

Alan Edward

the FIRE-WORSHIPPER



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As if the evil Loki himself were at his heels, the boy raced through the old town's tangle of narrow lanes and down its tumble of steep alleys, his sandals pounding the uneven cobbles, the icy air hurting in his chest, his breath coming in rapid, painful gulps. Already the twelve bells of the Fane had ceased pealing, and Great Edwyn swung alone, making the air, the houses, and even the ground shake with his thunder. The boy quickened his pace; snow-feathers were beginning to tumble all around him again, and last night's fall was already hard-packed on the pavements, making the boy skid sometimes on corners, making him whirl his arms extravagantly to keep balance.

In the town square he slowed, drawing long, deeper breaths. His cloak was of lined brown cotton in double thickness and tightly belted, but now the icy air struck sharply on his bare legs; he paused by a workmen's brazier, going as close as he dared, until his skin burned and tingled. Bending, rubbing, he lifted each foot in turn, wiggling his toes in the shimmering heat from the coals as sensation gradually returned.

He couldn't run any more. And, anyway, he still had several minutes. He walked now, slowly, looking through the windows of the shops and houses. Most shop windows were richly decorated with holly, mistletoe and candles, and in the houses he could see cards, paper-chains, lanterns and, always, the tree in the corner hung with lights, colored balls, ribbons and tinsel. Some people were at supper, some playing games, many clustered round their TV's watching the comedy or variety shows popular at this time of the year. Tinny, canned music and laughter penetrated a hundred windows.

He lingered for a moment, moving off again reluctantly into a darker part of the town, scuffling his feet along the dried snow by the side of the pavement. But soon he could glimpse the vast bulk of the Fane's triple towers, the oldest and tallest towers in the land, their uppermost pinnacles now beginning to vanish into the darkness and the thickening snow.

He crossed the close, tonight hung everywhere with colored lamps, to the South Door. He could see other Songboys arriving. Some came by bike, some were driven by their parents, some walked or, more usually, ran. The boy caught up with his friend Chad, thirteen years old like himself, head bent over a pocket video-game. Chad looked up.

"Oh hi, Alric. See what I got! I can get to Level Three now – almost."

Alric looked over the other boy's shoulder; Chad held the game, with its flickering screen, half-way inside his cloak as protection from the whirling snowflakes.

"You got to kill that big Norn with the club," said Alric. "It's not easy, but there's a trick. Sit beside me when we go in? Geirrod won't notice."

"Yes, but Otte will." Chad pressed a few buttons, the machine squawked, and he sighed. "Lost it."

"Don't worry about Otte," said Alric airily. "Segundos don't count. Now *come* on, slow-joe!"

The pair scampered through the vast archway and down the stone steps to the crypt; there, with the other Song-boys, they changed rapidly for the service. Leaving off their outdoor clothes, they wriggled into white ankle-length albs, each with a short scarlet cape at the shoulders and a linen rope at the waist. The boys chattered excitedly. It was just over a month now to Lupercalia, when there would be games, competitions and an enormous feast – roast ox, venison, frumenty cakes and ale, as much as they could eat and drink. What was more – they, the Songboys of Durnovaria, had again been chosen to sing and dance at the revels, and they would be very well paid, especially Ran, who was to dance the solo. Ran had

worked out, he said, that he would have enough to buy *three* new games for his Masterdrive.

"Which games you going to get?" asked Ori.

"Dunno. The new Sonic, maybe."

"No, get Demon Biker – it's *crazy*, man. They come at you all ways, and you gotta punch and *kick* to knock them off their bikes – *thump...wham!*"

"Ori!"

The boy fell silent under the sharp eye of Geirrod the Songmaster. A bell rang softly, and the boys lined up in pairs, then went as quietly as they could up the long stairway to the back of the vast nave. Today it was lit with a thousand candles in honor of the season, and hung from end to end with holly, sycamore and myrtle; the leading Songboys each carried a spray of mistletoe affixed to an upright wand of ash. Organ music billowed down the aisle, the cymbals clashed, and the people stood as one while the choir made its way to the sanctuary. Alric was pleased to find himself almost hidden behind the tall and magnificently decorated tree; careful maneuvering before the procession had enabled him to slide in beside Chad, the latter with the game slid carefully into his alb's large pocket.

There was a hymn, then the censers were lit and were swung continuously as the priest stood at prayer, after which followed the choir's Yule anthems. These went splendidly, but Alric didn't like the looks that Geirrod was giving him throughout. As if he guessed they were up to something; he was, unfortunately, of a suspicious turn of mind.

Chad and Alric kept the game out of sight for a while, pretending deep attention while Highfather Mauric mounted the pulpit and began the discourse he always gave at this time of the year. Some of the Songboys groaned and fidgeted, others punched and scuffled amiably under the cover of their oak stalls.

"On this holy day," said Highfather Mauric, "We celebrate our deliverance from ignorance, from fear, and from the powers of darkness."

He began, as was his invariable custom, with the warring Arab tribes of thousands of years ago, and then, as ever, came back to the one tribe that was ten times more wicked and cunning than any of the others, and the terrible god they had invented called Jahweh, whom they said was chief over all the other gods, even those of sky, earth and water. This was, of course, an evil device to commit whatever foul deeds they wanted on the pretense that Jahweh had told them to; in no time they had spread terror among all the other tribes of the region, ultimately setting in train the worst program of genocide the world had ever seen, slaughtering men, women and children in their greed, in their wicked desire to seize the best land, herds and seaports. Also, of course, continued the Highfather, they had spread foul slander about our beloved Pagan faith, murdering both priests and people wholesale. Yet the cause of these "Ishmaelites" was ultimately a false one, and they knew it. Why?

Chad looked sideways at Alric, and whispered, "*Ah, look around you, my dear friends...*"

"Ah, look around you, my dear friends," said the Highfather, holding up both arms. "Look at the beauty of the world, at the gentle rhythms of nature, at the many delights and the multiple provision that our own kind deities have created for us to enjoy, which they sustain for us, into which they daily breathe warmth, life and color. How then can we, who worship life rather than death, ever believe the tales about such a one as Jahweh, or that such a one is 'lord over all'?"

Geirrod's eyes were closed, and he was possibly dozing. Alric nudged his friend and nodded towards Geirrod, and they carefully took out their game. From its integral clock they calculated that, on his usual form, the Highfather was about halfway through. Chad brought his hero to Level Two and passed the game to Alric, who pushed buttons and whispered, though at the same time keeping half an eye on Geirrod. He had no wish to feel the Songmaster's rod on his bottom again; it was an experience he had already undergone too often.

But there was no end, continued the Highfather, to the devisings of these Arabs. Almost two thousand years ago, they had perpetrated their greatest deception of all. Some members of the tribe had pretended that Jahweh (here the priest's tone grew ironic) had *changed*, that he had become *nicer*. A new prophet, one Jeshua, had proclaimed that, after all, the faith of Jahweh was one of peace and love. Naturally, though some of the old faith had been resistant, the new cult had won wide acceptance; its members had taken over many of the old festivals – both those of the Pagans and those of Jahweh – as their own, and its devotees had traveled widely, proselytizing throughout Europe. But the new Jahweh-worshipers had been no better than the old, and the effect was simply to set off an even more widespread wave of savagery, with persecution, tortures, beheadings, burnings alive, all through the civilized world – if civilized it was.

The hatred of the new cult members for humanity, love and even life itself was such that the very human body itself was anathema. Laws were passed, for example, that it must be hidden at all times, and fearful penalties were exacted from those that dared to break these laws.

"*Done it!*" whispered Alric. "Now you try. The trick is to get right in close, then when he starts to swing his club, you *kick*."

Happily, Father Mauric concluded, the prophets of the cult of Jeshua had been beaten back before any real harm was done. Some, admittedly, had been more persistent than others, but the remaining few had been reduced to wandering amongst the world's savage tribes persuading them that, even in hot countries, they must cover their bodies with cloth and animal skins. They had, naturally, either been killed or confined as lunatics.

Alric shifted in his seat, then fumbled for his music, knowing that in a moment the priest would announce the Hymn of Deliverance. He wondered if he would ever get like the white-haired Highfather in the pulpit. He already knew how old men exaggerated – but, he supposed, the priests had to have something to go on about. Quintan, his father, said that they'd be out of a job otherwise.

The hymn over, his favorite part arrived. Here, as the horns sounded and the cymbals clashed, the Songboys threw their robes on to the terrazzo and danced on the chantry steps, clad only in necklets of amber, moonstones and opal, symbolizing earth, air and water. And, in their hair, a garland of the leaves that were green at Yule – holly, hellebore, and dog's mercury. In a row on the top step, arms upraised and palms together, the boys awaited the end of the pipe overture that began the first dance.

Alric caught the eye of his mother, Gretha, and smiled. She didn't like him dancing naked at Yule. It was one thing at Midsummer, she said, but at this time of year the Fane was far too cold; Freya had provided them with warm clothes to guard against chills and disease, and the Highfather should know better. Alric knew that Gretha would certainly give him a hot bath when he got home, and he just managed to suppress a grimace; the Songboys were meant to look happy when they danced!

The lights in the Fane were dimmed from end to end, the timbrels set up a slow rhythm and, to a languid pipe melody, the opening dance began. Candlelight flickering on their pale bodies, the Songboys knelt, stretching their arms upright, featherless sun-starved nestlings wearied of the dark, supplicating for restoration of the life-giving fire. They rose, knelt again, and then, to the flutes' plaintive accompaniment, the boys stood once more and, arms raised, chanted their hymn to Mithras, bringer of the eternal flame.

Then the cymbals and horns sounded and, at a tambour roll, the rhythm quickened, and one by one the boys bounded down from the chantry to the crossing pavement for the centerpiece of the dance. Red spotlights from the great pillars bathed the Songboys' leaping bodies; they were fire-elves now, symbolizing the returning flame. Thrice sunwise, thrice widdershins, they circled around the Head Songboy, now crouching, knees bent, on feet and fingertips, now leaping on tiptoe, arms upstretched, fingers flickering to represent the flames, hands touching, separating again. In an outer ring, the Segundi were masked as Ice-Goblins, Bookas and Hags, or robed as Kari the Great Wind, and her daughter,

Eternal Snowbank. Beyond, in the semi-dark, there prowled witches, werewolves, Snap the Dragon, malevolent Nurns, rascally Ettins and Orcs, and the Frost-Giant with his evil minions, Axe-Time and Host-Fetter.

At once, for a moment or two, there was total silence. Elves, witches and night-creatures stood stock-still, as if spellbound. Then, just as suddenly, the drums and cymbals crashed in unison; simultaneously the boys yelled, screamed together at the tops of their voices, jumping high in the air and clapping their hands. The sound rolled and echoed all down the vast nave, a gong began to boom, and, as the fire rose and the priests held aloft blazing torches, the yells rang out again and – at first in ones and twos, then en masse and helter-skelter – the evil creatures of the dark fled away into the gloom, hiding their faces, vanquished by the fire.

The tempo quickened further, the drums began to throb and the flutes to trill, heralding the finale – a celebration, a frolic to welcome the coming spring.

As the musicians played, the priest stroked the boys' faces and bodies with oil and dyes – henna, rouge, ocher, cerulean. Then they donned ribbons and bells at wrists and ankles, some picked up tambourines and rattles then, at another pipe flourish, each ran in turn to join a leaping, bounding circle, again round the Head Songboy, the latter now crowned with a circle of light, a corona of densely-woven oak twigs studded with a score of candles. And with them, from the far edges of the sanctuary, the Segundos returned as a weaving, capering procession of merry figures waving torches, and green boughs – bearded holly-headed old men with wassail-bowls, oak-horned stags with fluttering green leaves, Masters of Disport and white oxen, and after them the priests swinging handbells, censers, and sprays of ash, cherry and hazel. The solstice hymn was struck up, all twelve bells in the tower began to peal, and the congregation joined in the dance, spilling out into all the aisles, swaying, clapping and singing.

*The Frost-demon is dead, cruel Winter is
banished;
Welcome, Sun-god; all hail, great Mithras;
Enter, Bringer of fire.
Abide with us, giver of life, greenleaf and
blossom,
Reign, beloved Allfather;
Sing, dance, let merriment and feasting abound!*

The dance ended the celebration. The congregation, exhausted, adjourned for hot punch in the crypt, while the Songboys rubbed off the dye and oil as best as they could and dressed in their outdoor clothes again.

The bells were still pealing when Alric came running, breathless, out of the West Door. He hadn't stayed with the others because he knew that Otte, as always, would be waiting for him. Otte had been in the Segundos for several years, and was now one of the musicians.

He put a finger under Alric's chin and tilted his face upwards, kissed him, then said, "That was fabulous. The dance, I mean."

Alric smiled. "I knew what you meant."

He had to raise his voice a little to be heard above the clangor of the bells, and the two walked along the close for some distance without speaking, Alric swinging on Otte's arm.

"I knew you liked it," said the boy at length. "I was watching you, I could tell."

Otte looked down, smiled, and ruffled his friend's hair. "Ah, but you couldn't see *quite* how much.

And when old Uther rubbed you all over with the oils.... It almost made *me* wish I was a priest."

The boy stopped and locked his arms round the young man's waist, then nuzzled his chest.

"But not enough to take the vows?" he asked.

Otte laughed quietly. He didn't answer for a moment, just pressed his face into the boy's hair in turn, running his lips over the long delicate strands.

"But then, you don't have to," said Alric. He pulled back, looked up at Otte, and laughed. "Did you see that little prat Okki, tripped over the step in the Finale? And Geirrod's face, he was *mad!*"

Otte shook his head.

"I didn't see Okki, I didn't really see any of the other boys in the dance. There was just *one*, you see, that I couldn't take my eyes off, even for a second. *Wondrous*, even, is scarcely the word."

"Who was that?" asked Alric quickly.

"Who d'you *think*, silly boy?"

Alric's arms tightened round Otte, he pushed into his chest again, then he whispered, "You're going to take me home with you, aren't you?"

Otte hesitated. "Listen, Al, I can't tonight. I'm sorry, I really am."

The boy drew away a little, looking up, his smile vanishing. "But you always do. And it's Yule."

"Yes – yes, I know," said Otte, shifting uneasily. "But honestly, I can't, poppet. I've got work to do."

"You never had before."

"Well – I'm sorry. I really am. But there's a job I simply have to finish."

"We made our promises three months ago," said the boy sulkily. "You've got my amulet still. Your job's more important than that?"

"No, of course not," said Otte. "But – look, I've said I'm sorry. You just have to accept that it can't be every time, that's all."

The boy looked down, tracing patterns in the snow with the toe of his sandal. "It's not all," he said, "You're not telling me the truth. I think you have a girl now."

Otte sighed, then put his hands on the boy's slim shoulders. "Listen, Al," he said gently. "Didn't you hear me? Does it *sound* like I want a girl? It's just – well, work just sometimes has to be done, and you must understand that."

Alric, his head down, still didn't speak, and Otte went on, "And you must understand, too, that things change, that with time people change – we all know that. Some day – well, you'll probably want a girl."

The boy said crossly, "Who says? There's not any law says I must, is there – is there? Just Highfather Otte, whoever *he* thinks he is – no-one else."

"Don't be angry – and don't misunderstand. We're still friends, of course, always will be."

"Fine friend, meets me on Yule evening, tells me to piss off." There were angry tears in the boy's eyes and Otte reached out, but Alric abruptly pulled back.

"Listen..."

"Well, you can piss off yourself – *piss off!*" shouted the boy, half-sobbing. He wheeled round and collided with someone else with a thump.

"*Hey!*" It was Jarel, the Head Songboy, heavily cloaked, with the hood pulled down. He put a hand on Alric's arm. "Wassa matter?"

Alric stood still, head down; quickly, he rubbed his eyes. Otte said, slightly embarrassed, "I have – er – other things to do tonight, but Alric doesn't understand."

He hesitated, then said, "You live in his part of the town, don't you? Walk home with him?"

"Okay, I don't mind."

"Thanks – and goodnight," said Otte, sounding relieved and moving off, but Alric didn't reply.

The two boys walked off down the pavement in silence, Alric trailing his toes in the snow. At length Jarel said, "What a shit!"

Alric looked round, surprised at the unexpected sympathy.

"He thought I'd be on *his* side," Jarel said. "Some joke! I'm coming with you because I *choose* to, not because *he* asked me."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Alric considered his companion in silence out of the side of his eye. Jarel – known as Jay for short – had been a Songboy for some years; he was fourteen now and, before long, his voice would break and he would become a Segundo. Alric hadn't spoken to him much, but had noticed him a lot; everyone did.

Envious voices had been heard to say that his position as Head Songboy was mainly due to his striking attractiveness – his sky-blue eyes, his flawless complexion, his tumbling blond locks – but this wasn't entirely fair, because he was a talented singer as well; however, he was usually picked if a role in one of their many dramas demanded exceptional star quality – in the visual sense at least. Once, Alric remembered, the Highfather had wanted him to be the goddess Freya, but on that occasion he had refused!

For the moment, though, Alric could only see the other boy's bright eyes looking curiously at him from the depths of his hood, and the few near-transparent strands of hair that escaped from its edges, caught and ruffled by the cold December wind.

"You okay?" he asked Alric.

"Yes – fine thanks, Jay."

"What game was that you had? I wasn't close enough to see."

"Demon Biker. We almost got to the end – but then Geirrod woke up and we had to shove it away."

Jay smiled. "These pocket-size versions are a bit of a fiddle anyway."

"I know. I have a Gamesmaster at home – and lots of cartridges. It's much better."

"So have I," said Jay eagerly. "I say – we could swop cartridges. And – I've developed a way of copying them – well, almost. I'm working on it. You interested?"

"You bet!"

Alric hesitated, then asked, "You want to come home with me now?"

"Yes, I'd like to." The older boy nodded back in the direction of the Fane. "*They'll* be at the punch-bowl and the dancing for ages still."

"Oh." Alric stopped short. "So will mine be, come to that. And I haven't a key. We'll go back and ask Gretha for it, shall we?"

They were on the edge of the town now, where the street lights petered out; beyond, the road curved through the forest and up the hill to where Alric lived with Gretha and with Ine, his sister. Jay had stopped too; Alric couldn't see his face, hidden now in the deep shadow of his cowl, but he seemed uncertain about something, to be hesitating. Then he shook his head and said decisively, "No, I've got a better idea. Come with me."

"Where?"

"I'll show you."

Jay fumbled in the depths of his scarlet Head Songboy's cloak and took out a torch. He flicked it on; its beam was powerful, and he spun it round the boles of the trees for a moment or two, then down on to the ground.

"Okay, this way."

It wasn't exactly a path, but now Alric could see that a narrow track had been worn in the snow by at least one set of footprints. The snowfall in the last few hours had been light, and the steps had not yet

filled, also Jay trod the snow ahead of him – but still the snow was icy-cold on Alric's near-naked feet and the frosted bracken brushed almost painfully against his bare legs. The torch lit a narrow avenue between the tall firs, the birches and elders, their laden branches sweeping the ground; flakes were still drifting across the narrow torch-beam. But Jay went on, just saying, "Not far now."

Then they were in a clearing beneath a great carapace of boughs; a few more steps and it opened out a little. The snow stopped, and now the moon was visible; low in the sky, it stood over a wooden hut covered with snow like a great Yule-cake. Under the branches, through the spider's-web of moonlight, Jay crossed to the building and pushed the narrow door open. It moved inwards with scarcely a creak.

"This way," said Jay in a low voice. The boys went in, and Jay said, "Just wait there a moment."

Alric stood still in the pitch darkness, heard Jay fumbling; there was a tiny flicker of flame, then a glow sprang up in the center of the hut, quickly illuminating the tiny space. Alric stared round wide-eyed. Outside, the building had looked like a tumbledown shack – which to some extent it was – but inside, the walls had been painted, there were rugs on the floor and brightly-patterned curtains on the window, there was a tiger-skin and a multitude of prints and posters on the walls. Also there was, for a table, a box covered with a check cloth, and there were cushions scattered round it.

"Some *den!*" breathed Alric. "Yours?"

Jay nodded. He had put down the torch and gone over to the tiny fireplace, where sticks had already been laid criss-cross. He took up a box of matches from the brick hearth and struck one.

"Brace yourself," he said. "The chimney's not very reliable. If the wind's in the wrong direction you get fumigated."

In a moment the fire was crackling, and the hut was illuminated in its leaping orange, but seemingly the wind was okay; only a wisp or two of fragrant wood-smoke drifted, rather pleasantly, into the hut. The boys crouched in front of it, rubbing their legs vigorously; Alric grimaced as the circulation began to return. Jay noticed; he reached out, chafed Alric's ankles and calves with both his palms.

"Poor Al, sorry to walk you all this way," he said.

"*Sorry!*" said Alric incredulously. He looked round again. "It's the most *fantastic* place... Who knows about it?"

"Nobody. And it's a secret, mind."

"Cross my *heart*," said Alric fervently.

Jay pushed his hood back, fanned the blaze with his music folder, then said, "And here's the best bit." He reached inside his cloak again and took out a small leather bag, its contents curiously knobbly. He untied the string at the top. "Mince pies," he said. "About half a dozen. I took them after the celebration."

Alric giggled. He rummaged in his pockets and produced six more mince pies, three apples and four pieces of frumenty cake. "Snap!"

"Wonderful! Bet all the other kids have filled their pockets too, they'll wonder what's happened to it all. But we deserve it!"

"Don't we just!" The boys set the mince pies on a grill in front of the fire, and Jay produced a flask of ginger ale from his "cellar", a bricked area in the corner. "It's even chilled," he said, wiping snow away.

Cross-legged on the cushions, they passed the flask to and fro and waited for the pies to heat. Alric was still a little cold and, almost without noticing, he had snuggled against the older boy; Jay felt him shiver slightly. He opened his magnificent Head Songboy's cloak, larger and thicker than Alric's, and wrapped it round them both, sliding both his arms round Alric's chest.

"That better?"

"Definitely! Mega-better!"

For a few moments there was just the crackling of the fire and the faint sigh of the wind outside. Then Alric asked suddenly, "Why now?"

"Why what?"

Alric really wanted to ask why Jay was suddenly being so friendly and nice to him. But it came out as, "Why show me your den now?"

"Why not?"

There was no answer to that, and Alric was silent again, toying idly with the brass clasp of Jay's cloak. Then Jay asked, "Do you still love Otte?"

