emerging whole from the floor, with a tall back that reaches
upward in similar aspect to the tower itself. A long red cloth
is draped over the throne, and a white figure reclines upon the

red fold, with a globe of light above his horned head, so bright that it outshines the sun.

Gebriaha urges them forward impatiently. The sweep of the King's regard passes over them, and Roshim feels faint. He stumbles as he approaches the throne with Ladulai, and ten paces from the raised base, Gebriaha pushes him down to kneel. Ladulai kneels beside Roshim. Gebriaha fades back, melting into an octet of masters who array themselves behind the two.

GEBRIAHA

(loudly)

Allfather. I present sixth brother Ladulai on behalf of second brother Elfindar of Ush-Kana. I read to you, in Elfindar's own words:
"...he has long enmeshed himself in the fallen world, and by his own report traveled as far as golden Carcosa, to meet with the sage... as well as taken counsel of the Sangriel atop the Hali mont... therefore in my own limited perspective, he may yet be of use to you..."

Roshim looks up to see the aspect of Astheopithicus, and sees not but white light for a moment before a pressure forces Roshim onto his hands, bowing his head again. A voice speaks, deep and soft, resonant with authority.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

And the other one?

GEBRIAHA

The fallen man is Roshim sed Jiro-Balthius of Lornia Mons, who accompanied brother Ladulai during his travels, according to his word. I would not have brought him before you, Allfather, save one thing: he bears with him some hint of the glory of gold, something that Elfindar did not notice. If it is some design of the Lord of Gold, I cannot see what, yet it is a strange thing to find.

The pressure relents, and Roshim looks up, slowly. The light is gone, and he can see the king clearly. The Pale King is taller than his children, yet the same face and features are here, sharp and serene, with pale, pale eyes, so pale they are almost white. Great white lashes flicker as he blinks, meeting Roshim's gaze with a contemptuous tilt of his head.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

Lornia Mons yet stands?

Roshim does not know who the king is speaking to, but a sharp toe to his backside prompts him to reply from his kneeling position.

ROSHIM

It does, and thrives.

Astheopithicus bends down, and stares at him. The penetrating gaze makes Roshim sweat, his palms clammy. He

cautiously raises himself up, to sit more comfortably.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

Then it has yet to fall, but it will fall.
The hand of the tyrant god is moving against
it. I have seen this, for he also moves
against me. Lornia Mons has no king to defend
it.

GEBRIAHA

I found a letter amongst the traveling
possessions of these men. It is a plea,
addressed to the archmasons of Lornia Mons.
It speaks of damage to the foundation of the
lesser tower.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

Show me.

Gebriaha approaches and offers Roshim's letter with a bow.
Astheopithicus unrolls the letter and glances at it, and
laughs. He drops it to the floor. Nobody moves to pick it up.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

As I said. The tyrant moves against your
people.

ROSHIM

I do not understand.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

You fool. For all your knowledge you have not wisdom. You are blind and stupid without the direction of the children of heaven. It is as I foresaw. War is coming. The second rebellion is ripe. The tyrant will never cede defeat; his lip is aquiver with righteous indignation. And the kingdom of Aphael stands unguarded!

Astheopithicus laughs again, and the masters around him also chuckle. Astheopithicus raises his long white hands in proclamation, and rises from his throne.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

Yet the tyrant's army lies nascent, slumbering yet in cold Hali, and the army of the stars is seven generations old. So, seed of Lornia Mons, rejoice in this: the children of the stars shall crush the tyrant once more, and your tower will be safe by my grace. Bow to me, blood of the earth, and show your gratitude! For you are the first of your people to see your new king.

From the multitude of masters there is a great cry as Astheopithicus rises, and they all shout together:

ALL

THE BLOOD OF HEAVEN SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH!

Beside Roshim, Ladulai shudders. Astheopithicus sits back on his throne, and the mockery in his eyes is clear. He dismisses Roshim, and looks at Ladulai.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

From my seat above the world, I see much.
Much more than the vile creature who sent you to me. As you left her den, my army assembled itself, and my roads were prepared for a multitude. The wheels of the war-chariots are greased, and the spears of my sons have been sharpened. There will be no peace with your god and his servants, my fool of a son. Indeed, his peace is a pretext for his preparation, and war would come eventually, for the dignity of the tyrant has been defiled such that only a sea of blood could purify it again. Since the beginning, I was not as naive as the others; once I fell, I swore I would not trust in another for my salvation. Since the rebellion, I have known the Stranger was a false hope. Verily I say again, as I have said so often: there are only those with power, and those without power.

LADULAI

(quavering)

I come-- I come on behalf of peace, to prevent the shedding of blood--

Astheopithicus's eyes flick behind them, and a master's spear butt strikes the back of Ladulai's head. Ladulai pitches face-first into the floor and lays unmoving.

Roshim shouts, and scrambles to Ladulai's side. Astheopithicus watches with mild curiosity, and raises a hand to ward off more blows.

Roshim lifts Ladulai's head, and sees Ladulai is still alive. Roshim blinks, and tears fall from his eyes. He bows his head over Ladulai, shielding Ladulai's body.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

Why do you weep for a fool?

Roshim does not reply. Suddenly a hand seizes his horn, and lifts his head, and he stares up at the King's face. Gebriaha has seized him.

GEBRIAHA

Answer the King.

ROSHIM

...I do not think he deserves such cruelty.

GEBRIAHA

Then kill him. For he is destined for such,
and he knows this. He is a worthless thing,
and he is not needed. Many malformed seed end
their lives properly, grateful for their
purpose. He fled, and rejected his allfather,
his king. What more should he expect?

Astheopithicus raises his hand at Gebriaha, and Gebriaha
stops speaking. Astheopithicus leans down over Roshim, his
white aspect like a towering statue.

ROSHIM

(angrily)

The health of the body is indicated by its
weakest member. He came to you, to help. I
believe that. If he is not welcome here, let
him leave with me.

The corner of Astheopithicus's mouth twitches in something
that might be a smile, though mockery or no, Roshim could not
tell. The angel stands tall, drawing his shoulders back, and
looks over Roshim and Ladulai to his multitude of children.

ASTHEOPITHICUS

(to all)

Your sixth brother Ladulai shall live to see the fall of the Sangriel, and the dawn of the third age of the earth. Take these two away, and separate them, but keep them close at hand so that they may bear witness to my triumph. Whatever designs the Lord of Gold and the Lord of Silver made do not matter, for I am the Lord of the Earth and Stars. I have spoken. Go.

Gebriaha and the masters force Roshim and Ladulai up, Ladulai dazed and bleeding from the mouth and nose, and they are nearly carried out of the throneroom. The reddish hue of the sunset makes all of the white coat of the masters as red as fresh blood.

Gebriaha directs them back down the tower stair, and they stumble wearily down. Several floors pass and two of the masters yank Ladulai off into a side chamber. Roshim has only a moment to see that wide blue eye looking at him, and then Ladulai is gone.

Another few floors, and Roshim is taken into the tower wall. Gebriaha shows him into a tall chamber, clearly meant to be a reading alcove, but converted into some kind of makeshift living space. The shelves in the room are empty of books.

GEBRIAHA

You shall stay here. Someone will be posted at the stair. Do not leave or you will be punished. I shall send for a waste chamber and a blanket.

Gebriaha pauses at the door, and turns to glance at Roshim. He hesitates a moment.

GEBRIAHA

You were quite foolish.

Gebriaha leaves, and Roshim sits heavily on the reading couch. His legs hurt, his back hurts, and he is shaking still from the encounter with the King and with exhaustion.

When a servant appears an hour later with a chamberpot and blankets, Roshim is already deep asleep, sprawled out on the reading couch.