"Otte!" Alric pulled away, sprang to his feet and said, "I tell you, if he were here now I would do *this* to him." He kicked the wooden base of the wall with his sandaled toe as hard as he could, then yelled with pain, hopping around and clutching at his foot.

"You little juggins, come here," said Jay, patting the cushion. Alric sat down and Jay took the younger boy's foot between his palms again, gently massaging the toes. At length he said quietly, "That wasn't an answer."

"I know," said Alric after a moment. "The answer is, where Otte's concerned, I just don't care any more. Not at *all*. Not one t-tiny *b-b-bit*."

Abruptly, he butted his head into Jay's chest and started to cry, his shoulders heaving, his whole body shaking. "He-he always took me home on the s-special nights," he said after a moment or two. "And t-tonight, at Yule, I'd been 1-looking forward to it all d-d-day."

Jay held him again, pulled the youngster's face in against his chest, rubbed and stroked his hair.

"They don't always mean it," he said gently. "I don't think he knew you would hurt so much, otherwise..."

He stroked Alric again and, sooner than he would have expected, Alric didn't want to cry any more. The lump of misery in his chest was slowly dissolving, thawing in the warmth of...something wonderful, something spilling from the boy next to him, from a being whose depths of concern and kindness he had never guessed at, never suspected until now. Perhaps...yes, perhaps it was true what they said, that on the Eve of Yule there was magic everywhere, that gentle spirits were abroad, benevolent fairies, amicable pixies, good elves.

After a while, Alric whispered, "*You're* a good elf."

"Eh?"

Alric started to shake again, but this time with laughter. "The pies are burning!"

"Jiminy!" Jay leapt to his feet, snatched up the birch-twigg that served as a poker and started pushing and kicking the pies clear of the embers. In the event, only one or two were slightly blackened at the edges, and they were delightfully hot; the boys had to transfer them rapidly from hand to hand as they munched and as, one by one, the pies disappeared.

Alric wiped his eyes with the end of his cloak.

"Okay now?" asked Jay, and he nodded.

Finishing his last pie, Jay considered the slim thirteen-year-old beside him. Reaching out, he pushed back the long black hair that curtained Alric's perfectly oval face on either side, and the youngster smiled.

"That's better," said Jay.

In the firelight, as in daylight, Alric's eyes shone bright as a blackbird's; when he turned away, or in the semi-dark, they were dark, deep pools, the pupils almost invisible. His face reflected all his moods just as transparently, every emotion flitting across his face as visibly as sun and cloud across a June sky. He was sometimes thought to be emotional, but this was not quite true; an open, trusting youngster, he

never saw any need to hide his feelings. When he was unhappy – which was rare – his lips would readily droop, his eyes fill, and when he laughed – which was often – his eyes sparkled, his entire face lit, a brilliant sun-after-showers, his broad smile revealing beautifully white, even teeth. In coloring he was a complete contrast to the fair-haired boy beside him; his hair was jet-black, shoulder-length, his skin lightly olive, but his complexion perfectly clear and smooth, marked only by a light dust of freckles on his upper cheeks. There, now, the firelight was still damply reflected; Jay found a tissue, reached out and dabbed the youngster's cheeks dry.

"Now you can face the world," Jay said. Very quickly they finished their feast and cleared away.

"They should be home now," Alric said.

"Will you take your amulet back from Otte?" Jay asked as they closed the door and he switched his torch on again.

"Suppose so," said Alric, though he hadn't thought about it.

They were at Aide's house in a few minutes. Gretha was delighted to see Jay and made him enormously welcome, bringing both boys more cakes, also hot drinks; she was clearly pleased that the Head Songboy seemed to have become Alric's friend – though Alric as always wished she wouldn't fuss so much. But at least she didn't after all give him a bath; instead, clucking about how cold he felt, she undressed him and spread him on the rug in front of the fire for a massage, which was much better. Alric always enjoyed the feeling of the heat from the flames on his bare skin and the delicious sensation of Gretha's firm but supple hands rubbing and stroking him all over. Jay meanwhile plugged in the Gamesmaster and rummaged through the cartridges while fifteen-year-old Ine, pretending lack of interest, got on with her homework in a corner.

"Poor dear, you're as pale as a moonbeam," murmured Gretha, who wrote poetry sometimes. "And you're so *cold* still," she went on, stroking Alric's back, legs and bottom as he lay tummy-down, eyes half closed.

She always worried about his health, especially in the winter. She was happiest in mid-summer, when Alric and his friends, naked under the hot sun from morn till eve, were brown as gypsies and chipper as sparrows. And also, Gretha usually added, dirty as vagabonds – from their long, crazy games in the dusty streets, or their endless romplings, chasings and tumblings in the fields and woods at the city's fringes and beyond.

Jay had loaded Masters of the Universe; bleeps, whirrs, plinks and plonks filled the room. Gretha stroked Alric's back, then his extended arms, then her palms slid down, stroking his waist, back to his bottom, stroking, slapping, patting.

She said softly, "*Now* you have fewer goose-pimples. They're all going – one by one..."

She rubbed the backs of his thighs, slid her fingers into the warm space at the top, then in between his bottom-cheeks, probing, flickering. The cheeks tightened, then relaxed again. Gretha separated the boy's thighs slightly, ran her palms down the insides, then up again – up, as far as she could.

"*Aaah!*" said Alric.

"*Got 'm!*" said Jay, looking up from his game.

"*Sssh!*" said Ine, turning from her homework.

"Sorry."

Alric squirmed, and his breathing deepened. The best part of the massage came after he was turned on his back, but he wondered if he could wait. He was tingling like mad underneath now; if Gretha put a finger in his bottom again he was sure he would go off pop, right into the rug. It was a good rug, and Gretha mightn't be pleased.

"Roll over," said Gretha.

Alric did, and she began to slide her palms over his stomach, his flanks, and the fronts of his thighs, but then the boy reached down and quickly and decisively guided her hand. He gasped as she complied, but she laughed softly.

"Silly little boy! Wait a bit, it'll be even better."

Alric emphatically shook his head, not moving his hand. Gretha smiled and then, placing one palm under the boy's bottom, fingertips probing again, she took a firm grip with the other hand and began to move it rapidly; after only a few moments Alric *aaah-ed* and jack-knifed, throwing his thighs apart, his feet flying upwards, then banging down on the mat again. "*Wow-eeeeeh!*"

He arched upwards, remained rigid for an instant, then his bottom dropped again on the mat with a thump.

"*AaaaaaAAAH!*"

After a few moments Alric laid his head back slowly, closed his eyes, and said, "*Wow! W-o-o-ow!* That was the *best ever*. That was the best part of the *whole day!*"

"Better even than the dancing?" teased Gretha, wiping her hand on a linen towel. "Or the Highfather's sermon?"

"*Joke!*" said Alric.

Then he sat up, said, "Thanks, Gretha," and kissed her.

Jay had come over from his game, and was crouching on the rug alongside, watching with interest. Gretha smiled at him. "I'm glad you're friends with Alric. Come home with him whenever you like."

"Thanks. I will!"

Ine had abandoned her homework too. On the rug too, pouring hot chocolate, she told Jay how much she had enjoyed the dances, particularly his part in them. Alric smiled secretly behind his own mug of chocolate; he knew what Ine meant! She rarely missed a Fane ceremony where the boys danced naked, and on these occasions her eyes rarely left Jay now. Jay had a slightly bigger one than Alric, with a few hairs. Yes, Alric understood his sister very well... On the other hand, Ine had conceded that, now he was thirteen, even Alric's was "quite nice." Indeed, she had said that he was now "fairly okay" all round, and twice recently she had given him his bath, soaping and washing him with her bare hands until he was as hard as he could ever remember, then making him shoot explosively into the towel while being dried. She wasn't so bad, sometimes...

The children had some more home-made cakes, then a glass each of hot ale before Jay said, regretfully, that he would have to go.

"Walk back with me, Alric?" he asked.

Alric nodded and went for his clothes, but Gretha said hesitantly, "It's a pity, now you've just got so nice and warm."

"It's okay, I'll wrap up and we'll run all the way – won't we, Jay?"

"Right!"

Gretha still hesitated. "It's not just that. Is it, Alric?"

Alric, buckling his belt, paused, his eyes going uneasily from his mother to Jay, then back again.

"And it is quite dark now," Gretha added.

Alric said slowly, "*You're* the one who always says I imagine too many things."

"So you do," said Gretha, while Jay watched them both, slightly puzzled. "I just don't want you to be frightened again, that's all."

"I *won't* be," said Alric decisively, and Gretha nodded.

"Okay – but mind you *do* run."

"What was all that about?" asked Jay, when they were out in the street.

Alric hesitated, then said, "I – sometimes I hear things at night. Things...in the street. But...Gretha says I'm – er – imaginative. Maybe she's right."

The older boy looked sideways at him, then decided to change the subject.

"Oh – by the way..."

"Yes?"

Jay held out his hand, palm upright. "Mates?"

Alric slapped it enthusiastically.

"*Mates!*" he said, and his own was slapped in return. "C'mon, lets run."

It had stopped snowing, but it was still bitterly cold. The two boys sped along the almost deserted road, their sandals hammering the hard-packed snow on the pavement, their robes flying. They began to chase and jostle one another, pushing, shoving, laughing. Soon their skins began to glow again and then they slowed, panting, their breath swirling round them in great opaque clouds.

After that they walked in silence, getting their breath, then Jay asked, "Will you see Otte tomorrow?"

Alric shook his head.

"But I'll see him now and again, of course. He's – well, he's been really kind to me, sometimes. But it won't be like it was."

Then he added, "I think he might have a girl now. He says he hasn't, but..."

"They do," said Jay, with an air of worldly wisdom. "Did you like him very much?"

"I suppose," said the other boy. "Still do really, though he's such a swine sometimes. It'll be different now, though."

"It always is," said Jay, then he asked, "Did you let him up your bottie?"

Alric shook his head. "No – sort of up between my legs – or in a little bit, but not *right* up. I – I suppose I didn't like him enough to let him do that."

He was slightly surprised to hear himself uttering the thought, though he knew in the same moment that it was true. His next thought surprised him even more.

I'd let you, though.

He almost had to bite his tongue to keep from saying it aloud. He blushed deeply, but didn't think that Jay had noticed anything.

Then he presumed to ask, hesitantly, "Have *you* been with any of them?" It was something he had often wondered about.

Jay shook his head so vigorously that his blond locks flew. "No, I *haven't*. They keep sending me notes and all that, but they're such a shower, I wouldn't let one of them *touch* me."

They had stopped at the side of the road, where the path wound through the trees towards Jay's house. Reluctant to part from Jay quite yet, Alric asked hesitantly, "So you've *never* actually had someone like – I've had Otte."

Jay said slowly. "Well...there *is* somebody. He's a lot older than me, but – we do care a lot about one another."

Quickly, reading Alric's face with his usual sensitivity, he said, "But it's not like you and Otte. I'll never give him my amulet. It's quite different."

It had begun to feel colder and Alric was shivering now. "How d'you mean?"

Jay laughed. "Poor Al! *You'll* laugh too, when I explain – which I will some day. G'night!"

Alric started back more slowly than he had come. But then, bit by bit, he began to remember everything – the fire-ceremony, the dances, the hut, the mince-pies, the secret, and, above all, his new friend – and soon he broke into a trot and at last, half-running, half-skipping, he had tumbled back through his front door and was being pursued upstairs by Gretha, fussing about the cold, his lateness, and just

about everything else.

Alric was tired, but he slept uneasily that night. Maybe it was the earlier conversation with Gretha that had unsettled him. It was true that some months had passed now since the last night he had lain awake, listening, body tight as a bowstring and heart thudding, but as Great Edwyn struck three Alric again woke with a start, certain it was back again. That it would be coming round the corner just below his window, that it would be right outside at any moment now. He began to sweat; he sat up, drawing the blankets tight round himself.

He had often wondered what it looked like. Gretha, exasperated in the end, had told him to stop being silly, that nothing came through the town ever, day or night, and that Alric should know that perfectly well. And indeed at night when all was quiet, if he listened hard, he could just hear the *whoosh, whoosh* of vehicles on the raised trafficway. But that was about a quarter of a mile distant; the other wheels he could hear, sometimes, were much closer. He was sure, on some nights, that they were passing right in front of his house. And again that there would be the creaks, the rattles, the sound of horses' hooves muffled by the snow. No engine, because everyone would hear an engine.

Alric had never dared to look out of the window. At the first sound he always pulled the blanket, even the pillow, tight over his head, covering his eyes and ears. Yet, somehow, he knew; it would be very big and completely black, even the wheels. And the windows would be curtained or blacked-out too. The driver's face would be hidden; there would be other men, also heavily masked or hooded. They would not speak; they would know what they had to do and where they were going.

Tonight, at least, they didn't stop; they were passing, the sounds were fading, then it was quiet again. Gradually, Alric relaxed and his heartbeat slowed; he knew that it only came once in a night. But now it had started, he knew it would return, perhaps for several nights more. Until the night when it didn't pass, when it stopped right at his front door, when they rang his doorbell.



The first thing Alric did when he woke was to look out of the window and see if there were any wheel-marks in the snow. There had not been a further fall during the night, but already quite a number of people had passed on their way to work, and the snow was well trodden; any marks would have completely obscured. *If* any, Alric qualified the thought, as he pulled his clothes on.

For school, boys wore a linen knee-length robe with, in winter, a woolen vest underneath and, on top, an calf-length cloak of varying thickness, again depending on the season, with a leather belt at the waist. On their feet, leather sandals; in the cold weather also perhaps a scarf and a woolen hat. Alric put on all of these; Gretha as always checked before he left, then she kissed and hugged him goodbye, sliding her hand up the rear of his robe and affectionately patting his bottom, after which he was on his way to the Songboys' school at the Fane, running to catch up with Chad, whose red bobble-hat he saw in the distance.

Tiptoeing up behind, he jumped on Chad, and they wrestled and tumbled for a moment or two before collecting their books again and scampering on down the hill to the Close. Alric had known Chad since they were both very small, and they had enjoyed a warm, undemanding friendship ever since he could remember. When they had both been accepted as Songboys, the fact that it meant their staying together had pleased both of them infinitely more than the "great honor" that their mothers had enthused about.

On the rise leading down to the school, Chad shouted, "Look, they've made a slide. *Come on!*"

Outside the West door, the Songboys were whooping up and down on the hard-packed snow, shrieking, wildly waving their arms; then a shout from the Highfather's assistant brought them running.

"You *know* it's Instruction from the Highfather today," he fussed, shoohing them in. "I really don't know *what* he'll say."

In another moment they were all in the great hall indoors. There were over a hundred boys in the school, not all of them Songboys. The latter were selected around the age of eight, but there was a long period of training subsequently, and a boy had only Probationer status till he became a full Songboy at the age of twelve.

The Songboys had instruction from one of the priests before classes twice a week; some of the boys found this more interesting than others. A few would in fact become priests themselves, but Alric would not be one of them. He shifted slightly as they sat, knees clasped, on the marble floor of the sanctuary. His eyes, as often, strayed upwards to the vast East window where, in a multitude of colors, the young god Odin hung dying on the tree Ygdrassil, side pierced by a spear, dreaming of the ninth day when he would ascend to Valhalla. The evil Loki, conquered, crouched at his feet, attended by the malevolent creatures of the Otherworld, while the Skyfather watched benignly from his High Seat above. Alric liked best the fantastic creatures that clustered round the edges – the oak-horned stags, the Frost-giant, the Phoenix, gryphons, salamanders and unicorns. Then his gaze dropped to the circle of boys and he whispered to Fal, beside him, "You brought any cartridges?"

"Sure thing, I'll show you later."

The Highfather's eye rested on the boys and they fell silent. He had come, as he always did on this day of the cycle, to the Prophecy of Gratian the Rimer. Gratian had written that, if there were not constant vigilance against heretics, the devotees of Jahweh and of the new god would join forces and establish a great and evil empire in the west, in Transatlantica, having slaughtered or driven out the land's inhabitants from coast to coast. There they would seek world domination, and in this they would be ruthless; indeed, everyone who did not defer to them, think like them – even look like them – would be subdued by powerful and terrible weapons, the like of which the world had never seen. A single one could not only vaporize an entire nation, but cause the slow death of millions in adjoining nations, and in the most horrible ways imaginable.

Father Loddo, their preceptor, had told them all this too. And, when he had had a little of the monastery mead, he would add that these heretics would even chop off the ends of all the boys' sticks so that they didn't enjoy themselves too much. The Songboys would giggle a little at this – rather uncomfortably if truth be told – though they knew that priests always liked to frighten you a little with their tales. Alric had in fact related the last part to Gretha and she had said it was going too far, even allowing for the mead, and that she was going to speak to the Highfather. Alric hoped she wouldn't, because it was always embarrassing for a boy to seem to have a fussy mother.

After schoolwork that day there were extra rehearsals for Lupercalia. And after that Chad remained to play football, but Alric colored with pleasure when he found Jay waiting for him at the gate, as if he had done so every day. They strolled off together, then Alric looked around and said in an undertone, "I got some cookies and jam from school when they weren't looking, and cake from home. That is, in case we..."

His voice tailed off. Maybe it was a cheek to assume too much.

"...in case we would go to your hut again."

Alric was thrilled to hear Jay say, "Yours and mine. The only bad thing about it was, I haven't had a mate to share it with. Till now."

Eagerly, then tripping a couple of times over concealed branches, Alric followed his more sure-footed friend again up the narrow twisting path through the pines to their clearing and their den. The night was clear and a huge moon hung over the trees again, but there was still shadow and a host of concealed roots

and branches in the path. Jay, however, seemed to know about all these even before he came to them; he weaved, ducked, sometimes called to Alric to watch out, sometimes paused to lift an overhanging branch so he could pass under, sometimes pushed a thorn or a creeper aside for him.

And then they were back in the hut, fanning the tiny fire until it leapt and crackled again. Tonight Alric noticed for the first time how the orange flame flickered on a number of small brasses that Jay had arranged around the few shelves – prancing horses, stags, wolves, centaurs and warriors.

"Phantasma-*gorical*," he murmured.

A short time ago Alric, who loved to model, had made a number of clay animals and had meticulously painted them, then had baked and glazed them in Otte's oven. He would bring them tomorrow, and so begin to make his own contribution to the den.

Jay had brought a large tin of tomato soup; they stirred and heated it, then poured it into a bowl and passed it from one to another. Presently Alric produced his cakes.

"They're a bit squashed," he said apologetically. "I had to hide some of them in my back pocket, and I'm afraid I've been sitting on them for most of the day."

"Your little bum won't have done them any harm," said Jay lightly. He took a bite. "Mm! No harm at all."

Alric felt delightfully relaxed when they had finished; he rearranged the cushions on the floor, so that he lay flat, head leaning against Jay, then Jay gently shifted the younger boy's head on to his lap. He stroked Alric's cheeks, then his forehead and nose, with his fingertips; he laughed softly.

"You've still got a cold nose, like a little puppy," he said, touching it again.

Alric laughed too. "At least you've taken this little puppy in out of the snow!" Then he looked up directly at Jay and asked, "Did you ask me here because you felt sorry for me? You know – because of Otte and so on."

Jay shook his head. "Still asking questions?"

"Like I said last night – I just wondered why you'd never asked me here – and sort of been so friendly – before."

"I was never unfriendly to you, was I?"

"No, of course not. But you know what I mean."

Jay stroked the youngster's hair, idly lifting the long strands, toying with them, dropping them. "Poor Al, you like to get everything absolutely clear, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," said Alric simply.

"Well, it's simple," said Jay, continuing to stroke. "It's just that you'd always been – well, Otte's boy. Hadn't you?"

"S'pose so. I wasn't his *property*, though."

"No, I can see that now. Will you take your amulet back?"

"You asked me that last night." Alric stretched out for another cake, but Jay moved it out of his reach.

"You didn't answer," Jay said. "Not properly."

"I thought I had. Yes, I will. Okay?"

Jay nodded, seeming satisfied.

"Now you can have this." He picked up the cake and gently "fed" it to Alric.

A moment later Alric said indistinctly, "Now you have to tell me something."

"What?"

"Your friend you told me about last night. This man."

"Oh no, *that's* bothering you again?"

"Yes, it is. And you can't have any more cakes till you've told me."

"There aren't any more."

"Oh. Well, tell me anyway."

"It's nothing really. It's not like you think, it really isn't. So does it matter? I don't ask about all *your* friends."

"I'll tell you about them if you want."

"And I'll tell you all about mine. Soon, but not now. Trust me, poppet."

Alric's eyes opened slightly. Temporarily diverted, he said, "Otte used to call me that."

"Sorry – don't you like it?"

"Course I do. But I wouldn't let *anyone* call me it. Just you now."

Alric reached up and toyed with his friend's locks in turn, then said, a little sleepily, "It's a bit of a cheek, though, come to think of it. You're really only a few months older than me, you know."

"So little, yet so much – *poppet*." Jay bent, kissed Alric on the forehead, then said, "Come on, let's clear up and go."

"Must we?"

"Yes, we must. It's after seven."

"Jiminy!" Alric leapt to his feet, scattering cake-crumbs. "Gretha will... Come back with me?"

"Course, if you want. But you won't say anything about the den, will you?"

"I *promised*," said Alric reproachfully.

"Sorry, I know you won't."

"Come back with me then. Gretha likes you. If I was with you she won't make a fuss about my being late."

"Okay."

Gretha was pleased to see Jay again, and made hot chocolate all round. But for Alric, tonight, there was no escape; squawking in mild protest, he was immediately given a very hot bath in the raised marble tub in the corner of the living room, after which Gretha was most reluctant to let him go out again. However, Jay prevailed once more and soon, wrapped in a thicker cloak, scarf and woolly hat, Alric had fallen into step beside him on the last lap of the trail up to Jay's house. Again, where the paths diverged they stopped; Alric shivered slightly with the cold and as before Jay wrapped his cloak around both of them, pulling the younger boy close.

Jay said quietly, "I have bad dreams too."

Alric, surprised, asked, "You heard what Gretha said last night, then?"

"Yes. Are they – like something bad's going to happen? Something very bad...soon?"

"Sort of," said Alric hesitantly. "Yours are like that?"

"They're not dreams exactly. Just a kind of...feeling, really. And – I've been getting it more often lately."

Alric slid both his arms round Jay's waist, locking them in place. "Don't be frightened," he said softly.

"I'm not," said Jay. "Well, not any more. You and I, we stick together now."