EXT. THE DREAM OF AVALON

At first, Roshim's sleep is deep and dark, like the void of the causeway. Gradually, he begins to come to himself, and cast about for some purchase, but sees nothing but darkness.

ROSHIM

Avalon?

Roshim feels Avalon, but Avalon's regard is distant, not focused on him, so he begins to move toward that faint yellow light. Roshim slogs forward, feeling as if he is walking through the fenlands, or crawling on his knees through the irrigated rice fields of Aphaelia, or swimming deep in the bay of palms.

At last Roshim feels Avalon's regard shift toward him. Roshim reaches out blindly and feels strong slender hands grasp his own, then pull him forth.

Roshim emerges, splashing and sputtering, from the cold pool behind the vegetable garden where Avalon was last bathing. Though his eyes are blurred, Roshim sees Avalon is standing there in simple linen pants and an open shirt embroidered with white roses, his long sleeves soaked, smiling down at Roshim. Roshim sees another figure there further up the path, a long white shape. He blinks, and wipes his eyes as he staggers up, shaking water from his hair until he can see again.

The figure is Ladulai. But not Ladulai with his glassy eye

and wet nose and scars; Ladulai with a coat of pure brushed white, two piercing blue eyes, and a healthy pink flush of his ears and snout, and no scars. Ladulai is wearing the same clothes as Avalon. He looks worriedly at Roshim, and then at Avalon's smiling face, and then down at Roshim's nakedness.

AVALON

Come, come, we have all seen it before. I told you, child of the stars; I cannot keep him away from me for long! It has been a long time since I was alone in my sanctuary. But this is not a bad thing.

Avalon tosses Roshim a towel, and after Roshim dries himself, hands him a shirt and pants in the same fashion as his own. With Roshim dressed, they all walk up the path, and to Avalon's tea table. The dawn is well underway, and the white stone of the house is shining as the sun comes above the flower-strewn hill. The scent of lavender and chamomile is strong. Two cups are steaming on the table already; Avalon pours another and hands it to Roshim.

LADULAI

(dazed)

I do not understand. What is this place? I thought I had passed.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

How can he be here?

Avalon looks at Roshim, and then at Ladulai. He sips his tea.

AVALON

I am very, very surprised. Very surprised. I thought you a simple creature, O Ladulai. You have humbled us all. Indeed, let us say the world has been humbled.

Ladulai glances at Roshim, bows his head, and says nothing. His narrow shoulders tremble.

ROSHIM

(to Avalon)

Answer me, please.

Avalon raise a finger to his lips playfully, but his eyes are solemn. He lays his hand on Roshim's arm.

AVALON

Wait but a moment, and I shall answer. He cannot remain here long. But we are fortunate to meet him. It is almost enough to make one believe in the Stranger's grace. But there is little time. Firstly--

The dream shifts underfoot, and suddenly, the gold light of Carcosa shines around them. For a moment, Roshim sees the great temple of Carcos in its full glory, with steeples like flames in the sunrise, and a vast garden of every sort of plant

in rings around the mountain, bursting and crawling and growing with a desire to live, all the greatness and terror of life in full display. It is a young world, full of heat and passion.

And out of the center of that holy garden, a plant like no other before or since, its multitude of leaves as large as a man, burnt offerings at its roots, strange words in gold written on its vines. And from the plant, a bud with colors like living flame, blooming and unfurling to the songs of hundreds of pilgrims, beneath the amarantine gaze of the Lord, and from the center of the flower a child sits up, wrapped in its own long hair, and opens great green eyes to look at the sky.

Roshim and Ladulai find themselves suddenly there, sitting among the long petals, children themselves. Young Aphael smiles at them, and leans forward to take Ladulai's small hands in his own.