Alric snuggled closer. Again he felt that delicious warmth, not just on his skin, but deep inside as well. Just behind Jay, a spray of branches was covered with a thick pall of snow, even and unmarked. Reaching out, Alric idly traced the outline of a heart and, inside it, some letters.

"What you doing?"

"Nothing." Alric, flushing slightly, rubbed his palm quickly over the markings and obscured them. "I should go," he said, but didn't move.

"Will you see Otte tomorrow?"

"You mean, about the amulet?"

"Mm."

"Tomorrow – or soon. Before I change my mind. Though I won't." Thinking back, Alric experienced again the resentment and disappointment he had felt on the previous night.

"And all that talk," he said, half to himself. "Stuff like, *I just couldn't take my eyes off you at the dance*. And then – well, you heard."

Jay nodded. He was silent for a moment, then he asked hesitantly, "If – if *I* were to say that... Would you – would you believe *me*?"

"Eh?" Alric looked up enquiringly.

Jay pressed the youngster's face back against his cheek, then went on, "And last night, with your mum, when she was...rubbing you down..."

"Yes?"

"And when she bathed you tonight. And now – even remembering..."

"Yes?" prompted Alric again.

Suddenly Jay took Alric's hand, pulled it down against the front of his cloak, pressed it inwards.

"Wow!" said Alric after a moment.

Then, unbelieving, he whispered, "Because of *me*?"

"Who else?" Jay whispered back.

"Wow!"

Then abruptly Jay bent, kissed Alric goodnight, and was off through the trees as silently as a ghost, his robe fluttering. In an instant he had disappeared from view in the darkness and the mist. Alric stood where he was for a few seconds, then he scampered for home, running, skipping, singing and punching the air as he went.

But he slept poorly that night. For one thing, he had only just got into bed when the Idea hit him, made him sit up, almost choking with excitement. He would give *Jay* his amulet! Of course – why hadn't he thought of that before? Then he would be *Jay's boy*. Seven times fabulous! Seventy times. Seventy thousand *thousand*.... His heart thudded, his skin tingled from top to toe.

Yet...it would be unusual. Jay was really just a boy like him, not even a Segundo. Would that be okay? But Jay was no ordinary boy, he was Head of the Choir and would be a Segundo very soon. Yes, he was sure it would be all right, though he might have to ask the Highfather.

And Jay? Well, he was pretty sure now he knew the answer. Why, after all, had Jay kept asking him if he would get the amulet back from Otte? Was it, perhaps, because he'd hoped... But no, he mustn't get carried away. What would he say to Jay, though? What *did* one say? With Otte, they had known one another since Alric was small, and it had come about naturally. Still, he would ask – oh yes, he would ask!

He curled up tight under the blankets, hugging his secret deliciously to him, and could still hardly sleep for thinking about the next day. And then, some hours later, he was wakened again, the warmth inside displaced by the horrible creeping cold he had felt on the night before. He pulled all the bedclothes over his head again, but he was sure he could hear it – hear the scrape of wheels and the rattle of harness. There was, too, a dreadful moment when he was sure, *this* time, it had stopped outside – but no, the sounds were fading, then he heard Great Edwyn strike four, and all was quiet again.

Next morning began with one of the full rehearsals for the festive cycle that led up to Lupercalia. This would coincide with one of the choir's two annual tours, and was their busiest period. Together with the choral items, there would be a number of plays, and later today they would begin rehearsals for the historical play that was always included. This year's theme was a common one – about how their

ancestors had driven out the Roman invaders, at least those who were Nazarite converts, and about how the land had thus been delivered from the scourge and darkness of heathendom. And about how the remaining Romans had united with the incomers from the North to form a civilization that had endured for nearly two thousand years.

Alric understood that he himself was of Roman origin; Gretha would sometimes stroke his jet-black hair and all of his light olive skin and tell him so, adding that he was inappropriately named. Chad, however, as a young Viking, was very well named indeed!

For Alric, the rehearsals for the dances and plays were what he liked best, also the performances and the singing for audiences. The formal learning and rehearsing of the music, in the morning, where the boys stood at long desks around the rehearsal room, was somewhat less enjoyable. And Jay hadn't arrived yet, which was unusual.

During a gap in the rehearsal he asked Geirrod where he was.

"You should be able to manage without the Head Songboy sometimes," Geirrod said. "Concentrate on that *Jubilate*, especially Page Three, and don't concern yourself with what the others are doing. Keep your eyes on *me*."

What he'd expected really. Jay still wasn't there by the mid-day break, so he asked Father Rufus, when he came to call them back in.

"I don't see him, do you?" said Father Rufus. He was not the most friendly of the priests.

"Is he ill?"

"I haven't heard so. But he simply isn't here, so as Geirrod said we must manage without him, okay?"

He got similar answers from the other priests during the course of the day, and became increasingly puzzled. Normally Geirrod, for one, would have gone a bit mental if the Head Songboy hadn't turned up, would have been ringing all round, flapping like a demented dodo, demanding explanations from all and sundry. For him to dismiss the matter with a shrug, as he had, was odd indeed, and for the moment Alric couldn't think of any possible reason for it. After school he refused an invitation to play football and went to Jay's house, at the other side of the town.

The house was a pleasant one with a long frontage and numerous windows; there was almost unbroken snow on its wide lawns. Alric, swinging his books, crunched up the drive, and Jay's mother, Thea, came at his ring.

"Sorry," she said. "He's out somewhere."

"Is he okay?" asked Alric. "He wasn't at school."

"Well, perhaps you just didn't notice him," said Thea casually, "He's certainly not here."

Alric stared; didn't Thea know how small their group was? He began to speak, but Thea said, "Don't worry, he's always somewhere about. Why not go and look?"

Gently, she pushed the door shut.

Alric went back down the drive; a cold tight knot was gathering in his stomach. *Something was wrong*. Something bad, and no-one would tell him. *Why? Why?*

Outside he met Chad, flushed after his football game. He lived next door to Jay.

"Can you make it out?" Alric asked, shaking his head in puzzlement. "He's not at home, not at school, and not in the town, and nobody will tell me anything."

"I think he may be ill," said Chad slowly. "My mum saw his mum in the garden this morning, and thought she was crying. I'll find out what I can and tell you."

He went in to the house, and Alric started home, intending to ask Gretha if she knew anything. It still didn't make sense. Even if Jay was ill, why hide the fact? Then it hit him, and he stood stock-still on the pavement, ice-cold with shock.

They've taken him.

Again he had been slow on the uptake – very slow. He sat down on a bench, his legs weak. He knew he had heard the wheels last night, he just *knew* it. Really close this time. And now he knew why. *They* had wanted Jay, the famous Songboy of Durnovaria, perhaps the best-known in England – *they* had taken him for themselves. And now...

Suddenly he leapt up and flew home; he burst into the house, threw his books down and thrust himself at his mother. "Oh, Gretha – *Gretha!*"

"Why, what's wrong?" asked Gretha in alarm, as Alric started to pour out his tale.

"Come now – come now – I can't hear a word." She took off the boy's cloak, guided him to the sofa, and sat him down. "Now, calm down – and *slowly*, please."

She shook her head when Alric had finished.

"Oh dear – dear, dear," she sighed. "Your imagination will be the death of you. Of *course* Jay hasn't been spirited away, not in any black van or anything else. I've spoken to you about all that silliness before, and I thought it was finished with. I'm sure there's quite a simple explanation."

"Well, what is it?" demanded Alric.

"I've no idea. But if Jay wasn't at school then he's at home; maybe he's ill. Or if he's not at home perhaps he's staying – well, with relatives, maybe."

"Well, then, why didn't Thea tell me?"

Gretha sighed again. "I've no idea," she said again. "Look, I'll make you some hot chocolate now and, if it will satisfy you, I'll go and see Thea and ask if Jay's okay. Satisfied?"

"I suppose so," said Alric. "And...thanks."

Gretha was away for about half an hour. Alric heard the door and ran to the top of the stairs. "Well?" he asked breathlessly.

"Sorry, Thea wasn't in," Gretha said, hanging up her cloak. One of the neighbors thought she'd gone away for a bit; probably Jay's with her."

"Did they say where?" Alric persisted.

Gretha shook her head. "They didn't know. But I expect they'll be back soon – so *stop worrying*."

Alric stood where he was, the coldness inside returning. He hadn't liked the way Gretha hadn't looked at him while giving the explanation. But...surely his mother wouldn't *lie* to him?

Or would she?

Perhaps she would say something that wasn't quite true if she thought it was best for him, or to save upsetting him; she wouldn't really think of that as "a lie". One thing he knew, it was no use pressing Gretha further. She was cheerful – suspiciously cheerful – over supper, and Alric pretended to be as well, not mentioning Jay. But Gretha's cheerfulness reminded him of Thea's rather odd manner earlier, and he began to feel genuinely frightened, more frightened than he had been for a long time. All evening, and all that night.

Who was left? *Otte*. Well, worth a try anyway. And he had to go and see him anyway. So next day after school he went to *Otte's* villa on the edge of the wood; there *Otte* worked from home, making intricate electronic components. There was still crisp snow on the ground, and it was bitterly cold, but there was a bright sun and a brilliant blue sky; and Alric guessed that a thaw, and indeed spring, was not far off. Muffled now in scarf, woolly hat and mittens, he was cheered by the thought, but then he remembered that they were to go sledging on the big hill tomorrow and that Jay had been coming with him.

Maybe he was all wrong, maybe he *was* too imaginative, like Gretha said, maybe they *were* simply away on a visit. To a relative who was ill, perhaps – which would account for Thea being so upset. Odd

that Jay hadn't said anything to him, but perhaps he hadn't known. There would be other problems, though, if Jay didn't return soon. In a week or so there would be one of their great set-pieces of the year – Bach's Yuletide Oratorio, with its wonderful cycle of chorales and hymns to all the deities commemorated at the season. Many of the solos would be taken by Jay, as they were last year; the packed Fane had been thrilled, electrified by his sparkling performance in one aria after another. Indeed, after one – though it had been strictly forbidden by the Highfather – the entire congregation had risen and applauded long and rapturously. In the event, the Highfather had said afterwards that there was some slight excuse – though the outrage must never occur again!

And now? This year's performance would doubtless have been Jay's swansong, as his voice would surely break within the year; the performance, besides being put on record, would have been broadcast on Europa TV. Nobody else was as good. Yes, Geirrod would share out the solos, and they would manage, but it wouldn't be the same – no, not at all.

When Alric went into the villa, Otte immediately got up and came to greet him, though a little formally, just kissing him on the forehead, then telling him to sit down.

"I'm sorry about the other night," he said, pushing his magnifying spectacles up on his forehead. "I've been under a bit of pressure lately, and it made me rather insensitive. Sorry."

"It's all right; you can't help it," said Alric, with an echo of Jay's style. "I'm sorry for shouting at you. And you're right – things do change."

"I'm glad you understand that," said Otte, looking a little relieved. "And – an amulet isn't for ever, you know."

"It can be," said the boy. "Still – I know, not for us."

Otte pushed a small jewel-box across the table. "Nevertheless, this is rather sad," he said.

If Otte expected to make a big scene of it, thought the boy, bad luck. He pocketed the jewel-box. "I'll find someone else," he said coolly.

"I'm sure you will." Otte tweaked his glasses, started toying with the components on the table.

"By the way, it doesn't *have* to be a Segundo, does it?" asked Alric on impulse.

"Not at all," said Otte, taking up a pair of tweezers, then putting them down again. "But remember, it's not just for the...fun, you know. He's got to look after you to some extent, protect you – help you with your school-work and everything; it's got to be someone who has it in him to do all that." He wore his "responsible" look as he spoke, and Alric shifted impatiently in his chair.

"It can't be just anyone," Otte added finally.

The boy flushed. "You think I'd go with *just anyone*?" he asked angrily. "You really think that?"

"No – that wasn't what I meant at all. Oh, dear..." Otte had been drinking black Spanish coffee; he pushed the jug and a cup across the table. "Here, have some."

The boy wrinkled his nose, and Otte said, "Okay, there's lemonade in the fridge, then." When Alric returned with a flask and glass he asked Otte, "This – where you have to help...and protect. Can it be...well, the other way round?"

"What d'you mean?" asked Otte, his brow furrowing.

"Oh, never mind," said Alric, and then, as if changing the subject, he asked, "You heard anything about Jay? He's – well, disappeared, you know."

Otte slid the glasses back down and began to adjust a precision calliper.

"Oh, don't worry. I imagine he's somewhere around."

Alric half stood, smacked the table hard with both palms. "Oh, please, Otte – please! Don't you treat me like I'm stupid. *Please!*"

Otte, a little taken aback, rescued a screwdriver that was about to roll off the table, then said, "Well, I'm sorry. But if no-one else is worried I don't see why you need to be."

"Gosh, Otte, can't you see that's *why* I'm worried! Jay gone, and everyone *pretending* not to be worried, *pretending* it's all right. Why – *why?* It's *weird!*"

Otte toyed with his glasses, seemed about to speak, hesitated, then said quietly, "Sorry, I don't have the answers. If you want answers, ask Wise Wilfrid."

The boy blinked, stopped in his tracks. Earlier Father Loddo, goaded beyond endurance by Alric's questions, had said the same. *Ask Wise Wilfrid.*

Otte stood up. "Do it," he said. He had previously been ill at ease, his eyes flitting about the room, but now his gaze held Alric's directly.

"And as for you and me, Alric," he continued, "It will be different now, I know, but..."

He gestured once more to the box in the boy's hand. "...because you once gave me that, I'm your friend for always."

"I know," said Alric, standing up as well, "And I'm yours."

They shook hands solemnly, again the rather formal kiss on Alric's forehead, and then the boy, thinking deeply, was returning back down the long hill. It had been a difficult, rather stiff little occasion, and he felt glad it was over, but he was also glad that some things had been settled now. And he had regained some respect for Otte, too, for taking it so well.

Later that evening Gretha, plagued by yet more questions, said the same as the others. *Ask Wise Wilfrid.*

Okay then, so he would. But he wondered... It was something Gretha had said to him before when he had difficult questions – and he had heard other adults say it. Maybe Wise Wilfrid didn't really exist, maybe he was something adults made up, like the Bogey-Man. Rather hesitantly he asked Chad on the way to school the next day, but uneasy in case Chad would laugh at him, as at a boy who still believed in the Tooth Fairy.

But Chad didn't laugh – nor was he the sort that would anyway. He said, "Wise Wilfrid lives in a great castle on top of Conygar Hill, he has a great white beard, and he knows *everything.*"

"Really?" asked Alric, still uncertain.

"We'll go and see," said Chad in his usual matter-of-fact way.

That was just like Chad. Alric considered him out of the side of his eye as, after classes, they plodded through the deep snow towards Conygar Hill, just north of the city, the highest hill in the region.

Chad was a pleasant, slightly lazy boy, but one who was always friendly and never seemed to lose his temper. He had a mop of blond, uncombed hair, and he always managed to look as if he had just got out of bed, but otherwise he had the striking appearance, and the lithe build, of all the Songboys. These attributes were essential, as the boys were widely in demand not just to sing, but also to dance and to perform plays, both in the Fane and on tour.

He stole another look at Chad, the youngster's delicate cheeks flushed in the ice-cold air. Chad caught his glance, looked at Alric thoughtfully with his greenish, slightly slanted eyes, then smiled.

"Did I tell you, by the way, that Wise Wilfrid also eats little boys whole?" he asked.

"Oh yea," said Alric, punching him.

But there was a lot more to Chad than met the eye, Alric thought. Chad was in a dream a lot of the time, it was true. But when he wanted to – in a math lesson for example – he could have finished all the questions, and got them all right, when most of the boys were still chewing their pencils over Question One. But this was rare; usually he was either gazing out of the window or drawing pixies, goblins,

wizards and other fantastic creatures in the margins of his exercise book, driving Geirrod – who was also their form-master – almost to distraction.

If someone had asked Alric whether Chad was his "best mate" he would probably have said yes, but it wasn't exactly like that; as the two had virtually grown up together, their friendship was more brotherly than anything else. Indeed, Alric well remembered the day when, under the huge oak sacred to Dagda, they had solemnly "adopted" one another. They had both meant it, and still did.

But there was something else now; Alric remembered again how he had recently seen Chad having his bottom smacked in class for laziness, and how during this entertainment he, Alric, had suddenly and substantially stickied himself. He giggled, and the other boy looked at him enquiringly.

"What now?"

"Nothing. Race you to the top!"

But he would tell Chad sometime; he would probably be flattered. Alric certainly knew that he would have been.

A long, narrow road, winding round and round, led up to the top of Conygar Hill. Vehicles would have been able to traverse it only with difficulty, but it was clear that none did – or hadn't recently, since the snow was still completely smooth and unbroken. The boys had never been up here before; it was steeper than they had expected, and they were glad they hadn't brought their bicycles, as they had planned at first.

Suddenly, coming through a curtain of trees, they had arrived. Wise Wilfrid's house – as far as they could see – was not exactly a "castle", but huge and impressive, with numerous wings and gables, a massive central tower, and a multitude of tall, pointed windows and tiny turrets. It had a high, steep roof, today so thickly covered with snow that the whole building looked like a vast Yule-cake. But the grounds were surrounded by a high wall, and the ironwork gate was tight shut, with no handle or bell.

"Wow what?" asked Alric.

"Listen..."

For the past few moments the boys had been hearing a regular metallic ringing; now they could see that, outside a building near the gate, a young man was working on a huge and powerful motor-bike. He was dressed in black leather, and concentrating deeply on his task, not even looking up as the boys approached.

They stood awkwardly behind him, then he said suddenly, "Hold that, please," indicating a spar he was trying to screw into place. The boys knelt down and did as he asked, then the man carefully screwed it in, tapped it, and said, "Good."

"Um – excuse me," said Chad.

"By all means," said the man, standing up and wiping a streak of oil from his face. "You've been most helpful. Consider yourselves excused."

The boys shifted, then Alric said, "We're looking for Wise Wilfrid."

"Have you asked yourselves," said the man, "whether the 'Wise' may be some kind of joke – in the same way that a small man is called Lofty, or a fat one is called Slim?"

"Um-no," said Chad, after a moment.

"I should," said the man. He held out a hand and said, "At your service – though friends drop the 'Wise'. Intimates, indeed, call me 'Wilf. The choice of appellation is totally yours."

Alric blinked, then he, and Chad, shook the man's hand.

"You're not like we expected," said Chad solemnly.

"I thought Wise Wilfrid was old, with a beard," said Alric. "Everyone says so."

"I'm older than I look," said the man. "And a beard does so get in the way when you're bike-minded."

Don't you agree?"

Alric laughed. "I wouldn't know."

"Well, come in," said Wise Wilfrid. "It's not every day that two of the famous Songboys come to visit me."

"How did you know?" asked Chad, surprised.

"I have eyes," said the man, with a smile. He touched a panel and made the huge gate hum open. "Everybody knows what the Songboys look like, and one doesn't come across a couple like *you* every day."

Inside, the entrance hall was cavernous, pillared along both sides and walled in colored mosaics. Wise Wilfrid led the way into an adjacent area furnished mainly with cushioned divans; here the walls were tapestried, and the center of the space was occupied by a square pool with a fountain in the center; above it was a glass dome, clear and sparkling in spite of the snow outside. The air was warm and balmy, and weeping fig trees stood in all the corners. From an alcove Wise Wilfrid brought a tray laden with chocolate biscuits, glasses, and a flagon of wine. The wine was not like the rather bitter kind that other adults gave them, but sweet and fruity; it made Alric feel a little drowsy, but agreeably so.

Wise Wilfrid excused himself to change, and returned in a few minutes in more conventional attire – an ankle-length gown, scarlet-edged with long sleeves. For the outside in winter men – that is, males over school age – wore a jerkin and long breeches – but in the warmer weather or indoors they wore a shirt or robe much like a boy's, but longer. Wise Wilfrid didn't look as young as he had done in the leathers, but it was difficult to tell his age. Sometimes his shoulder-length hair looked jet-black, but when the light caught it from other directions it seemed lighter, almost silvery.

He drank from a large goblet at a gulp, then refilled it. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready for what?" asked Alric.

"For anything. Yes or no?"

Alric swallowed.

"Yes."

The man smiled. "Good." He pressed a switch, the light of the room dimmed, and a huge hood slid across the inside of the dome, blacking out the sky. At the same time, the enormous tapestry opposite them whirred aside, and they were looking at a black wall-sized screen, like a TV screen but immensely bigger.

The picture was at first a static one; it showed a long arched passage, brick-lined, with other corridors leading from the side. The passage was dimly lit, and completely deserted. And totally silent. In their own room too, the plish-plash of the fountain had died away, as if it had been switched off with the lights.

Nothing happened for a while, and Chad started to speak.

"Sssh!" Alric held up a hand. "Listen."

At first it was very faint – but there was something about the new sound which, even though it was still distant, brought up goose-pimples on Alric's flesh, made all the little hairs on the back of his neck prickle. Human voices – men's voices – rising and falling in a weird toneless chanting. The sounds became louder, shadows fell on the stone floor, then Chad clutched his friend's arm, catching his breath as *they* began to appear in pairs from one of the arched passage-ends – blacked-robed, hooded monks, their faces hidden by deep cowls, some carrying books, others tall candles. The boys had seen monks before; there was a monastery by the Fane, but they didn't look like these dark nightmare beings. It wasn't simply their appearance, however, that made Alric's guts tighten; it was the device on the chest and back of each monk, and carried aloft by the leader...

A black Latin cross – the most feared, the most terrible image in the whole of their known history. The symbol of terror, of torture and burning, of martyrdom and death. Their revered Pagan ancestors had been tied to it, strangled on it, burned on it, tortured in its name and broken under its shadow. Held aloft and twisted in Europa, it had inspired waves of genocide; set aflame in Transatlantica, it had been carried before baying mobs of hooded devotees who butchered their slaves and the children of their slaves. Chanting, the monks poured down the passage, more and more of them, with groups joining from the other side-passages – all moving as if to some ceremony that would take place at the far end of the main corridor, off-screen.

"Is this a... *film*?" asked Alric in an undertone. "*When..?*"

"Now," said Wilfrid. "And it's not a film. Well, not in the sense you mean."

"But they don't exist any more," Alric said. "All that was...hundreds of years ago. The Highfather told us."

"You know that isn't so," said Wilfrid quietly. "Or, at least, you knew it last night."

Alric's stomach tightened again as he remembered... So it *was* real, was true. Yet, even in the worst of his nightmares he hadn't imagined just *who* the faceless men were.

"*Nazarites*," he breathed after a moment, daring only to whisper the dreadful word. "But – they *can't* be. Not now."

"It wouldn't be allowed," said Chad with slightly more confidence.

"We have to allow freedom to all, that's *our* faith," said Wilfrid. "We're not like *them*; that's the difficulty. So below our cities, in the catacombs, with the sewage and the rats, they too live on."

"And J-Jay?" ventured Alric.

The picture faded.

"Watch again," said Wilfrid. "But, first – *don't* be upset. You came here for help and help is what I'll give you."

The next picture came up very, very slowly – in fact, it was difficult to see anything at first. This time it was outdoors, at night. Then it was possible to see a sky patterned with stars, a street underneath and the black mass of buildings on both sides. The light grew a little, and it was possible to see that the ground was covered with fresh snow. A bell sounded, four times.

"Great Edwyn," whispered Alric. He had already begun to guess at what they were to see.

Yet, even this time, he saw very little. There was no sound of wheels, simply a sight of a darker mass moving in a little from the side, then coming to a rest. Immediately two hooded figures like those in the catacombs moved across the screen, then a moment later they came back carrying something long between them, limp like a corpse, its legs hanging on one side, its long fair hair at the other.

"Does he *know*?" breathed Alric, his skin crawling.

"He's still asleep, he thinks he's dreaming," Wilfrid said. "He thinks it's a nightmare, like you did."

"Like *Gretha* did," corrected Alric in an undertone, his eyes still unmoving. Again there was no sound; the black shape simply glided away from the side of the screen, leaving the road empty again. The picture faded; gradually the lights came up, the tapestry slid shut and the splash of the fountain could be heard again.

"Why Jay?" Alric asked, "And where is he? Is he all right?"

"I'll explain all that soon." Wilfrid rose, and so did the boys. "Come here," he said, and took Alric's hands in both of his. "Yes, he's all right – and if we help each other we can find him, we can bring him back. Don't ask any more questions now, just hold on to that. Okay?"

Alric started to speak, but Wilfrid held his hand up.

"Ah-ah! I meant it. Okay?"

"Okay," said Alric reluctantly.

Chad's brilliant green eyes, even wider than usual, had been moving from one to the other.

"What about me, can I help? I want to."

"Of course you'll help," Wilfrid said, patting his shoulder. "We're all together in this. So – I want you to come at the same time tomorrow – but, for now, I don't want you to go home tense or worried. Follow me."

The boys followed him down a long flight of shallow steps and round a corner.

"Wow!" they both said.

They were at the edge of a vast pool, filled with pale green water. The pool was in another huge pillared hall; this time the wall was lined with patterned tiles and mosaics in bright colors, depicting woodland scenes. Along the side were marble statues, tall plants and ferns, all clustered and designed that they seemed to fuse with the mosaics, so that it was difficult to know where one began and the other left off. Into the far side of the pool a great waterfall thundered, the water bouncing off a series of flat surfaces, then rushing down a long chicane to crash into the green water; the pool tumbled and rippled all along its length, lapping and splashing at the edges.

"That is designed for sliding down," said Wilfrid, pointing to the chicane. "If you're interested, that is..."

"If!" shouted Alric and in a moment the boys had thrown their clothes on the marble pavement and were splashing in the deliciously warm water, then bouncing down the waterfall into the water, yelling and shrieking, time and again. They dived off the edge, chased each other back and forth through the greenery, laughing and tumbling, their smooth naked bodies entwining time after time as they tumbled and wrestled in the shallows. At last, when they had to get out, Wilfrid stroked them both all over with scent, then briskly dried them before they reluctantly got dressed.

The two boys walked home together, warm and relaxed, under a curtain of stars.

"Don't forget, I'm helping you now," Chad reminded him. "Call for me tomorrow?"

"Course I will."

They went on in silence for a few minutes more, then Chad asked, "Did you get your amulet back from Otte?"

Heavens, thought Alric, should he put it in the Durnovaria Gazette?

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Will you give it to anyone else?"

Alric hesitated, then said, "I'm going to give it to Jay. When he comes back."

Chad looked surprised. "You'll give it to *Jay*? Can you? He's a kid like us, isn't he, not even a Segundo."

"He will be – and Otte said I could – well, sort of. So I will – if he wants it."

"He *will*," said Chad.

"How d'you know?" asked Alric, a little surprised by Chad's confidence.

They were half-way down the hill now; the city lay directly below them, its lit streets and squares spread out for almost as far as they could see; the Fane, brilliantly floodlit, reared hugely in the center.

The boys stopped to look. Chad didn't answer the question directly, but said shyly, "It was great in the pool, with you. We'll do it again?"

"Often and *often*," said Alric. They walked on down the hill, their feet scuffling through the snow, then Alric asked curiously, "Will *you* ever give anyone an amulet?"

Chad shook his head. "Dunno. One problem is, I don't like any of the Segundos much."

"Mm," said Alric thoughtfully, "Actually, I have an idea about that."

"What?"

"I can't say yet. But soon, I promise."

"Okay," Chad said in his usual way, dismissing the subject.

But it had been a useful evening, and they had resolved lots of things, and perhaps started others. Before Alric kissed Chad goodnight at his gate he asked, "You want to stay over Saturday?"

"Course!"

"Tomorrow after school, then."

On the next day, late in the afternoon, Wilfrid was outside working on his bike as before. He wore scarlet leathers today; a huge sun hung low over the city and caught his long sleek hair, so that it looked almost as red as his clothes.

He greeted them solemnly, without smiling, which unsettled Alric.

"Everything okay?"

"It's the revs," said Wilfrid sadly. "I've pepped up the mixture as much as I dare, but the revs just don't come through. And, if they don't, where are you? Another day at the work-bench, I'm afraid."

Inside, he changed into a simple but spotless ankle-length shirt and brought them cake together with wine that was a curious green color and sparkled, but which tasted delicious. This time they were in a different room from before; it too had a screen, but the screen occupied an entire wall, was curved, and was a kind of opalescent white. As the picture came up, the surface of the screen seemed to dissolve, and the images appeared in three dimensions, as if they were looking through a huge window.

There was a large room; this time the area was brightly lit, with every detail sharp and clear. It was a kind of schoolroom; a man in a black belted garment stood on a raised platform behind a desk, a long rod or pointer in his hands. Below the platform were rows of desks, and a number of boys stood upright beside them, perhaps a dozen or more. The boys' hair was cut very short and they were oddly dressed – they had dark loose shirts zipped to the neck and lumpy shapeless breeches like men wore, these like the shirts ill-fitting and looking much too big for them.

Behind the man at the desk was a tall Latin cross. But odd too; for a moment it reminded him of the statue of Odin hung on the tree Ygdrassil – but then he saw that these Nazarites – for so they had to be – had pinned a figure of one of *their* gods on the cross, in grotesque imitation of the Pagans' own ancient imagery.

The man was speaking in short sentences; at the end of each he rapped his rod on the table, looked around as the boys repeated each sentence, tonelessly, word for word.

"There is only one god, Jahweh."

"There is only one god, Jahweh."

"We are the people of Jahweh, and of his son Jeshua; they have chosen us."

"We are the people..."

It was as if the camera had begun to move around the room, towards a viewpoint near the man's desk, so that the boys' faces gradually came into view.

"All others are lost, all others will be destroyed."

"All others..."

Alric gasped. He had begun to tense up, almost certain he was about to see Jay, but for a few moments he hadn't recognized him.

Jay too was dressed in the drab clothes, and his hair was short and badly cut. His face was pale, his expression more strained than Alric had ever seen it.

"What are they *doing* to them?" he asked Wilfrid hoarsely.

"Watch," said Wilfrid quietly.

The chanting went on; the man on the platform appeared to be listing a number of rules, which the boys were repeating after him, word for word.

"You must not kill," went one rule.

"Well, that's something, anyway," Chad said.

"Except your enemies," went on the chant.

"Well, you would hardly kill your *friends*," said Alric with a short laugh.

"Sssh," said Wilfrid.

The man's voice began to rise, become high and shrill; he thumped the desk. "If you do not obey all these, if you do not do as we command, Jahweh will punish you, for we are the *voice* of Jahweh..."

Behind him pictures appeared, as if projected from a lantern. The picture was red and flickering; flames poured upwards, smoke rolling above, and in the midst of the flames dreadful creatures, horned fork-tailed grotesques armed with double-pronged spears, pushed struggling victims down into the flames, holding them relentlessly, leering, shouting and exulting. The victims' screams mingled with the roaring and crackle of the fires.

"Yes," shrieked the man. "Yes – that is where Jahweh will put you – if you act wrongly, if you speak wrongly, if you even *think* wrongly – this is the way you will be tortured – for ever and ever and ever."

There were flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth. The boys' faces, though lit by the red glare from the screen, seemed even paler than before; two of the younger boys had started to cry.

Alric sat forward suddenly. "I *know* that boy," he exclaimed. "At least, I'm next to certain I do. Isn't that Vali? He was a Songboy a few months ago."

"And I'm sure I know *that* one," put in Chad. "See – it's Thai. *He* was a Songboy; he used to sit beside me. Then he went to live with his aunt in Ilchester – or so they said."

And, between them, with greater or less certainty, the boys identified four others. All had been Songboys at one time, but had left the choir, indeed had left the city, for reasons that seemed unremarkable at the time. One, it was said, had taken ill and had gone to live where the climate was better; another, they had been told, had gained a scholarship to study in another city. But now the truth was clear, the truth that everyone had been hiding from them.

"But why *us*?" asked Alric.

"You'll understand that soon as well," said Wilfrid. "But it's not only Songboys; as you can see, there are others."

The man's voice was ranting on, and there was the sound of sobbing from all around the room. "Repent, repent...!" he was shouting.

The scene faded, and was replaced by one even more harrowing. The center of this room was occupied by a great vat of fluid – horrible fluid, slimy with what looked like streaks and lumps of blood floating around on it. The schoolboys were being seized one by one by the black-robed monks and thrown into the water amid struggles and pleas, each boy's head held down till he emerged gasping and choking, then thrust underneath again. Boys who were reluctant were whipped mercilessly before being dragged to the edge and thrust underneath.

"What is that stuff in the bath?" asked Chad.

"Amniotic fluid," said Wilfrid, "The boys, they say, are so evil that it is impossible for them to change, so they must be re-born."

"Do we *have* to watch this?" Alric asked, half-turning his head away. A choking youngster was pulled out of the water by his hair, coughing, whooping for breath.

"Do you repent?" shouted the man.

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Is it *real*?" whispered Chad.

"For now, yes," said Wilfrid. "But perhaps not for much longer."

There was another slow dissolve, then the boys were back in the classroom standing, bedraggled, by their desks again.

The man who had seemed to be in charge came back, then from under the desk he took a paper-mache pantomime mask, depicting a huge, grinning face, and put it on. Other men came in with more masks, and fixed a mask, with its grotesquely grinning face, round the head of each boy.

A tune started up, and the man started clapping his hands.

"I am happy, happy, happy..."

One of the masters went round whipping at the boys with his cane, and they had to join in.

"I have washed in water and blood, I am happy, happy.."

"I have washed..."

The master lashed at a boy who was not clapping with sufficient enthusiasm.

"Why aren't you clappy – I mean happy?" he snarled. The boy yelled and joined in the tempo.

Chad and Alric in the room watched in horrified silence. Somehow, the sight of all the grinning masks and the sound of the music and the rhythmic clapping was even more terrifying than the tears and the pleas had been earlier.

Alric turned to Wilfrid again.

"Wilf, do we *have* to..."

Wilfrid shook his head and the picture faded.

They sat in silence for a moment. Wilfrid refilled the glasses but the boys didn't drink any.

"Poor Jay," said Alric, his eyes swimming now. "Poor everyone..." He took Wilfrid's arm. "We can't leave them there; what are we going to *do*?"

Wilfrid said gently, "Tomorrow I'll tell you. And if we stick together we'll win – just remember that."

He nodded towards the glasses. "Now, you must drink."

Alric didn't know, and didn't ask, what was in the shimmering green fluid, but it certainly made them feel more relaxed, took away some of the awful tightness inside that the pictures had created, made some of the memories dissolve, fade – even till he wondered whether he had dreamed most of it...

Neither of the boys felt much like swimming afterwards, but somehow, after a time, they were both floating almost motionless in the warm pool with its gentle waves, and the stress was beginning to dissolve, all of their muscles were beginning to feel soft and relaxed again. Alric remembered being rubbed dry, as before, with a scented towel, then he was walking home in the cold night with Chad, but with his skin still warm and glowing so that he was scarcely aware of the December chill.

The boys were unable to see Wilfrid on the following day, because on Fridays Alric, with Gretha and his sister, always went across the city to visit Alric's father, Quintan. He lived in a walled villa on a hill on the opposite side to Wilfrid's; it was a long, low building rather like the one where Otte lived, but bigger. Alric got on well with Quintan, but he liked it best when he visited on his own. When he went across with Gretha he tended to get a bit bored, and spent most of time either watching TV or fiddling with Quintan's computer while Gretha and Quintan talked, drank wine, or made love. He had heard that in some places – even in the poorer parts of Durnovaria – a father lived with his children and their mother in the same house, all the time. It saved a lot of money, of course, but you would have to be quite poor, Alric thought, for things to come to that. He hoped it wouldn't happen to them; he didn't fancy the idea of *two* adults bossing him about – or trying to.

As if to illustrate his thoughts Gretha said, "Fetch some more wine, dear, if you would. It seems to be

going rather quickly this afternoon. And have some yourself, if you want."

Alric went over to the wine press, fetched a beaker, sniffed, and wrinkled his nose. The wine the adults drank was a degree too sharp for his liking. However, he didn't mind too much drinking it mixed with lemonade, though Quintan said *that* was disgusting!

He watched the two grown-ups covertly as he sipped his concoction. They knew everything, he had no doubt about it – about the missing boys, the catacombs, and the Nazarites. It was, he supposed, a sort of mistaken kindness that led them to conceal it all from him – but, on the other hand, he wasn't a baby – and he hoped before long that he would show them he wasn't. What he didn't understand, though, is why they seemed simply to accept the situation, why no-one *did* anything.

He asked Wilfrid this next evening.

"Oh, but they're trying," he said. "They're doing their very best."

"It doesn't seem like it."

"Well – one problem is – they simply don't know where they are, they haven't a clue. And they've been looking for ages now."

Alric wrinkled his brows, then said, "But you said they were in the catacombs under the cities."

"Yes, many of the worshipers are. But not the boys. They've been taken somewhere else – oh, a long way away."

"But you know where," said Alric. "You must. I mean – you have that film, or whatever."

"It isn't a film," said Wilfrid. "Well, not exactly. And the fact that I can show it doesn't mean I know where it comes from – well, not yet anyway. Oh, I know it may seem all very mysterious to you, but you'll understand soon enough."

"You keep saying that, Wilf," said Alric a little sulkily. "But, I mean – it's different for you, isn't it?"

"Different?"

"I – I suppose it's a bit cheeky of me to say this," Alric said hesitantly, trying not to annoy Wilfrid. "But – he's *our* friend, isn't it? And some of the others too. But – Jay especially. It's not so easy for us to be – well, all patient and cool and collected like you."

Wilfrid slowly got to his feet.

"I think there is something I should tell you – in fact I should have told you before. Come with me, both of you."

They went along a corridor with tall windows on either side, then into a huge vaulted room that looked like a kind of art gallery; there were paintings on all the walls and, in the corners, and on plinths throughout the area, white marble statues – gods, goddesses, Pan with his pipes, Cupid with his bow and arrows.

But it was the picture on the far wall, in a niche surrounded by a wide embrasure, that made Alric catch his breath.

Jay.

It was either a high-quality photograph or a very good painting, breathtaking in its color and its lifelike quality. Jay was shown seated outdoors, on a terrace with flowers growing alongside and a fountain playing behind. He was naked, his fair hair long as it had been before and slightly lifted by the wind, his skin lightly textured by the sunlight, his smile sparkling, his eyes blue as the August sky.

"That's *fabulous*," breathed Chad. "I've *never* seen a picture like that."

"You see," said Wilfrid. "Jay is very special to me too."

Alric looked at him quickly. "You mean..?"

"I mean," said Wilfrid quietly, "that Jay is my son."

The boys were totally silent for a moment or two.

"Gosh!" said Alric at last. "Oh, gosh!" Then he added, "I'm sorry. For what I said, I mean."

Wilfrid shook his head. "You were right in what you said. I should have explained before."

His voice grew quiet. "I might have seemed 'cool and collected', but in fact I miss Jay...desperately."

"Sorry," said Alric again. He put his arms round Wilfrid's neck.

Wilfrid hugged him back. "Don't be."

They returned to the room with the fountain; they sat down again and Wilfrid poured wine.

Suddenly Alric remembered what Jay had said – ages ago it seemed – about the man he loved so much. *Of course!* He laughed out loud – as Jay had said he would – but when the others looked at him enquiringly he simply shook his head.

Wilfrid passed the glasses around.

"I often wondered if it might happen," he continued, "I knew about the others, and there were...reasons why Jay might be next. But I didn't want to place any restrictions on him. And – I had faith in him – and have still. You see...what has happened is not perhaps altogether bad."

"No?" Alric raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, I miss him and I worry, but... These pictures you saw. They're not a film, you know. They are what is in Jay's mind, what he senses, what he feels. It comes back to me, it's reconstituted to make a picture. And Jay – well, Jay may be the one that brings them all back. With some help from us."

"He *will* be," said Alric confidently.

Then, as before, he was growing a little sleepy, his limbs heavy, but pleasantly so.

"It's Saturday; do you want to stay here tonight?" Wilfrid asked.

Both boys nodded eagerly. "Gosh, yes!"

"Go in the next room and ring your parents, then."

There was no difficulty. Indeed, as it was snowing again, and late, Gretha was predictably relieved that Alric would not be going out again.

Wilfrid brought the boys up to a room in one of the towers, with one wall curved, and curtains across high narrow windows. The room was lit with pale orange lamps, with an enormous half-curtained bed at one side. They were brought supper – biscuits, fruit and flavored milk; then, in an adjoining bathroom, Wilfrid bathed them together in a round sunken tub, standing each in turn on a step to be soaped all over with both of Wilfrid's large hands, then rinsed down with warm scented water. As he washed them, he talked quietly about Jay, what kind of boy he was, the things he liked, the trips they had made in the past, and those they would make in the future, perhaps all four of them together.

Alric loved the bath, and he quickly went very hard indeed – and so, he could see, did Chad.

"You want us with you tonight?" Chad asked, locking his arms round Wilfrid as he was lifted down from the step.

Wilfrid smiled and shook his head.

"No – I have work to do, plans to complete. But soon, perhaps."

They were not dried with a towel, but were put to stand in an alcove where warm perfumed air blew on their bodies from all round as they turned this way and that. The sensation of the warm eddies, currents and gusts coming at him from all angles and fluttering in all quarters was delicious, and soon Alric was tingling all over, especially down in front; he didn't think his stick had ever been so hard.

Chad's too, he could see, was the same, waving around like a bowsprit as he twisted and turned in the billowing warmth.

After they were dry Wilfrid stroked their hair and their bodies as he talked to them some more. And, after a while, his hands slid down over their stomachs, gently pulled by Chad, then by Alric, till he held Alric's stick in one hand and Chad's in the other. He drew the boys in towards one another, their bare feet shuffling on the tiles, both boys giggling as he touched the ends together.

Alric began to twist, to make himself move in Wilfrid's grasp, and Chad started to do the same, but Wilfrid shook his head again.

"I think that tonight these two pretty Songboys should sing nice songs together."

He spun them round, slapped them both gently, pointed to the bedroom.

"Go – *run!*"

Chad, who had become much more relaxed with Wilfrid now, grinned and asked, "What if we don't?"

"If you don't," said Wilfrid, "You will be severely *tickled.*"

Chad, hopping from one foot to the other on the tiled floor and swinging his arms, said, "Maybe I *want* to be tickled."

"Do you?"

Both youngsters nodded enthusiastically. "*Yes!*"

"Tomorrow, then. But *not* if you don't move *now!*"

Wilfrid jumped up, made as if to set off in pursuit. Laughing, tumbling, the two boys scampered up the steps to the next room; Chad, who was through the door first, landed feet-first on the huge bed, found it wonderfully springy and was soon trampolining up and down on it, turning over and over, bouncing on his toes, his back, his stomach. But Alric hadn't followed; he had stopped, turned, and now stood stock-still outside the door, his eyes two black pools fixed solemnly on Wilfrid.

Wilfrid went over, put an arm round him, drew him back momentarily into the smaller room and sat down, pulling the youngster close. He said, almost in an undertone, "Listen, Alric the Roman, you have something very precious – something you want to give to...someone you love very much. Right?"

Aide's eyes grew even bigger, now with astonishment, then he nodded.

Wilfrid quickly held up a hand as Alric began to speak.

"No, I don't want to know who it is."

Because you know already?

But the boy didn't say anything.

"When you give it to him he'll be very special to you indeed – he is already – and no-one, absolutely no-one – will take his place for you. But, it's *not* disloyal to have other friends, not if you care enough about them and they about you. Okay?"

Alric's eyes shone again and his face was illuminated with a broad smile.

"O-kay!"

Wilfrid slapped his bottom. "So go to your friend. *Now!*"

In an instant Alric had bounded across the carpet and launched himself on top of Chad; both boys yelled as he landed in a tangle of arms and legs. The light in the bathroom dimmed out and the door curtain dropped, but they were scarcely aware of it. Chad had wrestled himself on top of Alric, had pushed Alric on his back, then was kissing him on his cheeks, his lips, his neck, while Alric squealed and wriggled with delight – then Chad squirmed further down, licking and kissing all the way down Alric's chest and stomach – then was holding Alric's stick in one hand, kissing, licking it, then putting it in his mouth as far as he could, and...

"Waaah!" yelled Alric, jerking half-upright. "*Teeth!*"

"Sorry!"

"No," said Alric, "Again, again! And do with your tongue, too. Eeeeeee-AAAAAARGH!"

Chad's long locks delightfully tickled the inside of Alric's thighs as his head worked vigorously, and as Alric thrashed, kicked and shouted.