For a moment, Roshim sees a cold white room, and a young woman breathing weakly as she lies on a blood-streaked bed. She stares blankly at the ceiling, as if unable to believe her pain is finally passed. A trio of midwives stand around a bloody baby, silently washing its white fur in a porcelain basin. There is no sound but the crying of the infant. Elfindar-- no, some other master-- stands in the corner, waiting until the baby is washed, and then gesturing for it. A midwife hands him the infant, and he inspects it disdainfully.

And they are back in Carcosa. The child Aphael is crouched

naked next to a sun-dappled pool, singing in a husky voice, moving its hands through the water. Adamus, young and strong, is nearby under a great tree sewing a garment. Roshim is not surprised to see Adamus's hair is red also before its gradual descent into white.

Adamus begins to sing as well, a deep melody that causes Aphael to sit back and eventually lay in the grass, listening to his father's song. The gentle wind moves through the garden mountain, and the it seems as if the trees themselves sway with Adamus's song.

Roshim is reminded of his own father-- and then, the familiar sea scent of Aphaelia, and the working-song of the rice fields. They are young men now, brown and red and white, standing in the drained rice fields, part of a multitude. Balthius is there, no gray in his beard, horns long and shining as he teaches his children to scratch rice, how to turn over the soil and make it fertile again for the next year. Cristio's golden curls are tied back, and Roshim feels a deep joy at the familiar faces of his brothers and sisters. He shows young Aphael and young Ladulai how to use the child's till, and they work eagerly, half playing. Balthius and other adults work alongside them, and as the children grow restless, Balthius teaches a working song. The sound of all the voices bring tears to Roshim's eyes, and he stands there a moment, recalling this is a dream, but that such songs are still sung in Aphaelia.

At last, work is over, and the group of children file out of

the paddy and rush down the hill to the worker's house, where tables of food are prepared, the adults following more sedately. Roshim makes sure Ladulai and Avalon have enough and sits beside them. The sound of eating fills the hall, then childish voices speaking.

LADULAI

I am tired.

ROSHIM

That's all right! There is a place to lay down. We will not work again today until later. Come with me.

Roshim and Avalon and Ladulai leave the hall and walk back up the hill, and further up the mountain, away from the paddies, up to the meadows, and sit in the soft new grass. Ladulai sighs and lays down. Avalon smiles and lays a hand on Roshim's shoulder.

They gaze down the side of the mountain. The white tower of Aphaelia and the shining bay of palms glitter in the light, and the warm scent of the meadow brings back more memories to Roshim in a rush.

ROSHIM

Look! There is my home. Isn't it beautiful?

Roshim turns, but Ladulai is gone.

ROSHI

(to Avalon)

Where is he?

Avalon pauses, and twirls a blade of grass between his fingers. The wind plays in his hair.

AVALON

He is with his father.

ROSHI

Oh. Well-- listen then. I too had audience with the Pale King. He spoke of coming war with the Sangriel, and the tyrant god. He called it a second rebellion.

Roshim waits, but Avalon does not speak.

ROSHI

The Pale King also said this: that the kingdom of Aphael is unguarded. He spoke of Aphaelia, did he not?

Again Roshim waits, and again Avalon does not speak.

ROSHI

(angry)

Have you no answer for me?

Avalon sighs. He stands and dusts off his thighs, staring

out over the sea.

AVALON

"A king without a kingdom is not a king. The kingdom makes a man a king." Is that not what she said?

ROSHI

I did not expect to hear Lucea's words come out of your mouth. And I do not think she meant them in the way you imply.

AVALON

What do you think she meant?

ROSHI

I expect she meant that a king's kingdom is that which he has power over. I hear you say the same words, yet I know you mean the kingdom chooses its ruler.

AVALON

You know me well. I say when one is a king, all the world looks to be made of kingdoms. The Lord of Firmament will always consider Aphaelia my kingdom, whether or not I am enthroned. He does not understand any other way. On this, I agree with the Lord of Gold: it is better to accept power than to take it. And Aphaelia has never needed a ruler.