"Bite some more – some more!" His hands pressed against the sides of his friend's head, pushing it up and down ever more rapidly. After only a few moments he screamed and convulsed, his legs shooting out straight, his body bouncing up from the bed, rigid from top to toe, then landing again. But he kept moving the blond boy's head as enthusiastically as before, gasping, writhing, sobbing... After that they both lay still for a while, Alric breathless but relaxed, Chad, his head against one of Alric's thighs, still holding his friend's stick, gently, licking the end, then kissing it once, twice, then repeatedly. Then Alric sat, rolled the blond boy over, slid his lips down over his tummy, started licking the base of his stick, feeling with the tip of his tongue the tiny hairs that grew there now, but Chad took Alric's head in both hands, lifted it.

"I want to put it up your bottie," he whispered into Alric's ear.

Alric nodded, then whispered back, "Get some soap from the bathroom. I think that makes it easier, the first time."

But it was so very easy. Alric slid a pillow under himself, raising his bottom up as far as he could, then – after Chad returned from the bathroom – reaching back and helping, gasping just a little at first at the novel sensation, but then wriggling his rear cheeks as much as he could as he felt his friend pushing, jolting...then felt him joggling, bouncing, heard him *ah-ing*, *wah-wah-wahing*... And, finally it feeling so good that...as he felt Chad tense and shudder and heard him yell...he too shot again, right on to the counterpane.

Then they pulled the sheets over themselves and lay quietly, sleepily now, arms and legs entwined.

"Love you," whispered Chad.

Alric's arms tightened round Chad and he kissed him on the tip of his nose.

"Love you too."

"I wish Wilfrid had brought us off after our bath," Chad murmured. "I felt a bit crazy for it. I almost asked!"

"You should have," said Alric. "I think he would have – for you." He rolled on to his back, looking dreamily up at the angels and cherubs on the painted ceiling, then he asked curiously, "You let anyone else bring you off?"

Chad shook his head, then said, "Well, only my big brother. He's quite a pal as well, and I like him a lot."

Alric nodded. He remembered Chad's big brother, and had liked him too. He had been a Segundo a year or two ago, and Alric remembered how fiercely protective he had been of Chad as a little boy.

"He's a tennis champ, now," said Chad, "and he has these big strong wrists; does he make me *squeal!*"

"Lucky you!"

Chad shook with laughter again, and said, "He sometimes calls them my singing lessons!"

Then, quickly, he added, "*You* can give me my singing lessons now – as many as you like."

"Won't I just," Alric said, before he fell asleep.



The thaw came quickly now. The fields and paths were all clear within a few days, and, now that the Solstice had passed, the sun shone more often, and it became milder. Canada geese swept, honking, over the lake below Wilfrid's house, and foxes chased each other through the gorse-bushes; there were catkins

on the trees along the water's edge, there was colts-foot and traveler's joy, and the first snowdrops and crocuses were pushing through the long grass on the banks.

Alric and Chad often went up to Wilfrid's house now, where above all they loved to swim in the warm opalescent water and to slide and tumble down the chicane, often spending hours there at a time. Sometimes Gretha would ask, when Alric came home, "Well, has Wise Wilfrid answered all your questions?"

Alric would simply smile and say, "Not quite," and Gretha would say, "I thought not."

At the Fane, Geirrod had distributed the parts for the Bach Oratorio, including the solos that Jay would have sung. Alric was to sing one aria, *Now Light returns to the Earth*, and Chad would sing a duet, *Come Beloved Freya*, with Rufus, one of the Segundos. Soon, in the two weeks leading up to Lupercalia, the Songboys would go on one of their tours; there was one at this time of the year, and one at Midsummer. On these tours they were not just singers but players, staging a number of dramas associated with the season, whichever it was. The costumes at this time of the year were popular with the boys – the motley and bladders for the Feast of Fools, the stags' heads, the masks, the armor and helmets. They would also of course dance, and some boys played musical instruments as well. There was a great deal of rehearsing needed, also measuring and trying-out of costumes.

But Alric was growing even more impatient in the face of everyone's seeming casualness about Jay. One evening Wilfrid, having for once finished work on his bike, took both boys on the back for a long, thrilling trip over the hills, and round the long rim above the city; they sped like a hurricane, faster than Alric had ever gone before. When they stopped at last, faces flushed, pulses still hammering, Alric asked, "Did Jay often ride on the back?"

"Often," said Wilfrid, "Often and often. And he will soon again." He led the way inside. "The plan operates in a week."

"Oh, *no!*" said Chad. "That's when we go on tour."

"Exactly!" replied Wilfrid. "And that's when you start to help. I'll explain in a moment. But, first..."

They were in the tapestried hall again. Wilfrid brought them cakes and drinks again; there was a similar bubbling fluid to what they had before, but crystal clear this time. As he drank, he began to feel the familiar, pleasant swimming in his head; he lay back on the couch and saw the tapestries slide open again and the shapes and colors appear once more – at first blurred as if seen through a mist – but then as sharp and clear as if they were all in the room together, as if the screen had dissolved out of existence.

It was the classroom again; there was the desk, the teacher in his black robe, the boys in rows. Again, Alric was struck again by how strangely they were dressed, how grotesque their haircuts were. Their hair was short, cut high at the back and above the ears, and their clothes were lumpy as before, with heavy shirts and great floppy sleeves. When they stood to answer questions he saw their wide ill-fitting breeches; some even looked more ridiculous than others in that their breeches came down only about three-quarter way, stopping between knees and ankles.

Jay held up his hand to ask a question; uncannily, almost as if hearing Alric's thoughts, he asked, "Why do we have to wear these funny clothes?"

"Ah," the man came towards the desk, a mirthless leer on his face, and Jay shrank back a little. "So – our friend Jay wants to know why you have to wear what he is pleased to term 'funny clothes'. Well, well, friend Jay – and have you any *other* questions?"

Jay still held himself back from the master, but he asked, "Yes – why do we have to have these nasty haircuts?"

The master's rod cracked suddenly down on the desk; Jay jumped back with shock, and the other boys gasped.

"How *dare* you? How *dare* you question us? But I'll tell you – oh yes, I'll tell you."

Putting his rod down, he rested his hands on Jay's desk and moved his now flushed face forward till it was within a foot or two of the youngster's.

"Because it's boys like you – boys like *you*, and the rest of these precious Songboys, and boys that look like them, that turn men to *evil thoughts*. Yes, and not just men, but *each other*." He banged his fists on the desk. "Shame on you – aye, shame, *shame!*"

"But I don't understand," said Jay, his brows creased. "I haven't done anything."

"Ah, but that's not the point, is it?" The man slowly came upright, his lips curled in self-satisfaction as if he had won some kind of argument. "No, that's not the point."

"So – what is?"

"Oh, you're so smart with your questions, aren't you?" The master looked round the room. "*We* know all about pretty-pretty boys like you, how people look at them, what they make men, other boys, even women, *think*. Well, there'll be fewer for them to feast their eyes on now, won't there? And – look at you – he pointed to the shorn kids in their lumpy clothes – *you* don't enjoy looking at each other now, do you? Oh, there are no pretty blond locks here, no clothes here that show your *shape*, no *bare legs*."

He leaned forward again, lowering his voice.

"And I even hear of you, in those ceremonies of yours, *exhibiting* yourselves. Oh, you wicked sons of Satan, oh, shame on you!"

"He's mad," said Alric aloud.

"How dare you call me mad! How *dare* you speak to your elders like that," yelled the man, making Alric jump. But it seemed after all as if he was replying to something that Jay had muttered.

"Why do you keep us here?" Jay asked aloud. "You have no right."

"We are the servants of Jahweh, it is the will of Jahweh, and you have the *wickedness* to talk about 'rights'. Oh, you unrepentant boy! Tonight you will be severely punished for your rebellious spirit, and as often as necessary after that, till you too learn to love Jahweh."

"My father will come for me, you'll see," Jay said. "He won't let you away with this."

"Your father?" sneered the man. "Oh, we all know *him*. *Wise Wilfrid* – har, har. *He's* only wise in evil and black, black sorcery. *Wicked Wilfrid*, more like."

"Why, you big..." Jay had leapt to his feet and lunged out in fury, but he was immediately grasped by the master and two others, who had seemed to appear from nowhere, and he was hustled, struggling and yelling, out of the room.

"Oh, you will repent of this, you child of the Devil!" they heard the master say breathlessly as the door closed.

"Oh, no!" said Alric, leaning forward, his hands clutching the edge of the couch. "What will happen to him? Please, Wilf – can't we do *anything*?"

Wilfrid, somewhat to Alric's irritation this time, was calm as ever. "He will not be hurt," he said. "Please don't worry."

"But – these awful men..." Alric gestured towards the screen, but the picture was already fading, the colors dimming, the shapes becoming misty. He shook his head a little to clear it. Then after a moment he asked, as he had done before, "Is this *real*?"

"It's what's in Jay's head; it's what he knows," said Wilfrid enigmatically.

"That's not an answer," Alric said, not to be so easily put off this time.

Wilfrid sighed, then put his arms round the necks of both boys and drew them in to himself.

"Do you trust me?" he asked simply.

"Yes," said Chad.

Alric said, "Yes, but—"

Wilfrid gently put a finger on the boy's lips.

"You must try and trust me for a bit longer. But yes – it is real – too real. Yet, the Nazarites can't seriously hurt the boys; in the end they want them on *their* side. But...they won't win; you must believe that."

Alric began to relax; he leaned back against Wilfrid and nodded. Then he said, "He's very brave, though, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is," agreed Wilfrid. "At night, though, when it's dark and he's alone with nobody to see or hear – well, he wets his pillow then. Quite a lot."

Alric said, "It must be awful for him. And he must miss you badly too."

Wilfrid pulled the youngster close. "Yes, he does," he said gently. "But it's not for Wilfrid that he cries at night."

Alric pushed his face into his friend's warm robe, and was silent for a moment.

Then he whispered, "I do the same, sometimes."

"Not for much longer, Alric the Gladiator – you'll see."

"How much longer?"

"Until next week," said Wilfrid, "You set out on your tour then, don't you? Well, I believe that one of the places you will be visiting is the place where Jay and the other boys are – or very near it."

"How do you know?"

Wilfrid laughed quietly. "It's a bit late for technicalities. But some day, when I have paper and pens, a blackboard, and three hours or so, remind me to tell you about alpha-waves. For the moment, though, let's just say that I can to some extent guess the location of – he waved toward the closed curtains – what you have seen. But I can't go there – everybody would know. On the other hand – *you can*."

Almost asleep, Alric murmured, "So let the action begin."

Three days later the boys called to show Wilfrid their costumes for the plays; they would each take several parts, and thus wear a number of different costumes, but each had brought along his favorite. Alric was to be the Apprentice Fool, dressed like the Fool (one of the Segundos) in motley, with a three-cornered cap hung with bells, and a pig's bladder on a stick; with the latter he would playfully hit the dancers on the head during the revels. Chad would be a Boggan; he would wear a scarlet hat and a yellow tunic; carrying a willow wand he would attend the horse-headed Hoden, helping him to drive off Old Mollie, the evil crone who put spells on the crops and made the rivers dry up.

After they had changed back into their normal clothes, Chad said unexpectedly, "Wilf, there's something you keep forgetting."

"Eh? What's that?"

Chad grinned. "The dreaded *tickle*," he said; he poked at Wilfrid, then jumped back, then up and down on his toes. "Ages ago, you *promised!*"

It was extraordinary, thought Alric, how Chad was completely different when he was with Wilfrid; usually he was a rather quiet, sometimes almost sleepy boy – but with Wilfrid he could be suddenly bubbling with high spirits – like now – hyper-alert, fizzing and sparkling. Alric had seen this extraordinary switch in other Songboys when they were with someone they really cared about – a Segundo perhaps – and it was like nothing else. It had never been like this between himself and Otte, though they had been fond of each other in a way – still were, come to that.

Wilfrid had rolled his long sleeves up.

"Quickly, then – off with your clothes!"

In a moment Chad had dropped everything, including his sandals, on the floor, and was on knees and elbows on the couch, bottom cheekily high, legs splayed. Wilfrid put one hand under the boy's chest and the other, from behind, between his thighs, then set to work with tremendous diligence, with Chad, electrified from the first touch, shrieking, plunging, cartwheeling, kicking... And, with Wilfrid's repeated and vigorous attention to all his most sensitive spots he was soon super-hard, and before long, after Chad's pulling insistently at his arm, Wilfrid's busy fingers were agitating the boy's stick with such rapidity that he suddenly shot, two or three times, writhing and whistling, then holding and pulling at Wilfrid's hand again, and for some considerable time, to make him continue... Until, at long last, Wilfrid disengaged, patted the youngster's bottom, rolled him over on the couch, then motioned Alric to come for his turn.

Alric, already naked, bounced immediately down beside Chad, and in a moment he too was being tickled, thrashing and screaming, across the couch, on to the carpet, round the room, and all the way back again. Watching Chad's acrobatics had made him go every bit as hard, and now he shot almost within moments – although, when Wilfrid bathed them both later, he was self-evidently ready for a *reprise*, indeed demanded it. As Wilfrid, with Alric standing on the step of the marble bath, set about the task with his accustomed diligence, Alric asked, "Did you d-do this for J-Jay?"

"Jay wouldn't go to bed till I *did!*"

"Does he make more sticky than Alric?" inquired Chad, perched on the edge alongside.

Alric jolted, gasped, then shot – and again – and shortly later Wilfrid touched the end of the youngster's stick with his finger, then held it out towards Chad.

"Soon," he said, "*You'll tell me.*"

Next afternoon Wilfrid came to the Fane to watch the boys rehearse. It was quite usual for relatives and friends to come and watch the final rehearsals for the tour since, of course, they would probably not see the performances themselves. Alric's mother and his sister were also going to come over that evening. For once Wilfrid left his bike behind, and they walked to the Fane together along the side of the lake. The ice had melted some time ago, leaving the still luminous water completely clear; they could even see right to the bottom in the deep part where the boys made their swimming hole in summer; the diving board was still there, and the two youngsters knew they would be using it again in a few months now. They paused for a moment to look at the shrine to Ea nearby. It had been dressed with fresh flowers, poppies and daffodils – probably from the greenhouse by the Fane – and the wood at its base, with the runes deeply cut into its smooth surface, had been freshly varnished. The Nazarites, Wilfrid said, would not revere the gods of the trees and of the water; if they had their way, the trees would be cut down and the seas and the rivers polluted. Chad said that, next day, he would bring some more flowers to the shrine; in summer, the swimming hole was his favorite spot.

The rehearsal was almost the last one; the audience sat silently in the nave for most of the time. They had been asked not to applaud, but sometimes they did. The choir generally included about four plays in their touring repertoire each year, of contrasting types. There would be the historical play about their Roman ancestors, the one they had already rehearsed. Other plays would be comedies – for example, the rumbustious tale of Old Mollie and the Boggan. Then there would be a religious allegory of some kind and, to end, a play that involved a good deal of dancing, as this was one of the boys' principal talents.

In general, Segundos took the adult parts, or most of them; Otte, though mainly a musician, also took parts occasionally. If there were female parts, the boys took them, though none of them would want to be girls, and there would be great arguments. Usually the issue was in the end settled by a toss of a coin; this year, at least, Alric had been lucky.

Interspersed with the dramas there would, of course, be the choral music. This year the centerpieces were Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*, his joyful, bubbling sequence of hymns to the spring-deities, and Pergolesi's *Requiescat*, the composer's beautiful lament for the sacrificed Odin.

Wilfrid had left before the end of the rehearsal, but the boys were to go to his house again, and they walked up together in the dusk, carrying torches.

After they had walked in silence for a time, Alric said, "You know when I talked about you giving an amulet to somebody."

"Mm. You wouldn't say who."

"But you know *now* who I meant. Don't you?"

Chad said hesitantly, "Yes – I think so. But I couldn't. It would be a cheek."

"*He* wouldn't think so. And he likes you a lot. A lot. I can tell."

Chad, deeply thoughtful, said nothing for a while.

Then, "If I had just *one* wish..." he said, half in a whisper, and was silent again. Alric started to speak, then decided not to. He wished there was some way he could help but, perhaps, it was better he let things develop by themselves. And he was sure, he was *certain*, that they would.

At Wilfrid's they had clear delicately flavored wine and hot mince pies; but tonight the huge screen remained curtained. It was time, Wilfrid said, to think about the future, time to plan.

"Come with me," he said, and led the boys into a tall room with Gothic-style windows and a high, raftered ceiling. On all the walls were shelves with row upon row of books, mostly thick and leather-bound, with gold lettering on their spines. An oak table occupied the center of the room, and Wilfrid sat the boys rather formally on wing chairs to one side. Within a few moments, though, Chad – not for the first time – had found his way on to Wilfrid's knee, and Alric smiled to himself; he knew he was going to be proved right!

"Know your enemy," said Wilfrid, pouring yet more drinks, this time on a small round table alongside. "Let me tell you just a little more about the Nazarites, the people that have your friends, the people *you* must meet in order to get them back. Have you the courage to do that?"

Alric felt a cold tremor deep inside, but he nodded firmly, as did Chad.

"Good, I knew you would have. Here." He filled a goblet for each of them.

"Is it all true what the priests say?" asked Alric, "About the evil prophet Jeshua, and about all the tortures and murderings and so on?"

"Up to a point," said Wilfrid slowly. "Jeshua himself was not, in fact, a bad man. He meant well, and he had the right ideas. He taught, for example, that it was not the priests, nor the wise men, but *children* that would lead the world to the truth. And for his friends he picked just a few boys, mostly no older than yourselves. In fact, his particular friend, Johann, was only twelve, and he was the only one who never let Jeshua down; he later became a great writer and a famous man. But all this was too much for Jeshua's Ishmaelite puppet-masters; he was murdered, his teachings were perverted and – well, things were worse than ever. As you've seen."

"Now they *hate* children," said Chad.

Wilfrid nodded. "They fear them," he said. "Because of what they know."

Alric had moved too, on to a low stool alongside Wilfrid's big chair; he leaned his head on the man's knee. "What do we know, Wilf?"

"What matters and what doesn't."

Alric wrinkled his brows and puzzled a little; he would work it out, he supposed, given time. Of one thing he was sure, Chad knew, *he* had worked it out.

"Now then," said Wilfrid. "To practicalities. You leave tomorrow, don't you?"

The boys nodded.

Wilfrid got up and went to the oak table. On its center was a small box, also brightly polished, four or five inches square. Wilfrid took it up, undid its polished brass clasps, and opened the top. Inside was a flat ebony-black panel with, in its center, the upper half of a white globe; nothing else.

Wilfrid tapped the globe's center. "This box picks up Jay's alpha-waves just like the screen mechanism."

"A *crystal ball*?" asked Chad, his eyes wide. "Can we see him in it?"

Wilfrid laughed. "That would be nice – but no. However, when the alpha waves are strong that globe will light up; you'll see it glow a faint blue. The nearer you are to the source – by which I mean Jay – the brighter the bulb will be. You see, it's not lit now, but soon it will be."

"When?"

"At one of the places you visit. You'll see." Wilfrid closed the box and handed it to Alric. "Keep it safe, but well hidden. Carry it around with you in a sports bag or rucksack or whatever, and look at it from time to time. And...good luck!"

"Won't we see you at all on the trip, Wilf?" asked Chad as they parted at the gate.

"You may, you may not," said Wilfrid enigmatically. "But, I advise you, keep looking out for me. *Wherever you go.*"



The choir's first stop was Verulamium, about three hours drive in their bus. By custom, the opening performance was invariably in the capital city, and Alric always enjoyed visiting it – seeing the huge pillared temples on all the hills, the columns surmounted by gryphons and winged goddesses, the arches, the amphitheaters, the great marble statues. The stone had everywhere been freshly painted, the pillars and their capitals in contrasting and bright reds, greens and orange, so that the whole city, under the clear January sky, was a vast riot of a thousand shades and colors. All vehicles, on leaving the trafficway, had to be parked in enormous wooded spaces a mile out of the city, so that inside it the air was clear and sparkling; scores of brightly-plumaged birds, imported from the southern lands, swooped and twittered through the arches and columns.

The performance that evening was in a domed hall near the top of the uppermost hill. The mythical play was one of Alric's favorites – about how Thor had tricked the wicked giants Skrymir and Utgard-Loki and, annexing their lands, had added them as a gift to Midgard, the home of men. The giants had huge paper-mache heads and the action was long, furious, and exquisitely choreographed, bringing one burst of applause after another.

The dances – by the Songboys alone – were near the end. For these, a chain of elfin revels, the boys wore only colored caps and slippers. The boys usually performed at least one or two of the dances naked, often all of them. As the Songboys were chosen for, among other things, their exceptional attractiveness, audiences appreciated these – as indeed the thunderous applause at the end of the opening sequence amply testified.

Alric had been chosen as one of the two boys who would do the dance of the Elves of Spring, symbolizing the returning life. His partner was twelve-year-old Aeden, whose golden curls always made him a favorite with audiences. For this, the last dance, they discarded everything, even caps and slippers. The action was fast-moving; to a rapid measure on flute, harp and rattle, the pair went into a wild and colorful sequence of leaps, rolls and head-over-heels tumbles, followed by a slower interlude with gauze scarves in yellow and scarlet – and at the end a chain of handstands and near-gymnastic leaps,

culminating in Alric's catching Aeden in mid-air and holding him aloft, arms extended, motionless for a moment. The applause rang in Alric's ears then as he stood tousle-haired and breathless, and he colored with pleasure. The entire sequence had needed a lot of rehearsal and the most intense concentration, and he was proud and delighted that it had gone through so faultlessly.

The clapping continued as Aeden dropped to the ground, also as the elves kissed farewell and ran off into opposite wings.

"More, more! Encore!"

Alric wouldn't have minded, and looked at Geirrod enquiringly, but the Songmaster shook his head, called in all the others to take their bow, and at last brought down the curtain.

"You should have done the elves' dance with *me*," said Chad reproachfully that night, as the two lay bundled together under a wide woolen blanket.

"I'd rather have," said Alric, "But I didn't think you could choose."

"You could have," said Chad with some severity, "And you should have."

He pushed the blanket aside and it slid to the floor. His cheek cradled on Alric's bare stomach, he was engaging idly in the agreeable habit he had developed of blowing gently on Alric's stick till it was hard.

"So what you going to do about it?" asked Alric sleepily, a moment or two later.

"*This*." Chad lowered his head suddenly, and set to work so vigorously with lips, teeth and tongue that Alric, instantly wide awake, was soon writhing and shrieking...and when he shot it was like a small explosion, accompanied by a yell that might even have penetrated Geirrod's sanctum, might even have brought him roaring from his den with heaven knew what consequences.

But Geirrod, being no longer young, was probably exhausted by the day's traveling and the night's performance. Or more likely he heard the boys and ignored them. Because after each concert the Songboys, like all performers, remained elated and over-excited for some time; they would romp, wrestle, laugh and chase, with great reluctance go to sleep or even to bed. So those in charge often encouraged them to dispel their nervous energy in the most natural way, so that, with the Songboys in bed singly or in pairs, the night would soon be resonating to delectable vocals varying from soft gasping and giggling to a wide and fascinating range of banshee yells and *fortissimo* shrieks as the excitements of the evening were finally and categorically bombarded off into the darkness. These entertainments were often referred to as the boys' "late choir practice". Alric remembered Geirrod once standing with arms akimbo at the ends of the dormitory on such an occasion until all was at last silent, then rapping his baton on his palm like a conductor acknowledging the end of a successful performance, and snapping, "Thank you – and good night", before striding off again.

The January Kalends ushered in the Feast of Fools, which could be celebrated more or less at any time in the season. On the choir's second (and last) night in Verulamium, the concert ended with a ring-dance in the city's main square. A great fire had been lit in the square's center and the Songboys, this time in green and crimson motley, leapt and pranced around it, accompanied by the Segundos dressed as Fools, as Lords of Misrule with cardboard crowns and scepters, or as moderately amiable demons wearing masks, pointed hats and animal skins. Some of the boys also wore hats and skins, their faces were blackened, and they uttered ferocious war-whoops to the music of horns, drums and accordion.

On another fire, several whole sheep had been roasted. After the dances, Songboys, Segundos and audience enjoyed hot mutton, mince pies and roasted apples. An enormous wassail bowl had been prepared, and cups and glasses were filled with its heady mixture of hot ale, spices, cloves and ginger.

Halfway through the feast, Chad gripped Aide's arm and pointed.

"Wilfrid!"

It was hard to see in the dark; the leaping flames reflected off the terrazzo, the pillars and the statues, but the faces of the crowd were not so easily discerned. Then the flames rose again, and Alric saw him clearly, right opposite. His hair was red and yellow in the firelight, and, as before he looked much older out of his motorbike leathers. This time he was dressed quite formally, in a white robe and dark green cloak, fastened with a gleaming gold buckle.

Chad was at his side in a minute, hugging him, then so was Alric.

"I couldn't stay away from you for long," whispered Wilfrid. Alric was uncertain whether this was addressed to them both, or particularly to Chad, and it was probably this uneasiness that led him, that night, to tiptoe downstairs and perch on the end of Otte's bed in the long room that he shared with the other musicians.

"So?" whispered Otte. "A little naked ghost visits me?"

"A little *cold* ghost."

"Oh, come on, then." Otte lifted the blankets and Alric slid in beside him. "So we're still friends?" he asked drily.

For answer Alric twisted his arms and legs round him, squeezed and wriggled.

"You're a fake," Otte said. "You're not a *bit* cold." Then he held the boy in turn, held him throughout the night, patting and stroking him all over, almost untiringly. He didn't do anything more – though Alric felt that night he might have let him – but the boy felt Otte's warmth and closeness wonderfully comforting nevertheless.

Otte wasn't fooled, though. In the morning he asked sleepily, "So where's that delectable little blond, then?"

"Aeden?"

"No."

"Oh. I don't know."

"With his friend, is he? So you come back to your old friend Otte?"

"I don't think he is with his friend," said Alric thoughtfully. "Well, not like you mean. But..." He considered the young man doubtfully. Was it starting again, was the old nasty-Otte back?

"Did you mind?" he asked doubtfully.

"Will you get it into your head..." began Otte slowly.

"Yes?"

Otte pulled Alric's face down, kissed him hard.

"...that you are, absolutely and without exception, the very nicest hot-water bottle in the world. Now, *get up!*"

The day following was a free day for the boys, and Wilfrid took Alric and Chad out on an extraordinary expedition. It was an unusually sunny day for January, and they were able to sit out in the square, between the columns, with an abundance of cakes and ale between them, while Wilfrid explained.

The devotees of Jahweh and their Nazarite puppets, Wilfrid said, had considerable influence in relation to their small numbers. Many vulnerable people fell under their influence, and this influence induced in such people curious states of mania, almost of panic sometimes. The State naturally did not want the public in general to have to witness such sad sights and, also in consideration to these pathetic souls, had set aside a large sports-field in the outskirts of the town where the victims of such hysterical

attacks could indulge themselves freely – on the race-track or in the sand-pit, running, jumping, waving their arms and crying out at will. They were therefore able to enjoy their attacks freely – if "enjoy" was the word – and let other people get on with their lives undisturbed. From time to time, however, the city opened the sports-field to spectators – not as an entertainment, but so that viewing these sad lunatics would be a solemn lesson to all.

Wilfrid and the boys got good seats near the front, and the two youngsters watched the performance with fascinated eyes. The lunatics (or, to be kind, the patients) were a motley lot; there were men with long hair and straggling beards, others in uniform, other men with hair cut very short and in jackets and breeches instead of uniform; there were, too, quite a number of very odd-looking women dressed like men, with hard faces, also with hair cut short and wearing breeches.

When the spectators arrived most of the sufferers were, as Wilfrid had said, running to and fro distractedly, whirling their arms, pulling at their hair and shouting indistinguishably, though some of the short-haired men were trying to form up in rows and march to and fro, like soldiers.

Some words became audible. From time to time one of the sufferers would rush to the edge of the stadium, confer with a group there, then career back, gathering another group who would confer with their heads earnestly together, then start arm-waving and yelling again.

"Filth!" shrieked a woman.

"An *avalanche* of filth!" shouted another.

"A *floodtide* of filth!" shrilled a third.

"Shock-shock-shock! All fall down!" chorused the rest.

Wilfrid grinned, then said, "I should have explained, by the way, that most of the panic is about sex! I'm afraid that, in these attacks, it's the main thing they have on the brain."

Alric wrinkled his brows. "Why?"

Wilfrid put a hand on his shoulder. He explained that many of the sufferers were people who had been disappointed in life in various ways – legislators who had failed to obtain office, entertainers whose star was on the wane, fourth-raters in many other fields...

"You see, there's a kind of person," he went on, "when they haven't had what they want from life, just can't bear to see anyone *else* enjoying himself. So – well, what's just about the most enjoyable thing there is?"

Alric giggled. "Have you been *watching* us?"

Wilfrid smiled. "You understand, then?"

The boys nodded.

"Mm – I suppose so," Chad said.

Another of the women had come rushing over from a corner, arms windmilling. "There are *dirty* pictures!"

"Thousands of them!" from another.

"*Millions* of them!"

A fat, pink-faced man started, "Millions and millions and trillions and *trillions* and..." becoming pinker and pinker until he broke off in a severe coughing fit and had to be helped out of the arena.

"Where are the dirty pictures?" asked Chad with interest.

"There are none; I *told* you they were lunatics!"

"Perverts!" bawled one woman, pointing at the spectators in general.

"Sex-maniacs!" shouted a man, pointing as well.

"*We* are?" said Chad.

"Cut their balls off!" shouted one of the short-haired men.

But the shaggy men and some of the women had formed into tight circle and were spinning round and round, heads together. "Therapy...therapy," someone muttered.

"Deep, *deep* therapy," intoned the others.

Now there was some excitement at the far side of the arena. A small crowd of patients was forming around something they had just found; the therapy group and the marchers instantly stopped what they were doing and turned their heads to see, open-mouthed and alert.

"What's happening?" asked Chad, craning to see.

"Ssh! Just watch."

Now everyone had gone to the far side. Suddenly loud music struck up and a massive wooden cart emerged from the crowd, pulled with ropes by about a dozen of the patients. All the others now started jumping up and down excitedly. The cart was decked with thousands of ribbons and balloons, and on it sat musicians playing trumpets, trombones and drums.

Wilfrid nodded. "I knew it, they've got a new bandwagon. They *will* be pleased!"

And indeed they seemed to be. On the side of the cart had been crudely painted the legend: PROTECT THE INNOCENTS, and the patients were pointing it out to each other, nodding and smiling. As the cart set out around the arena, however, there was a terrific scramble to get on top, with many of the patients thrown off or trampled. Some of the injured had to be carried off the field; others who had failed to get on the wagon ran around it sobbing and crying, pleading with those on top, now jubilant, to let them climb up as well. Some of those on the ground yelled out slogans designed to attract the attention of their more fortunate colleagues.

"Millions of innocents abused!"

"Trillions and *trillions!*"

"Who can survive? Who, who, *who!*"

There was now so much wailing that the spectacle had become less enjoyable, and then events took an even less pleasant turn.

"Look – that man's *touching* that boy!" shrieked a bullet-headed woman, pointing straight at Wilfrid, whose arm was round Chad's neck.

"He's *hugging* him!" bellowed one of the short-haired men, as Wilfrid's arm tightened protectively.

Wilfrid smiled benignly at the pair; as they were joined by others, he whispered to Chad to pay no attention.

"He's being *nice* to him!" shouted one of the short-haired women.

"The boy will be *scarred for life!*" yelled another, and the crowd joined in again.

"His *children* will be scarred for life!"

"His *grandchildren* will be..."

The remainder of the sentence was drowned as the band struck up with increased volume. And, as the drums were beaten ever more vigorously, all those on the ground and in the bandwagon turned as one towards Wilfrid and Chad, pointing, shaking their fists and bellowing abuse.

"Filthy perverts!"

"Filthy, *disgusting* perverts! We'll get you! We'll *get* you!"

Now, though Wilfrid continued to smile down amiably, Chad was white-faced, and both boys were immensely relieved when the attendants quickly herded the patients back into their enclosure, locking and barring the gates.

Outside, Wilfrid looked less happy.

"I'm afraid that 'Wise Wilfrid' doesn't always live up to his name. I really shouldn't have brought you there."

"It – it's all right," said Chad, for whom Wilfrid could never do any wrong.

"Pray to all the gods," said Wilfrid seriously, "That these gates stay locked, that these people never take control."

"That would never be allowed," said Alric, but Wilfrid didn't reply.

Then Alric said politely, "Thanks for taking us, anyway. But next time, take us to the circus!"



They were due to leave Verulamium next day, in the afternoon. In the morning Wilfrid reappeared in his bike leathers, and took Alric and Chad for a ride into the hills high above the city. It was still unusually sunny for the time of year, and the sky was clear and bright blue. Chad had said that he wanted Wilfrid to tickle him again – which was partly the reason for the ride to the country, the process being invariably a noisy one. In a wide dell, both boys quickly skinned off their clothes and were lengthily tickled, naked and screaming, on the cool grass; then Wilfrid pushed them close against one another so that they wrestled and tickled deliriously together, rolling, tumbling and thrashing, then tickled each other's now-hard sticks till they both shot spectacularly. Afterwards he pulled the pair against his large warm leathers, cuddled them and talked, but quite soon they got their clothes again. They had decided some time ago that they always wanted to be naked when they were with Wilfrid, but even this delight had to be limited when it came to the outdoors in January. In any case, they soon had to join the rest of the group to leave for Eboracum, where they would give another two concerts.

The weather changed dramatically again; as soon as their bus was on the trafficway heading north the sky clouded and it started to snow. As the bus accelerated to two hundred miles per hour or so the flakes came spinning past at astonishing speeds, then the snowfall gradually thickened till the view was almost blotted out; though it was still just afternoon the bus's huge spotlights had to be switched on, and soon it was rushing forward as if blindly into a dense tunnel of whiteness, with no landscape, not even any road, visible at last.

As they neared the city the snow slackened and there were occasional flashes of winter sunlight, but when the bus in due course turned off the trafficway on to the city approach it made slow progress in the deep snow, sometime sliding and skidding on the steeper hills. But this was the greatest fun for the Songboys, who yelled and whooped at every heart-stopping side-slip, then cheered loudly at the sight of Eboracum rising above a vast white forest, its pillared temples and houses covered with snow like a thousand icing-covered cakes.

And when they arrived at the school where they were to stay, miraculously, a sledge was found in the cellars – several sledges, indeed. So, almost as soon as the group had arrived, one sledge after another was hurtling down the enormously steep hill below the school, topped with shrieking, woolen-hatted Songboys, all usually to end in a confusion of arms and legs in a deep drift at the bottom. Alric and some others started a snowball fight, but Geirrod's assistant, Odo, who was an earnest young man, came out and stopped them.

"I know it's just a bit of fun," he said, "but the Songboys are meant to be *friends*; this is the whole principle we work on, and any *appearance* of aggression between you, even in play, should be avoided. After all, one thing leads to another, does it not? If you *must* work off your boyish high spirits, then find some – um – victims outside the choir, but you really should be expending your energy in more *creative* ways..."

Therefore the boys spent the remainder of the afternoon making a Geirrod-snowman, borrowing a

large carrot from the kitchen for his large red nose, and putting twigs under it for his moustache. They hoped the snow wouldn't melt before he noticed.

After these entertainments and before the concert, a hot bath was required. In the fashion of most schools, there was a huge communal bath in the basement, like a shallow swimming pool. There, as usual, the Songboys bathed one another in pairs, each boy rubbing the other's entire body with liquid soap, using both palms, then splashing him down repeatedly.

This scheduling was somewhat unusual. The boys normally had their bath after a concert, rather than before, the reason being that most of the boys shot when their sticks were being washed, and Odo – increasingly often in charge now – felt that this expended some of the nervous energy that otherwise would have given the Songboys' performances the special sparkle they were noted for. Indeed, he had decided that the boys sang their very best when they were hard, and often before a concert he and his assistants would rub the front of the each boy's robe for the necessary length of time before they went on stage.

"Wish they would rub our *bare* willies," murmured Alric to Chad as they waited their turn.

"You know very well what would happen if I did," said Tor, an assistant. "Just enough and no more, that's the rule."

Not always, though. Not long ago Ran had suddenly stickied himself during the high note of his solo in the *Exultate*. Whether it was the excitement of the music or the memory of just having bathed Aeden, one of the prettiest of the Songboys, was something even he wasn't sure about. However, the audience applauded his solo ecstatically when he had finished; the musicality of his trills and the singularity of his cadenzas were a talking-point for some time afterwards.

At bath-time after the revels in the snow, Alric's other half was in fact this same Ran, now aged fourteen, who proved very painstaking indeed in his attentions. Alric's stick was hard and tingling long before Ran had finished and, when, almost at the end, he was made to bend and part his bottom-cheeks, Ran washed in between with such diligence that Alric, squealing, shot there and then. Whether it took away from his performance that evening, however, he doubted. It was one of his favorites – the dance being the celebration of the first light of Lupercalia, namely starlight. The songs were first, then, in a sacred squared circle chalked in the center of the amphitheater, a black-masked and long-haired Segundo crouched, stood, whirled as Queen of the Night. The choristers, as Star-boys, skipped about the Queen in a ring, holding aloft five-pointed star emblems, each boy leaping high into the air, turning round completely, as he reached the squared circle's apex. Their appearance was a complete contrast to that of the paint-streaked goblins of the earlier performance; each boy was now in a calf-length and spotless white alb, his long hair sleekly combed, his body freshly washed and scented. Alric's eyes moved round the circle of boy-dancers endlessly, alert for each succeeding move. The outer lights whirled round and round him, their colors mingling and blurring. His skin, his whole body began to thrill with excitement, as ever, as the climax of the dance approached. Dimly, he saw more Segundos circle with tall lanterns on poles, then, as the heart-beat rhythm of the drums quickened, the audience, handed burning torches, began gradually to form a huge ring of fire on the outside. And, as the young dancers spun into their next movement, Alric was scarcely able to suppress a whoop of delight as each boy, coming to the top of the mandala, tossed his star to the Night-Goddess and then, with an equally swift motion, threw in his robe. The dancers skipped round again, faster and faster as the music quickened further and its volume rose, the lights playing brilliantly on their pale nude bodies. They finished with a spectacular sequence of cartwheels, then all bowed, together, to rapturous applause.

Afterwards, still bouncing on tiptoe, he immediately sought out Chad, pulling at his arm.

"You staying to watch the orgy?" Chad asked. Hearing the thump of the great drum now, then the bass

serpent, he added, "Sounds like they're about to begin."

Alric shook his head. On major festivals especially, the performance frequently ended with an orgy, and Gretha sometimes came on these evenings. But the Songboys were often extremely tired, or had had too much ale, by the time the orgy began, and they usually went straight to bed.

But Alric wasn't tired. He pulled at Chad again. "No, come with me instead."

"Course I will." Chad reached for his robe, but Alric said, "No, I like you best like that."

"You too, then. *Race* you!"

In their tower room upstairs, a moment later, Alric had pushed his friend on his back on his bed and then was making extravagant play with lips, teeth and tongue while Chad laughed, sobbed, shouted and writhed on the lambskin underneath. It was only a few seconds before Chad shot with a banshee-scream, then he had pulled Alric's face down on his own and was kissing him over and over again, then he was holding and jerking Alric's stick – till Alric quickly drew Chad's head down on to it and, while the drums throbbed outside, the cornets sounded and the firelight flickered on the ceiling above them, Chad all but devoured his gasping, yelling friend's stick until Alric too convulsed and shot explosively, shrieking almost as loudly as Chad had done, and for twice as long.

The two boys lay tumbled together in silence after that, hugging and cuddling on top of the bedspread. Alric still didn't feel tired. And the music, too, was still playing outside. After a while Chad rolled away a little; tummy-down, chin in hands, he said quietly, "I wasn't with Wilfrid last night. You thought I was, didn't you?"

"I wasn't sure," said Alric. He sat up slightly, kneeling over Chad's thighs, legs apart, enjoyed looking at and caressing his friend's smooth lithe body, running his palms up and down, patting, pressing, stroking. He remembered what Otte had said. *Delectable*. He wondered what it meant – but he could make a good guess.

"I mean..." said Chad. "Well, what I mean is, we just talked. I sat on his knee and we talked for ages. About everything."

"Like what, for instance."

"About you and Jay, for one thing. Hope you didn't mind."

"No. What did you say?"

"I didn't have to say much, actually. He knew. And he says that Jay was lucky, he would have the most loyal friend a boy could have."

"Jay lucky?" said Alric wonderingly, but feeling a surge of pleasure nevertheless.

"Then we talked about you and me. *Aaah!*"

Alric's hands had moved on to Chad's neat round bottom-cheeks; he cupped his palms over them, sliding his fingers in between, parting Chad's thighs a little. He wriggled his fingers, then pushed harder. Chad squealed again at that, and when Alric took his fingers out Chad reached back and pushed them back in.

"What about you and me?" Alric asked.

"He said that...when you give someone older an amulet, it doesn't stop you having another friend – like I've got you – if we care enough about each other. *Waaa-eeeh!*"

"Yes, he told me that too," Alric said. "So we know."

"This may surprise you a little," Chad said, "But for once I don't care what Wilfrid says..."

But he glanced around once, as if Wilfrid might be hiding behind the curtain.

"...and whether Wilfrid had said we could or not..."

Alric at last withdrew his fingers, but Chad reached back, took a firm hold of his friend's stick, now as hard as ever, and pulled that down instead. Alric, though now thoroughly a-tingle again, didn't go right

in – indeed he scarcely had time; his stick slid into the warm tight space at the tops of Chad's thighs; and as Chad clamped his thighs and bottom-cheeks on it, then twisted and wriggled with the utmost vigor, Alric jolted from end to end, squalling, whooping and whistling. His legs thrashed, his feet pedaled, then his whole body whiplashed, and he yelled again, long and loud...

"Oooh! Stick-eee!" breathed Chad after a moment, squirming pleasurably.

And then Alric's mouth was on Chad's cheek, kissing, licking it, until the blond boy rolled around and pressed Alric's mouth back down on his own; they hugged, rolled and tumbled over and over while the drums beat endlessly.

Midnight... And just before they fell asleep, Chad put his face close to Alric's ear and whispered.

"Wow-ee!" said Alric. "Tomorrow I *will!*"

Chad was still asleep when Alric woke at eight o'clock. Alric swung his legs over the edge of the bed and padded naked to the kitchen to carry out his first duty of the day – to bring orange juice and fresh rolls to Ran, who was at present Acting Head Songboy.

Ran sat up sleepily; he told Alric to get a second glass, then shared his breakfast with him as he perched on the side of his bed.

Then Alric asked, "Ran, do you know what's happened to Jay?"

He saw the other boy stiffen, saw him look down.

"No idea," he said in an odd voice.

"Yeah?" said Alric disbelievingly.

"Well – my mother said I wasn't to talk about him – not even to think about him any more. He had – betrayed us, she said."

Alric sat straight up, spun Ran round to face him. "What d'you *mean?*"

Ran said slowly, not meeting Alric's eyes, "She said he'd joined the Nazarites. And...she explained to me about them. You see, I'd thought, like we're always told, that they died out hundreds of years ago, but she said that they still live under the cities, in catacombs, and come out only at night. She said that they're getting more powerful, and that they want to destroy everything we have – our houses, our temples, our religion – but they can't do anything to them because we believe in religious freedom. And—"

"But what about Jay?" asked Alric impatiently, "And all the others?"

"What others?"

You know – Ulf, Bragga, Teho, Cerdic – all the Songboys who've gone from the choir in the past year or so. Well, they've all been taken by the Nazarites, every one. Jay hasn't joined, he wouldn't. He's been taken, *kidnapped.*"

"Yes?" said Ran doubtfully. "My mother said, if you ever see one, never listen. They're very persuasive, like *hypnotic*, she said. And they frighten you, tell you things like you'll be burnt alive for ever and ever if you don't do what they say."

"Listen," said Alric, turning Ran's head round with his hands till the other boy was forced to face him.

"You *really* believe that Jay would be a...*traitor*, do you? He was your friend too, wasn't he?"

Ran nodded. "Yes. And – no, I don't. But...if they are so persuasive..."

"Jay's not stupid, though."

"I suppose not. But how d'you know all this anyway?"

Jay hesitated, then said, "Wise Wilfrid told me."

Ran, head back on the pillow, closed his eyes and said, as if repeating something he had learnt by heart, "Wise Wilfrid is very old, with a long white beard. He lives in a big castle in the hills, and he knows everything." He opened his eyes and said, "C'mon, Al. Wise Wilfrid! Your mother makes him up,

like the Tooth Fairy. It's just a way to shut you up when you ask difficult questions. *Ask Wise Wilfrid.*"

"He *does* exist," said Alric earnestly, grasping both of his friend's arms. "He's not a bit like you say, *and* he's helping us to find Jay, because Jay's his –" He stopped suddenly, uncertain whether this had been a secret.