Avalon holds out his hand to Roshim, who takes it and rises beside him. They both gaze out over the dream-fields, and the white tower rising above the sea. Roshim looks at Avalon's face, and sees the pride of a parent.

ROSHIM

I would carve you a fine throne, should you ask it of ask me.

AVALON

Oh, enough! Do not speak a word of this to your fellows. Write it down if you must in your damn journal.

(hesitates)

But enough; I shall find you, soon. I am already in the White City. I see your light shining in the tower. Wait for me.

ROSHIM

(surprised)

Oh? You have found a secret way inside the city? Be careful. These kin of the stars are violent and strong. I am locked in a makeshift prison, as is Ladulai.

AVALON

(gently)

The way is simpler than you imagine. Wait for me.

INT. THE READING ROOM PRISON TWILIGHT

The dream dissolves, and Roshim wakes with a start. He sits up on the reading couch, which protests under his weight, and rubs his sore legs. The room is dim, with its glassy walls and windows gloaming. It is very quiet.

Roshim moves the chamberpot to the corner, and folds the blanket and puts it on the couch. He hesitates, then looks around the doorframe. The room is nestled back some ways from the exit to the stair, but he sees the arch of the exit. Nobody is there to prevent his leaving. Again he notices the utter silence.

Roshim steps out of the room. It is very dim away from the windows, and no lamps are lit. He moves carefully toward the exit, seeing the light from the hollow center of the tower. Reflexively, he feels the silver scroll in his pocket, unnerved, but keeps walking and listening.

As he nears the arch of the exit, Roshim trods on something and stumbles. He catches himself on the wall, then inspects the obstacle. He draws in a horrified breath as he realizes it is a long lean arm. The flesh is cold. In the dark, Roshim feels along the arm and chest, up to the snout and face of the fallen master. There is no breath. The man is dead.

Roshim rises and makes his way out to the stair. There, the light of the rising moon shines down through the center of the tower, lighting up parts of the winding stair and landings, but

much of the interior is cast in harsh shadow. There are no lights and no sounds save the moaning of the wind. Roshim's horror mounts.

ROSHIM

Ladulai.

Roshim begins moving up the stair, trying to recall where Ladulai left him. He finds more bodies on the stair, clad in armor. He tries each entrance into the wall, but the darkness and unfamiliar place leave him uncertain that he has searched thoroughly.

At last he stops, close to panic, and forces himself to rest at the rail, and looks up at the sky. The twilight disc is fading; stars are coming out, and the bright moon is slipping beyond the edge of his vision. Soon the tower will be entirely dark.

Just as he is about to leave and continue searching while the scant light lasts, he looks down, and sees a yellow light moving up the stair. It dances up the spiral, moving very quickly.

ROSHIM

(shouts)

Avalon!!

The light stops, and Avalon gives a long piercing whistle in response, then continues moving. Roshim sits in a reading

alcove, and waits.

A handful of minutes later, Roshim sees the yellow light sweep around the curve of the far stair. Avalon is bouncing on his toes, leaping his way tirelessly up the staircase, and around his waist his yellow sash is glowing brightly. His hair is braided loosely, and his torso is naked, gleaming with sweat.

ROSHIM

Here!

AVALON

Yes, yes, here I am.

Roshim reaches out, and Avalon flings himself into Roshim's arms, and they embrace tightly. Roshim hesitates, then kisses Avalon on the mouth. He realizes he is shaking. Avalon kisses him back firmly, then pats his shoulders. Roshim sets Avalon back down on his feet.

AVALON

Now, calm down. You big lamb! It was not even a week and I was with you the whole time.

ROSHIM

Oh, not just that. This! This death. Are they all dead??

Avalon nods. In the yellow light, Roshim sees the stark

features of another dead master, laying not but a few paces from where he had been sitting.

AVALON

The streets are full of corpses. I saw no living kin of the Pale King.

ROSHIM

What then of Ladulai? Why did he come to you?

Avalon gestures up the stairway, and they begin walking.

AVALON

His light is gone. But it was at the top of this tower. He has perished with the rest. It was certainly his intention. We saw him for a little while as he slipped away, in the space of dreams before death.

ROSHIM

(horrified)

Did he speak of this to you? How did this happen?

AVALON

No, he said nothing. I suspected nothing. This must have been his intention-- or the Lord of Silver's. Or the tyrant's, I suppose.

Avalon falls silent. Roshim cannot move the way Avalon did

up the stairs, but they make haste, and soon arrive at the top landing, and hurry toward the crystal throne room, stepping over the bodies that block their path.

The crystal throne is still there, magnificent in the fading twilight with its draped cloth, and the moonlight still penetrates the glassy crystal to fill the room with light. The king is there, on his throne, and the courtiers' bodies are piled up where they fell, and almost seem to wait for their king to speak. But the king's head is fallen into his chest, and his voice is forever silenced.

At the king's feet, Ladulai kneels, with his head in his father's lap. Roshim approaches, and when he sees Ladulai is dead, he falls to his knees and weeps.

Avalon sees Ladulai's left hand is clasping his pendant, now broken in two in his final convulsions. The silver pendant is hollow; a slip of paper is nestled within, dusted with black powder. Avalon steps around Roshim, and delicately plucks the paper free and unrolls it, and looks at it in the yellow light.

Roshim rises and dries his face on his sleeve, and looks to Avalon.

ROSHIM

What is it?

AVALON

(disdainfully)

Some curse of the conqueror god, the germ of
Ladulai's kin-killer. In the tongue of the
Sangriel, I suppose. I have no interest in
whatever brought the angel of death here.

Avalon makes as if to toss it away, and a bright yellow
flash consumes the paper, and ash falls to the floor.

AVALON

So passes Ladulai, child of the stars. Lowest
of his kin, yet now all lie equal in death.
In truth, the Pale King had what he intended.
All shared the same strengths and same
weaknesses.

ROSHIM

(staring at the body)

I wish he had come with me. Perhaps he would
have found peace. Aphaelia would not have
treated him the way his brothers and the
Sangriel did. Perhaps he would have healed,
in time.

Avalon lays a hand on Roshim's shoulder.

AVALON

I believe he found a good brother in you,
nonetheless. Who could say what might have
been?

Roshim gathers Ladulai in his arms and Avalon carries
Roshim's traveling bags, and they leave the tower of Celia
Mons, and bury Ladulai at the southern end of the lawn of the
great tower, overlooking the far off shore. The dawn is
breaking as Roshim finishes the small grave. He uproots a
pavement stone to stand on the spot, and takes his hammer to
the stone and scratches out the following in fine lettering:

HERE LIES THE BODY OF LADULAI,

FRIEND OF ROSHIM SED JIRA-BALTHIUS OF APHAELIA,

SERVANT OF THE SANGRIEL,

CHILD OF THE STARS,

BRINGER OF DEATH TO THE LORD OF FIRMAMENT ASTHEOPITHICUS ALONG
WITH ALL HIS KIN

As the sun rises, a great fog seems to rise with it, and the city is shrouded. Roshim and Avalon walk down the silent streets, and observe the bodies in light of day, contorted in pain or shock, their sightless eyes staring up at the sky, and Roshim is reminded of the silent throng of statues he saw upon entering the city.

ROSHIM

What does this mean, then? They cannot all have died. Perhaps some outside of the city yet live.

AVALON

I imagine so. But the army the Lord boasted to you of, his grand plans; that is surely all in ruins. I can see there is no life here. Indeed, I feel we ought to leave immediately. There is a strange sinking feeling in my gut, as if the White City is about to break away and float off into the firmament without its King to hold it in proximity to the world. Astheopithicus certainly put no thought into what this place would be without him.

ROSHIM

Let us make our way back to the shore, anyway. My head is all pieces, and I cannot think. Then we can speak of what to do next after a bit of rest.