Ran laughed. "Jay's his *boy*, you mean. Well – lucky Wilfrid – if he exists, that is."

Alric shook his head. He lay back and looked at the ceiling. "I didn't mean that. In fact, Jay's going to be *my* boy – when we find him. Or – the other way round, really. I'm going to give him my amulet."

Ran looked surprised. "He's not even a Segundo yet."

"He soon will be. So – if he wants it – it'll be okay. Wilfrid says."

"Wilfrid says, *Wilfrid* says," groaned Ran. "Okay, if it's all true – so what?"

Alric hesitated again, uncertain whether he could tell Ran about the box with the blue globe. "If it is, will you help me?"

Ran had sat up now, becoming progressively more interested. "We'll *all* help you; all the Songboys will be behind you, you'll see. I'm second in the choir to Jay, and they'll do what I say. But they'd want to anyway, because they all liked Jay – *and* they've all lost friends in the last year."

"And it could be any of us next," said Alric. "You – me..."

"But why *us*?" asked Ran, wrinkling his nose. "Why the Songboys?"

Alric smiled. "I asked Wilfrid this, but he said the answer would make me swollen-headed! Jewels in the crown, he said, and left it at that. But there are others, too."

"What to *do*, though?" repeated Ran. Now thoroughly awake, he kicked off the blankets and drew his knees up under his chin.

"I think Wilfrid will know," said Alric.

"Where is he?" demanded Ran.

"I don't know, and I don't know when we'll see him again – but I'll bet Chad does. There's something special between them now, and Chad always knows when Wilfrid's next going to be around. I'll ask him."

Alric jumped out of bed on to the carpet and pulled at Ran again. "But c'mon, let's have our bath first."



Alric lost no time in seeking out Chad, but he had to wait until after lessons to speak to him alone. Even when the choir was touring, the boys' tutors traveled with them, and there were at least two hours' lessons every morning, with rehearsals in the afternoons. Alric was slightly uneasy that Chad would not have wanted him to share any of their secret with Ran, but in the event Chad was pleased that Ran was so eager to help.

"We've got to trust the other Songboys – and I'm sure we can; the Songboys always stick together," he said. "We'll let Ran tell them. But we won't tell the adults – yet. And we'll keep our globe-in-the-box secret too, for the time being."

By the later part of the morning a weak sun had come out, an area in the school courtyard had been cleared of snow, and by mid-day the boys were playing a riotous game of football, yelling and leaping between the echoing walls and pillars. For games and leisure generally – in winter at least – they simply wore short brown tunics belted at the waist and coming down to just below the hips, combining a modicum of warmth with considerable freedom – the last especially welcome, as most of the boys were considerably athletic, and loved to play games more than almost anything. The ball was banged hither

and thither, the boys' long bare legs flickering in the pale sunlight as they ran, spun and twisted, in their way almost as graceful as in the more exotic dances.

But it would have been noticed that from time to time boys on the fringe of play would pause and whisper to others; that some few would momentarily stop playing and confer, heads together, in corners, also that most faces, gradually, became a deal more flushed and excited even than their unusually vigorous game warranted.

Soon the the whisper had gone all round: *Secret meeting in the cellars tonight. Be there!*

The Songboys had stayed in this school before, and had eagerly explored its vast underground cellars; Alric had previously whispered to Aeden that this, in the barrel-vaulted gloom between the great casks of wine, was the ideal place for secret societies, plots and conspiracies of all kinds. The time of the meeting was chosen for six as they would just have had tea, but didn't have to get ready for that evening's concert until seven.

The boys sat, not very comfortably, close together on the stone-flagged floor hugging their knees, while Ran addressed them from an upturned half-barrel.

"You've all heard about Jay now – and about all the others," he said. "And I believe it, for one. Anyone doesn't?"

There was silence. Many of the boys had not entirely believed the stories they had been told about the disappearance of their friends; and for most of them, the thought of a sinister enemy lurking in the catacombs was irresistible. Then they all began to talk. Some of the younger boys – and not just the younger boys – were for arming themselves and setting out on a rescue mission forthwith.

"Quiet!" hissed Ran. "*Quiet!* You want *everybody* to hear? Look..." He reached into a bag. "I've been in the Temple upstairs and brought one of the Books."

There was a slight in-drawing of breath and widening of eyes. Doubtless, this was strictly forbidden.

"I want you each to come up here one by one and swear total secrecy – that you'll tell no-one. Understood?"

"What about Wilfrid?" asked Alric doubtfully.

"We count him as one of us. He's on our side – we hope."

The boys, though still chattering in excited undertones when they left, decided to do nothing more until Wilfrid returned – not that, truth to tell, there was anything they could do. According to Chad, that would be the day after next. But, as the day passed, Alric grew increasingly uneasy, wondering if he had told too many people, wondering what Wilfrid would say when he knew.

The choir moved on that afternoon, to the northernmost point of their tour. This was to Mercantaria, the great city in the mountains about a hundred miles further on. The snow was thicker on the ground as they went higher, but the main trafficways were heated even in the mountains, and the bus made good speed. Like most northerly cities, Mercantaria was built largely in the Germanic style, with tall, red-brick buildings, pointed towers and high lancet windows. Though it was partly a busy commercial center, it was principally what it had been for a thousand years – namely a monastery town, governed by the Mithrians, specifically by the sect devoted to the goddess An.

The monastery itself – where the Songboys were to stay – stood high above the city on the lip of a terrifying cliff, reached by a long winding way up which their bus now made distinctly labored progress.

But the fortress-like building, still rearing several hundred feet above them, was one of the most impressive in the land, with high battlemented walls and a forest of towers, today all capped with snow. It was the second stay there for most of the boys, and there was little time to look round, as they had to prepare for the evening's performance almost at once. This would be in the monastery's great courtyard, where tiered seating had been prepared and fires lit, where people from the town were already arriving

and musicians were tuning their instruments.

Tonight was the festival of the Second Light of Lupercalia, moonlight, and was dedicated to the Moon-goddess. On a high stage, under brilliant lights, the performance began with a dialogue between Otte, in resplendent costume as Thor, and Raxi, one of the choir's best actors, as a Star-boy, holding aloft his five-pointed emblem.

"What, fair boy, is the name for the sky, child of the ocean, that we can all see, in each and every world?"

"Men name it Heaven," the Star-boy replied. "The gods say The Height and Vanir says Wind Weaver. The giants call it High Home, the elves Fair Roof and the dwarfs Dripping Hall."

"Tell me, fair Star-boy, what is the name for the sun, that all can see, in each and every world?"

"Men call him Sun," replied the Star-boy, "The Gods say Orb and the dwarfs Dvalin's Delight. The giants name him Ever Bright, the elves Fair Wheel and the sons of the Gods All Glowing."

"And tell me, fair lad, what is the name for the moon, which all can see, in each and every world?"

"Men call her Moon," answered the boy, "but the gods say Mock Sun. She is known in Hel as Whirling Wheel. The giants name her Rapid Traveler, the dwarfs Gleamer and the elves Time Teller."

"And now tell me, fair Star-boy..."

At the end of the dialogue, there was a burlesque by some of the Segundos – a vigorous enactment of the battle between the moon-goddess and the wolves Geri and Freki – while the boys got ready for their first group of songs. Before they went on stage, Odo and an assistant again stroked each boy to make him hard, as Odo was anxious that they should sing their best before such a large and august audience.

Waiting, Geirrod rapped his baton on his hand impatiently.

"In my opinion," he muttered, not for the first time, "it's with a red bottom that a boy sings best – and if any of you doubt that, I'll be happy to prove it."

There were no takers. And in the event all the groups of songs went well, being rapturously applauded; the choir was encored several times, and Ran finished with the favorite solo, *Ave Gloriana* – part of Schubert's great hymn to the Moon-goddess, tonight throned in splendor.

The program finished with the set-piece of the festival, under the shimmering cusp of the new moon itself. The Songboys, in spotless white, circled the central dais, each with a chaplet of winter flowers in his hair. Alric held Ran's hand on one side and Chad's on the other, his eyes fixed on the flower-draped altar in the center. There Aeden, he of the long golden looks, was Var, acolyte of the Moon-Priestess. He waited, arms upraised, on a low stone pedestal center-stage, and his very appearance, as he stood naked now under the bright floodlights, was enough to draw the first round of applause from all corners of the courtyard. Then, to the soft sound of harp, flute and flageolet, the Moon-Priestess herself approached dancing, whirling in veils of transparent chiffon that represented the clouds. The priestess was played by an attractive girl in her mid-teens, probably herself one of the postulant priestesses of the city's temple. As the tempo of the music quickened and crumhorns sounded, the priestess cast off the last of her chiffon and, now nude also, knelt in front of the boy-acolyte, caressing his body and stroking it with scented oil, symbolizing the Great Mother's delight in her children. Soon, to some more applause, the boy's stick was standing very hard indeed. Then the priestess had one hand on his bottom, fingers busy between his rear cheeks and underneath them, and her other hand in front becoming equally diligent, so that it was only a few moments before Aeden jolted and shouted, "*Yoiks!*" – to the delight of the audience – after which the priestess held up a distinctly sticky hand – to their even greater delight.

Then the music quickened again and, to drums and trumpets, all the other Songboys bounded one by one on to the proscenium with their robes off, where their sticks were each briefly touched and then kissed by the moon-goddess as part of a prayer for fertility – though Alric felt a little envious that Aeden was the only one who had got to shoot, and wondered if Geirrod would let him be Var the next time. But by now the audience were almost ready for the ritual orgy, though the feast – which interested the Songboys rather more – was first, with freshly roasted ox, plum-pudding, and the red wine of the region, heated and spiced. Alric was very drowsy afterwards; in their tower dormitory, he shared his bed as usual with Chad; tonight, though, simply cuddling and stroking one another, they fell asleep almost immediately.

But he was up early next morning. It was sunny but cold, so he put on his thickest robe, belted it tightly, and went down to explore the castle. This was allowed, as the Songboys were always welcome guests there; in fact, Alric and two other Songboys first shared breakfast with the monks in their Great Hall – orange juice, scones and toast dripping with the monastery's own butter and honey, then steaming

hot coffee. Warmed, Alric crossed the courtyard, pausing to admire the scallop-edged fountain, enjoying the silence – in such contrast to the previous night – broken only by the quiet splash of the water. But he had a definite object in mind, and shortly he made his way over to the deep cloister opposite, and into the long room where he had previously seen the monks and their pupils work on the monastery's illuminated runes; the manuscripts' stunning beauty, in gilt, silver and rich, fresh colors, had captivated him on his last visit, and he very much wanted to see them again, perhaps learn more about how they were made. Alric himself loved drawing and painting, and he often thought he would like to be an artist when his time as a Songboy had ended.

The room was almost empty, except for a flaxen-haired boy monk, of about Alric's age, seated at a desk under the high window opposite. He had a huge parchment spread before him and, tongue sticking out with concentration, he was painstakingly at work on completing an elaborate margin of flowers and acanthus leaves around the Runes of An, the city's patron Goddess. As he drew, from time to time he blew the strands of long fair hair out of his eyes. After he had completed the last petal of a scarlet poppy on one of the capitals, he put down his brush, turned and smiled.

"You're Alric, aren't you?"

"How d'you know?" asked Alric, surprised.

"We know everything," said the boy simply. "Actually, we hear you talking."

Alric smiled. He had been vaguely aware of the boy monks on the previous night – a row of pale, somewhat wistful faces in an arched gallery overlooking the courtyard.

"It can't have been...much fun for you last night," he said hesitantly, "I mean, just watching."

The boy, a handsome brown-eyed youngster, smiled too, then turned back to his manuscript and considered it, head on one side.

"Oh – we have good times here," he said.

He slid out some completed sheets from a pile on the table; around all the runes glowing patterns of wild flowers had been woven; among them were white doves, peacocks, and brilliantly plumaged birds of paradise.

"It's fabulous," said Alric quietly.

The boy touched the surface and said, "That's vellum – from calfskin. You can't make any mistakes, because you can never rub out even the smallest mark. Still – it's not so difficult. I'll teach you, if you like."

"Oh yes, please," said Alric, wondering however whether this somewhat mysterious boy could actually read his thoughts.

Then the boy monk pushed the manuscript carefully away, swiveled round in his chair and said, "My name's Tacca."

"Hi, Tacca."

"You want me to show you round?"

Alric nodded eagerly. Within the next hour he had been up the highest towers and down in the lowest cellars, had seen the dormitories, the games rooms, the studios where the boys learned artistic skills, the music rooms, packed with exotic and fabulous instruments, and – wonder of wonders – the electronics and media unit, a huge wing of the monastery itself. The monastery, a center of learning for much of the country, attracted the best brains to learn, work and teach, and many of the scholars had taken a major part in developing the new stereoscopic TV, and had set up a large factory in the city to manufacture sets and transmitters. Tacca showed Alric the boy monks' own media room where, as the monastery had some of the most sophisticated receivers in existence, the boys were, in the evenings, able to watch films and programs from all over Europa and most of the world. He invited Alric to join them after their own

performance that evening.

"We can see thrillers, horrors, space movies, just whatever you want," enthused Tacca. "Even..." – he lowered his voice – "...films they mightn't have let you see in Durnovaria, films they might think are too *frightening* for you."

"Wow!"

"Will any of the other Songboys want to come down?"

"All of them will!"

"Good!" As they spoke, the pair were leaning over a high wall, on the edge of a dizzying cliff. Great crags of stone jutted out far below; underneath these the boys could see the road winding down the hillside and, underneath that again, the tall red buildings of the city stretching out for miles.

"I'll tell you *another* secret," said Tacca, lowering his voice again. "Under that rock, deep, deep down, even far below the cellars, there are *catacombs* – miles and miles of them."

Catacombs? Alric's stomach jolted; he moistened his lips, looked sideways at Tacca, then asked, "You been down there?"

"They took us down once. It's very creepy – you could get lost. And...you can't go far in."

"Why not?" asked Alric in a deliberately casual voice.

Tacca traced a pattern with his finger on the stone, then said, "Because there might be...risks. Danger."

He didn't specify, and Alric ventured very slowly, "They told us once – a long time ago – that the... Nazarites didn't really die out, that they still live in the catacombs."

The boy monk looked at him sharply. "Who told you about the Nazarites?"

"A friend who knows a lot about things like that. Is it true? *Do* they live down in the catacombs?"

Disappointingly, Tacca shook his head. "Not in these – though they might have done once. But it's true that they still exist. Before I came into the monastery they told me that if you saw one you must never let him speak to you, never let him look at you, even. They sort of *hypnotise* people, they told us. But they're not in the catacombs any more."

Something in the boy's tone suggested to Alric that he might know more than he said – but he decided not to push further for the moment. After all, *he* had information that he hadn't yet decided to share with Tacca, about the abduction of Jay and the others. Perhaps he would tell him soon – after talking to Ran and Chad – because the young monk could be an excellent ally.

"You ever been to Durnovaria?" Alric asked, as they ran back down the stone stairway. "You want to come and visit?"

On a landing, Tacca stopped and shook his head. "No – thanks, but...you see, we can never leave the monastery – not after we come in."

"Oh!" said Alric, dismayed. But he had thought that life seemed so very good for the boy monks that there *had* to be a snag.

"Not *ever*?"

"Not ever. You can stop being a monk if you want, of course, but I'd never want that. And in the summer we go to another place we have, at Skansdra, by the sea, where we can do lots of things – swimming and sailing and so on – so we don't lose out really."

"Mm," said Alric doubtfully.

"*You* can visit here whenever you like," said Tacca, "If I invite you – and I do. But come down now and I'll show you how to illuminate."

"Thanks."

Soon the two boys sat heads together under the high window in the art-room. Tacca showed Alric the

brushes and pens to use and helped him in the use of the slightly unusual media. Alric, though tempted, avoided using the more exotic gilts and silvers, but very quickly picked up the technique otherwise.

Tacca temporarily left him for music practice and, when he returned, Alric had produced a beautiful kingfisher in glowing blue, green and orange. Tacca looked at the vellum, whooped and, before Alric could stop him had disappeared and then in a moment had returned, dragging the Art-Father by the arm.

"Well?" Tacca asked breathlessly, looking from the painting to Alric with proprietorial pride as if Alric, too, was a prize exhibit.

"Quite surprising," said the Art-Father, raising his eyebrows and considering the painting, then Alric, over the top of gold-rimmed glasses. "Very. You have talent – rare talent. Have you ever thought of training as an artist?"

Had he *what*, thought Alric! But he simply said, "I'd certainly like to."

"Well, I won't make any promises," said the Art-Father, putting the parchment down, "But come here in your next holidays, stay for a week or so, and I'll see what we can do with you. And after that, who knows?"

He left, saying nothing more, and Alric hugged Tacca enthusiastically.

"*Thanks!* So I *will* be an artist – perhaps." Then he seized Tacca's hand and slapped the palm. "And we'll be friends, won't we?"

"I thought we already were!" said Tacca, taking Aide's hand and slapping the palm in turn. "Come on, I'll show you the rest of the place."

Alric felt sure he could trust Tacca now; he would speak to him tomorrow. But tonight, other matters pressed. There was the evening performance, for one thing. And afterwards, to cement their new friendship, Tacca said that he would give Alric his bath, followed by a massage – something else which the boy monks learned to do, and Tacca thought he did well.

The big bath, adjacent to the central hall, was that evening shared by the Songboys and some of the boy monks, youngsters of about their own age who were fascinated by the much-traveled Songboys and who also, Alric guessed, welcomed the diversity the Songboys' visit brought into their somewhat unvarying routine.

The big room had a bath like a shallow swimming pool, similar to their own, but somewhat more "ecclesiastical", with tall thin columns, Gothic arches, and numerous statues of gods and goddesses, some of them lit or surrounded by foliage. For a while the water was full of wrestling, tumbling boys – that is, till the Dame who had charge of these nether regions entered, reminded them sternly that they were supposed to be having a bath, not romping, and pointedly indicated the flagons of liquid soap by the bath-side. They were told to get into twos and start work at once, or she would take a hand personally. The boy monks who had suffered in the past at the hands of – and under the hard loofah of – the Dame, instantly did as they were told; however, the Songboys, as soon as they had been bathed, all wanted to be massaged, knowing of the boy monks' special skills in that way. So soon the tiled area by the pool was scattered with a dozen or more nude, gasping, wriggling Songboys enjoying the boy monks' expert and unsparing attentions and soon, every now and then, the area rang with long and loud whoops and caterwauling as one Songboy or another shot into his friend's diligent hands.

For Alric, like the others, it was extra-special. Tacca, naked too, worked enthusiastically and skilfully all over him – stroking, pummeling, tickling, then slapping with both palms – slapping his legs, his inner thighs, his bottom, even his stick, till Alric was yelling with delight, at the very top of his voice. And even more so when Tacca, finally taking a firm grasp of Alric's stick, started work on it with steam-hammer intensity, meanwhile pushing the fingers of his other hand right underneath and between Alric's bottom-cheeks, as hard as he could. So that very soon, legs flickering like a go-go dancer's, Alric made

his own contribution to the general racket, as long and as piercing as any of the others.

After some considerable time, Alric was at last quiet and slid back, breathless, on to the tiles. Tacca bent, touched Aide's still-damp stick, kissed it, and said quietly, "It's the nicest one I've ever seen."

Then he heard Tacca say, even more quietly, "So's this *Songboy*," and magically Chad had appeared alongside; it looked like he had been rubbed down but hadn't stickied yet; he was as hard now as Alric had been a moment before. Feeling an extra tingle at the thought of Tacca watching them, he spun Chad on to his back in his turn and "swallowed" him to his utmost capacity, licking, chewing, then, lips clamped tight, moving his head with enormous vigor, thrilled to hear Chad's noise, to see and feel his contortions, ever more and more frenetic as Alric put increasing speed and effort into his task. He could feel Chad's legs thrashing, feel his thighs banging against his head on both sides, even feel his bottom thumping up and down on the tiles. And when, at last, Chad yelled and shot, several times over, he took a hold of Alric's head with both hands and kept moving it for some considerable time before he, too, slid back on to the tiles, relaxed but exhausted.

A moment later Alric, looking up, was delighted to see how hard Tacca had gone, just with watching them. He sat up, said, "Come here, Tac," pursed his lips and tapped them with his forefinger.

But Tacca just smiled, leaned forward and kissed him instead. He said quietly, "We each have someone... And I must go *now*."

He kissed Alric again, then Chad. "Love you both too, though. G'night."

After which, like a flash, he was gone.

But it was beyond question thereafter that Tacca would be inseparable from Alric and Chad during the Songboys' brief stay, so Tacca took his new friends up to share his room in the north-west tower. The boy monks could have rooms of their own or share with friends if they wanted; Tacca at present had his own, wide and perfectly circular; here he had space for his paints and easel, and quiet to work, away from the big art-room downstairs. And there was a huge bed, spread with a multitude of rugs and cushions, with room for all three of them.

At their first bedtime, however, Tacca unexpectedly put on his dark cloak again and hooked up the chain at his neck. He smiled, blew the long strands of hair back from his eyes in the way he had, then said, "We have the night prayers now. It will be an hour or so before I get back."

He was rather like Wilfrid, Alric thought suddenly, in knowing about things without being told; perhaps in his case it came from being a monk.

When he had gone, however, Chad said regretfully, "He's really nice-looking, isn't he?"

Alric nodded, then he said, "You'd like to take him, wouldn't you?"

"Mm."

"So would I. But I don't think we can. I think he's... taken vows to just one person. You know, like us with an amulet. But stricter."

"Suppose so." Then Chad giggled and said, "I tell you one thing, I don't think he's gone to say any prayers!"

"Actually, neither do I!"

They had taken off their clothes; Alric tumbled on to Chad and whispered, "But anyway, there's someone else I'd much, *much* rather take."

"You forgot about it last night," Chad said reproachfully.

Alric rolled Chad over on to his tummy, laid a cheek against his bottom, then kissed him once on each side. "You were asleep," he said. "But tonight..."

"Tonight," Chad whispered, "You take me *right* up my bottie."

Alric tingled all over even to hear Chad saying it again, and he felt his stick stiffen and stand almost instantly. Lifting Chad's flanks slightly, he slid a pillow underneath; he stroked, rubbed, then parted Chad's bottom-cheeks, sliding his fingers in between, then pushing his forefinger in completely, as far as he could. He felt Chad writhe, heard him sigh, then he said, "Wait, I'll get some soap."