They arrive at the Hall of Roads, and Avalon leads Roshim through the dizzying array of pools, until he stops at one with his traveling bag leaning up on one of the pillars. They kneel and put their hands into the pool.

EXT. THE CAUSEWAY ENTRANCE STATUE

Roshim feels Avalon's journey into the causeway is a bit rougher than Gebriaha's, but he is so glad to feel the cold bite of the water in the causeway that he does not mind. They shoulder their packs and stand. Avalon glances at the foreboding statue of Astheopithicus and its plaque, but Roshim is already moving.

ROSHIM

Let us not linger!

AVALON

Are you certain your legs can take it? You look uncharacteristically wobbly, my friend.

ROSHIM

I have enough strength left to reach the shore. Then I shall sleep! And what a sleep. I wish to never see another stair.

Roshim and Avalon walk down the foggy darkness of the bridge. Roshim hesitates at the darkness, but Avalon undoes his belt, and throws it before them. It seems to come alive, swimming through the air like a serpent in water, and radiates

a yellow light. So they follow it for a time, trudging along the shimmering gray stone of the bridge rising out of the fog, the cold of the causeway causing Roshim's breath to show, and the hypnotic wandering of the yellow belt before him makes him feel as if he is yet dreaming.

Suddenly, the yellow light goes out. Avalon snaps his hand, and the belt wraps around his forearm.

ROSHIM

(startled)

What?

AVALON

(peering ahead)

There is someone on the bridge. I do not-- it is a multitude.

ROSHIM

The army of the stars?

Holding still, the two listen. Faintly in the distance, there is a sound-- no, not a sound, a song. A hymn. The bridge trembles faintly.

AVALON

No, not that. It is-- can you see? It is Sangriel. Can you see the light?

Roshim squints into the darkness, but sees nothing.

AVALON

(shocked)

It is no army. I see the light of Laurientus.
It is but a small host. Ah, she stands before
them! They must have-- ah, she too, she too
moves through the causeway, despite--

Avalon reels. He turns to Roshim, and grasps his arm.

AVALON

(urgently)

Roshim, listen to me. I do not think we are
pursued; I believe Laurientus has come, or *she*
has, to sanctify this ruin to the conqueror,
as an offering. But I do not believe this
will be the last offering. I believe the
conqueror demands that both towers are
destroyed.

(points down the bridge)

She moves through the causeway like a child of
heaven. She moves at the head of a host. I
tell you now, I see clearly: she has the
power to build a road from Hali to Aphaelia,
and she will lead the Sangriel to Aphaelia to
destroy it.

ROSHIM

...I do not see any reason to doubt it. I
suppose-- did Ladulai know? He did not say.

AVALON

It matters not. What a fool I was, for not unraveling this mystery earlier--! Listen, listen, they are approaching. You must decide. I say we must go back, go back to the White City, and leave by a different route. The Sangriel now watch the causeway. I do not think Lucea will allow us to return, should she know we entered the White City and witnessed the its death.

Horrificed, Roshim takes the silver scroll out of his inner pocket, and makes to throw it out over the edge of the bridge. Avalon seizes his hand.

AVALON

Later. Later! Not here. We must leave nothing. Now; do you trust me?

Roshim tucks the silver scroll back into his pocket, breathing heavily.

ROSHIM

Of course I trust you.

AVALON

Then follow me. We shall go back, and find another road out of here.

ROSHIM

She shall see Ladulai's grave. She will know
we were here.

AVALON

It cannot be helped. We must move quickly. I
have long navigated the strange windings of
the causeway; how I wish I had come this far
north before! But the King's roads are many.
I expect we shall have plenty to choose from.
Let us hope I choose correctly. Now let us
go! The host approaches.

Hiking up their bags, the two trot back the way they came,
and soon reach the entryway pool. With the faint hymn in their
ears, they thrust their hands into the icy water.

INT. THE HALL OF ROADS MORNING

Roshim stumbles as he draws back from the pool, surrounded
again by the thicket of pillars in the hall. Avalon is already
moving, running to and fro, dipping his hand into one pool
after another. The empty hall echoes with the patter of his
feet as he seems to search for the right pool.

ROSHIM

What are you searching for--? Nevermind.
Nevermind.

As Avalon darts about, Roshim draws out his hammer and

chisel, and feels their heft. He walks some distance behind Avalon, looking back at the pool they emerged from. I suppose I must fight, Roshim thinks dully. The thought wearies him.

AVALON

(urgently)

Lambkin!

Roshim turns. Avalon is holding his hand in a pool. Hurriedly Roshim lumbers over, stowing his hammer in his belt. He puts his hand in the warm water.

EXT. LOST CAUSEWAY ROAD

Roshim's feet grit on wet shale as he stands. The chill and dark of the causeway has returned. He dries off his hand, and looks around. They are on a shallow beach, at the foot of a broken pillar. The stars are dim, and the water shines blue where it laps at the shoreline, lighting their feet.

AVALON

Come! Beside me, now.

The yellow light returns, and the belt-snake ripples above Roshim's head. Avalon is stepping away from the shore, and Roshim follows behind, careful not to slip. He glances around, and sees many more broken pillars, the wreckage of some great structure not just in front but all around them.

Avalon's yellow light shoots upward, and shows the bones of

some great bridge, a tower, a winding stair with no top, and a strange buttress. It is as if an entire city was overturned carelessly, and its detritus strewn violently about. Yet above the jumbled mass, pillars rise to support long roads, and the light shows the underside of those, yet with no way to reach.

Suddenly, the light shows a glimpse of a stair, broken and riven, yet precariously spiraling up to the roads above. Avalon sighs with relief and begins to pick his way through the watery ruin towards the stair with Roshim close behind.

AVALON

Come! Come along. I am no road-builder, but with any luck we shall not need to lay so obvious a path for someone to follow. The eye of the tyrant is blind here in the causeway; it is rather a relief to leave his sky behind for the moment. If the tyrant does indeed speak to Lucea, then she shall know when we have emerged from behind the Lord's moat of firmament, unless you are set on only traveling at night.

ROSHIM

If the tyrant tells her what he sees, then she must know I was taken to the White City. Perhaps some of the Sangriel lay in wait, or march yet on Aphaelia. Perhaps the roads have already been laid.

AVALON

I do not think so. The Lord of Firmament guarded his domain jealously, and I do not think he would allow such roads to be built without his consent. Such an act would have caused immediate destruction of the Sangriel. Their army must need time to mature. We may have half a year before the roads are laid between Hali and Aphaelia, before the Sangriel begin their march, when Lucea knows she has failed: not once, but twice. Hah!
(holding up his hands)

First, the tyrant struck the foundation himself, and failed; second, Lucea would have you do to Aphaelia what Laurientus did to the White City, but that shall not happen now that we know of it. So she will try a third time with the Sangriel!

ROSHIM

We have been thirteen months on our journey. Do you think we can return to Aphaelia in time to prepare a defense? It will not be long before Lucea realizes we have slipped past.

AVALON

Oh, we have taken a rather long and winding route to get here! Straight as an arrow is shot we shall return. Come! I have spent many lifetimes on the roads. The Sangriel shall not outpace us once we are past this blasted pale moat of the king.

At last they stand before the winding stair, out of breath. Roshim eyes the dizzying, precarious spiral with skepticism. Avalon leaps lightly onto the stair, and turns to him expectantly. The yellow belt wraps itself around his shoulders, and his hair glows in a halo of gold. For a moment, Roshim cannot speak.

ROSHIM

(recovering)

Let us travel together again.

Avalon smiles and reaches down to Roshim. Roshim steps onto the stair and grasps Avalon's hand.

THE END