"You *can* make it hurt if you like," Chad said quietly.

But Alric had already found soap and had started rubbing. Chad meanwhile pulled an extra pillow under his midriff; hips high and open-bottomed with thighs wide apart, he said, "And it will be the best sticky you've ever had – that anyone's ever had, you'll see. I'll wriggle and wriggle and *wriggle* my bottie and *blow your head open* – just wait!"

And, even at the beginning, with Chad squirming his hips vigorously and helpfully as promised, even the sensation of his stick convulsively gripped was enough to send lances of electricity running through all of Alric's body; then, as his hips began to jolt, and as Chad, wriggling extravagantly now, became more and more enthusiastic in his assistance, Alric was all too soon half-blinded by the sensations that arched from his stick all through him, from top to toe; his eyes closed, then he heard someone scream, probably himself, as forked lightning struck and he convulsed, again and again. Without having realized it, reaching down, he had taken a frantic hold of Chad's stick, and was working crazily, and then Chad was shrieking too as he also was struck by the blinding forks, as his whole body too jack-knifed – once, twice, thrice...

After a considerable time Alric, drowsy now, heard Chad whispering, "Keep it in all night – sleep with it in... I want to feel it in me all the time...."

Then they were both asleep – but at some stage during the night Alric had undoubtedly become detached from Chad, because by the morning Alric had rolled over on his stomach, and, when he opened his eyes, the sun shone bright on his face through the opened curtains and Tacca stood there, in his black corded robe, carrying a tray with coffee and rolls.

"Our breakfast!" he announced. "I got it out of Horrible Helga – don't ask how."

Alric, though still only partly awake, presumed the reference was to the formidable Dame, but asked no questions. He struggled upright, took a toasted roll, then asked, "You didn't come back last night, then?"

Tacca shook his head.

"All-night prayers, then?" Alric teased gently, at which Tacca at least had the grace to look abashed.

"Sorry," he said. "I *will* tell you, though – soon."

Alric sipped coffee and kicked Chad to make him wake. He asked Tacca, "You never get bored here, then?" He was still unaccustomed to the idea of Tacca never leaving the monastery.

The boy shook his head. "Never. And there are all the feasts and ceremonies, all the time. And we can have friends to stay, as often as we like. *I'll* have you and Chad too now, won't I?"

"You bet you will!" said Alric, kicking the motionless Chad again.

Alric swallowed a mouthful of buttered roll, then he said slowly, "Tac, you remember yesterday we were talking about the Nazarites?"

"Mm."

"Well, what would you say," continued Alric, choosing his words carefully, "if you heard that they had taken someone I know, a Songboy – in fact, several Songboys."

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Tacca. "They're always doing that kind of thing – and they always grab the best kids, too. They can hypnotize people – like I said."

"Maybe," said Alric doubtfully. "I think they were taken away at night anyway – maybe even by force – and now they're trying to get them to change their religion, to become like them."

Tacca turned to look at him. "This is *real*?"

Alric swallowed, then nodded. "They're in the catacombs now – somewhere – and we're trying to get them back. And we'll try anything."

Tacca shook his head.

"It's not just us," Alric insisted. "We have a...very powerful friend, too."

"You don't understand," said Tacca, "I mean, the Nazarites are not in the catacombs now, they haven't been there for a while. They're mostly on Arthuria."

"Where?"

"It's a big island. It's not far from where we stay in the summer, where we have our boats. We saw it once, but we were told not to go close, because they have guns and things."

Alric had sat up now, half choking on the coffee in his excitement. "So we know now – we know where they are! Wait till I tell Wilfrid!" He got out of bed, started pulling on his tunic and sandals.

"Come on, Chad."

But Chad was still asleep.

"Oh, you kick him for me," groaned Alric. "My foot's sore by now."

"Hey," said Tacca, "I *didn't* say I knew where your friends are, did I?"

"But they *might* be there. It's a good chance, isn't it?"

"Good as any, I suppose. Okay, let's talk to your friends, then."

Later that morning, Tacca sat swinging his legs on the deep window-ledge in the semi-secret tower room underneath. Ran hugged his knees on the ledge opposite, and Chad and Alric sat on the floor on upturned packing-cases. It was a break from lessons for the boy monks, and from rehearsals for the Songboys; the yells of two dozen youngsters at football echoed from the courtyard underneath. Otherwise it was quiet in the tiny, circular space. From his place on the floor Alric could see little but the brilliant blue of the sky, though snow was still heaped to a depth of several inches on the sill outside.

"This island," asked Ran. "How can you be sure if Jay and the others are there?"

"I *can't* be," said Tacca again. "But—"

"I can," said Alric suddenly, remembering the box with the light, then he stopped. Chad gave him an odd look which he couldn't quite interpret, and in the end he said, "We have – someone who can help. If we can get there, that is. *Can* we, Tac? You said something about a boat?"

Tacca didn't answer directly, simply said, "There are things you have to understand. You see—" Then he suddenly giggled and said, "Trouble is, the old monks tell you all kinds of things, and you never know whether to believe them. Oh, they wouldn't tell lies, not really – but they like a good story..." He paused.

"Yes?" Ran encouraged him.

"It's like this, then," said Tacca. "Or this is what they *say*, at any rate." He closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the stone edging and spoke almost tonelessly, as if repeating a lesson.

"There are really *two* islands – a big and a little one – with Jahweh-worshippers on both. The islands are called Arthuria and Braga. But the two islands are permanently at war, because the people on Arthuria say that Jahweh has three heads, while the people on Braga say that he has only one. The people on Arthuria, mainly Nazarites, wear breaches and have short hair, while the people on Braga wear white robes and have long beards. Sometimes the people on Arthuria capture and torture someone from Braga and make him say "three heads", and at other times the people on Braga torture someone from Arthuria until he says "one head". You with me so far?"

"Dunno," said Ran.

"There's more. Both islands have now got lots of big guns pointing at each other but each side is

afraid to shoot in case the other side shoots back. So they just keep getting bigger and bigger guns, and they've spent about half their money on them now. But the people on Arthuria do best, though, because they *make* all the guns – so they sell some of them to the people on Braga."

"Wait a minute," said Alric, wrinkling his forehead, "They sell the other island guns for the people to fire at *them*?"

"Yes – but, like I said, they don't fire them, because they know the people on Arthuria will fire back. And, in fact, the people on Arthuria have kept all the biggest guns for themselves."

There was a short silence, then Chad said, "I see what you mean about the priests and their tales."

"I thought you would," said Tacca.

"But look," said Alric a shade impatiently. "Does this help us at all with finding Jay?"

"It does a little bit," said Ran. "If they're anywhere, I suppose they must be on the bigger island, where the Nazarites are."

Tacca nodded, and Chad put in, "And, if they're busy fighting with the people on the other island, it might make things easier for us."

"Don't bet on it!" Tacca said.

"But *can* we get there?" asked Alric again.

"It would be *possible*," said Tacca slowly, "But you'd need a good deal of help." He thought, then asked curiously, "Who's this great friend of yours you keep talking about?"

As if by common consent, the other two looked at Chad, who turned slightly pink, cleared his throat and said, "It's actually Jay's father – and he's a bit of a wizard – well, in one sense at least. He's been helping us a lot – he's got – well, a load of strange electronic gear, and he can sort of track people by their brain waves. It will be easier if he explains himself, but—"

"Will he be coming again soon?" asked Alric.

"Tonight," said Chad without hesitation.

"And then?" asked Alric, increasingly impatient. He turned to Tacca again. "This boat..?"

"It's not so easy. The boats are at our summer place, quite a distance away. And it's not really a good time of year for boats. So – we'd have to get away from here somehow without anyone knowing, get to the summer lodge, get one of the boats in the water, sail it about ten miles over rough seas, get on the island without being shot at, caught, imprisoned or tortured – and then you might be able to start looking. Any questions?"

"*Can* we do all that?" asked Ran.

Tacca smiled and said, "If you ask anyone here an impossible question, they always say, *Ask Wise Wilfrid*. And everyone knows that *he* doesn't exist!"

Alric got up, slid Tacca gently to one side of the sill, then perched beside him. He said, "I think, Tacca the Monk, that it's my turn to speak now, and yours to listen.."

That night, the concert marked Lupercalia's Third Light – firelight. The fire ceremonies were among the most exciting, and were the favorites of many of the boys, with their unusually uninhibited music and dancing, and the especially lavish wining and feasting that followed.

Flags had been raised, pennants flew from all the towers, and the night's ceremony was opened by a great procession, led by heralds on decorated white horses.

For the dance tonight the boys were fire-elves; on this occasion they were completely undressed before going out, then painstakingly made up by priestesses skilled in the art. In the long corridor leading to the backstage area, Alric bundled his clothes on to a bench, then stood in the line of pushing, scuffling, excited boys watching as one after another was called to stand on the make-up box, under bright lights,

while three priestesses worked on each boy at a time, chattering amiably with him, standing back from time to time to admire their work. The boys' faces were painted in colored loops and whirls, delicate black liner made their eyes and eyebrows up-slant pixie-wise at the corners, and their hair was swept back and up to a peak. Then their entire bodies were streaked with scarlet dye and red ocher, again in curves, loops and spirals.

"Do *me* like that," Alric asked, entranced by the fantastic scarlet and yellow loops with which Chad was slowly being covered.

"Up you get, then."

It all took a lot of time, and the waiting Songboys, as always enlivened by being naked, had started wrestling and tickling one another, till the shrieks brought Geirrod to stand menacingly by the top of the line, rapping his rod as always on his palm.

"He's pushing me," squawked Aeden, kicking Raxi, who was next to him, out of the line of Geirrod's vision.

Raxi was a handsome dark-eyed Songboy some months older than Alric. Alric had always been friendly with him, but there was some kind of antipathy between Raxi and Aeden, and the two were always provoking one another.

"Just wait, you little squirt..." hissed Raxi now.

"Did you speak?" inquired Geirrod with enormous politeness, stroking his rod with his fingertips.

"No, Geirrod. Sorry."

"Good."

Finally, as always for this fire-ceremony, the boys went out for the dance hard – which was once more achieved by the efforts of Odo and, on this occasion, the priestesses. While being thus prepared Aeden shot, and was smacked, which immediately made him shoot again.

Then, to the *tic-tac* of the kettle-drums, the boys went skipping out in a line, next forming a prancing ring, shaking rattles and hand-bells, thumping tambourines. Alric this time had a tambourine too, trailing a dozen colored ribbons, and he banged it enthusiastically, blinking his eyes in the glare of the many spotlights set on all the courtyard walls. In the center of the yard a huge fire crackled and leaped, but Alric at first could scarcely see it, still less could he see the vast ring of spectators, but as before he felt the usual quiver of excitement and pleasure deep inside as the applause grew and echoed, following the dancers round and round the circle. Beyond it, soon, he could begin to see the priests with torches as they made a fire-ring outside the circle of dancers. And, behind them – unmistakably – *Wilf*, his hair scarlet and yellow in the leaping flame light. He tried to catch Chad's eye, but didn't succeed. He knew, though, that he didn't need to.

And then, in any case, his attention was forced back towards the ceremony. As cornets and trombones sounded, out bounded the Segundos as fire-demons, faces fiercely painted, in scarlet tunics and tights. The musicians played a merry hornpipe, while the dancers swept round in a double ring – then, to gong and cymbals, the two circles broke up into a mock-pursuit in pairs, each fire-demon leaping at a few paces behind his partner elf, with blood-curdling yells both from pursuers and pursued. Each boy when in due course caught pretended to be terrified, waving his arms aloft in panic, especially when each fire-demon, having captured his prey, dropped purposefully to his knees in front of him, teeth bared, his hands clasping both the fire-elf's buttocks...

And, to the roar of the biggest drums, the serpents and the bombardons, each fire-demon's head lunged forward, mouth closing tight, then began to work with the utmost energy, while in front of him his captive elf shrieked and danced frenziedly. The action rapidly grew more and more wild and rapid, till the treble chorus at last reached a piercing crescendo, with the Songboys' cries ringing out regularly as each in turn

shot, suddenly and convulsively – sometimes two, three, or even four times.

This last dance, Alric said afterwards, was always his favorite one of the ceremony – perhaps of any ceremony. He himself was paired with Otte, tonight (for once in an acting role) playing Loki the Trickster, the arch-demon, and Alric said afterwards that Otte – with all his faults – had not only made him dance his very best, but had made him sing a good deal better than his Songmaster could!

The feast followed immediately; there was lamb, plum-pudding, roasted apples, spiced ale, and huge fruit-bowls and dishes piled high with pears, grapes and oranges.

Chad, as Alric had half expected, was now nowhere to be seen. Alric himself, wrapped in his cloak again, carrying a large flagon and a heaped plate, slid up beside Otte on one of the long benches, took a sip of wine, and laid a head against Otte's shoulder. He whispered, "Otte, make me sing again tonight."

Otte bit into a lamb chop, took an enormous swig from his own flagon, and said, "*Sing?*" He took another swig. "All the trouble you give me, and you want to *sing*? Tonight, you little rapscallion, I'll make you scream like a thousand devils, I'll make you jump like a hare, leap like a roebuck, dance like a dervish..."

"Wow-ee! Dance on my *back*?"

"You *bet*!"

And, some time later, Otte amply fulfilled his promises. After only a few minutes in the tower apartment Alric, his entire body whiplashing and his legs flailing, made the stone walls echo over and over... Then after a time holding, stroking Otte, he was, as some time before, again thrilled and flattered to have made his friend so hard. Indeed tonight, with the wine and the excitement of the Fire ceremony still surging inside him, he decided he would let Otte do anything he wanted, anything at all. But Otte as before simply pushed up between the tops of Alric's thighs, so at any rate the boy did his utmost for him on his own part, squeezing his thighs extra-tight, squirming as much as he possibly could, rewarded with the astonishing contortions and sounds forced from his friend, then at last with his enormous joltings as the boy felt his own warm tight places become suddenly warmer, deliciously wet.

He slid his fingers down, then touched Otte's face with them and said, "My nicest present today!"

Otte opened his mouth, tapped his lips with a finger. "That goes for me too."

Makes up for Yule, Alric thought, but didn't say it. He still loved Otte in a way, he knew, and always would, but it was nevertheless time to move on. A very long way on. Perhaps, he thought, to a completely different world.



The Northumbrian coast is pitted with steep cliffs and rocky inlets; great shale formations, arches and high stacks corrugate its outline and make white water as far as can be seen, but in some few places the harsh cliffscape gives way to low green hills, usually around the estuary of one or another river. The city of Skansdra was set around such a river; the estuary was a broad one, with a multitude of ships in the harbors; and the city rose on the hills to both sides – a beautiful and dignified city, with pillared temples on the tops of the two highest eminences, and houses of such clean white stone so that, on a sunny day, the buildings shone and sparkled as much as did the water.

As in Eboracum, the people of Skansdra and the land around observed and valued their ancient religion, and its evidences were all around. On a rocky promontory over a beautiful limpid inlet stood the temples of Ea and Atho, the water-gods; the long circle of the beach, spotlessly clean, stretched away behind it. On a hill stood a massive image of Ymir, father of mountains, earth and trees; underneath it, the impeccably tended green landscape and fields bore witness to the devotion in which this god, one of the

oldest of all, was held. Opposite, on the highest hill, was the temple of Balder, deity of light and spring, and in front of it rose a pillar inscribed to Heimdal, guardian of the sun. On every day of the year, though the hill was a high one, almost a mountain, the temples were clearly visible against the sky. There was no smoke or very little cloud; as elsewhere, the citizens used fuels, developed years ago, that created no emissions; there were no chimneys in the city, and even most of the ships were driven by great computer-controlled sails, so the sun shone on the pillar of Heimdal at some time on almost every day of the year.

Further along the shore, where the estuary opened on to the sea, stood the monastery, and in front of it were ranged shrines dedicated to the deities of fields and rivers; on most days the priests – and the boy-monks in summer – dressed them with fresh flowers and sprays of blossom in season, then tended the borders and the river edges, exercising also their traditional husbandry of beach and shoreline.

Some ten miles offshore to the east, everything changed, though gradually. The water became more cloudy and opaque, small patches of dark oil appeared. There were fewer fish to be seen, the scattered oil patches began to coalesce into a single film, and occasional dead seabirds bumped against the hull of the white sailing-ketch that was now plowing its way through the steeper offshore swell. And then there were pieces of debris – rotting cardboard, plastic sheeting, one or two glass bottles. Ahead of the boat, the island of Arthuria, fifty miles across, gradually filled the horizon. And all over it hung a thick black miasma, like storm-clouds. Smoke flowed up from a thousand chimneys and other fires to join the clouds, which cloaked the island from end to end, blotting out the sun.

Alric shivered as its shadow fell over their boat; it was even colder now than it had been on the open water, and he pulled his cloak tight. He could see the cliffs ahead, and the high, blackened buildings clustered below and above them.

"Danger," he whispered, "*Danger...* You think they can see us coming?"

"Undoubtedly," said Raxi. "We play the innocent, remember – then we're safe."

Raxi had, so to speak, been "supplied" by Ran. The latter, rightly taking his duties as acting head Songboy seriously in Jay's absence, had decided in the end not to sail to Arthuria, but in his place had sent Raxi, who had a lot of experience of sailing, and was handling the small craft with considerable skill and confidence. Chad, clutching the box with the "magic globe", huddled in the stern; from time to time he opened and peered at it hopefully, even polished it sometimes with his sleeve. Doubtless having its association with Wilfrid uppermost in his mind, Chad had now "adopted" the box, had hung it on a string from his neck, under his clothes, and guarded it jealously day and night.

"I wish he'd have come with us, though," he said.

Wilfrid had shaken his head when Chad begged him to come. "Best not. Believe me, I'll be much more use to you back here – you'll see."

"Doing what?"

Wilfrid just shook his head again. "You'll see."

Chad hugged his box now. "Oh Wilf, I hope you're right," he said quietly.

"Give the box to me," said Aeden, from inside the cabin. "Or you'll drop it overboard, sitting there." Twelve-year-old Aeden, of the golden locks, was the fourth member of the party.

Chad shook his head and held the box ever more firmly, but joined Aeden in the cabin.

"That's better," said Aeden, putting his arms round Chad. "Gimme a kiss."

"Not *now*, you sprogs," said Raxi, looking down from the wheel. "Just stop fooling around, will you." To Aeden he said, "I dunno why we brought you."

"You brought me," said Aeden, "Because of my innocent and totally innocuous appearance. *Please, Sir, we're lost. Our boat got caught in the current and we don't know where we are. Help us –*

please."

"Mmm – not bad, I suppose," said Raxi. "Just do your best when the time comes."

"What'll you do if I do?" said Aeden.

"*Later!* Actually, I wish we'd brought Tacca instead. He looks even more innocent, and he is, too. You're not."

"I *told* you," said Alric a little impatiently. "He can't leave the monastery."

"He came to Skansdra with us."

"Yes, just to their summer place there; apparently that's allowed. But he could only go straight there, help us to get the boat out, then go back. But I wish he's been able to come, too."

"I hope he doesn't get in trouble."

"Don't see why he should, they can't connect it with him. There was nothing about him in our note, we didn't even say where we were going, just that we were going to get Jay and the others back."

"Optimist," said Aeden from inside the cabin.

"So help me, I'll come down and warm your little bottom in a minute," said Raxi.

"Promise?"

Raxi ignored him. He was holding the boat's telescope, eye applied to it frowningly. Then he handed it to Alric. "Take a look."

Alric peered and focused; he felt his stomach tighten. There was no mistake now. Above the brown and gray buildings, the skyline was pierced with tall narrow pinnacles; on top of each of them, starkly outlined, he could see the unmistakable silhouette of an iron cross. A Latin cross. He had seen it in pictures, he had seen it on Wilfrid's screen – but a small part of him had never really believed it. But this was real, this was *now*.

Fascinated despite himself, he continued to scan the island with the telescope. The houses were very tall, dotted with grimy windows; the people appeared to live in layers, like cliff-dwellers. And he could see some of them now, hurrying in the street – and their vehicles – driven, he had been told, by the old oil-based fuels – all blowing out gray and black smoke to contribute to the general murk.

They were almost enveloped in it now. The sun had been blotted out, and the land behind them had completely disappeared; there was only the gray, heaving water. It was cold, frightening. They really were lost; there was no need to pretend any more.

"Give me the telescope," said Raxi suddenly. He looked, then said, "I thought so. A boat – heading for us."

Alric stood up, gripping the rail, the hard knot gathering inside him again. "This is it," he whispered.

"*Hey!*" yelled Chad, suddenly. "Look, everyone – *look!*" He came rushing up on deck, clutching his box, almost overbalancing and dropping it.

"Hey!" said Alric, catching hold of his arm.

"Hey!" shouted Raxi crossly. "Not now. Get back inside."

"But the light, the light!" said Chad excitedly, "It's lit up. Look, *look!*"

"Gosh!" said Alric staring. "We were right!" There was no mistake. In the surrounding murk, the bulb was unmistakably glowing a faint blue. It was weird, but exciting, making Alric's skin tighten all over. "Wow – we were *right!*"

"Put it away," said Raxi urgently. "Okay – great – but you want to give yourselves away at the very beginning? Look..." He pointed to the now-visible uniformed occupants of the approaching boat. "I mean – *show* it to these turkeys, why don't you? Now, get below and get it out of sight – *now!*"

He bundled Alric and Chad below and made Aeden come up and stand beside him. The other boat was only a few yards away now; it was a somewhat noisy motor-vessel with three men on board; it

slowed, beginning to circle them.

"Raxi's getting too bossy," grumbled Chad, sliding the box under his cloak. They had decided not to wear their distinctive Songboys' gear, simply the plain brown knee-length tunics that most boys wore for school, with long winter cloaks on top.

The three men on board didn't speak, just looked at them expressionlessly. They had peaked caps, with the peaks almost covering their eyes, and the uniforms had high collars with dull yellow flashes on them. Their faces were cold; Alric didn't like the look of them.

The men cut their engine, and their boat drifted alongside; they reached out a hooked pole and snagged the white launch's painter, pulling it close. The eyes of the man at the wheel roved over them.

"How many of you are there?" he asked shortly at last.

"Four," said Raxi, kicking Aeden unobtrusively.

"We're lost," said Aeden. "We were sailing, the mist came down...the current caught us. Where are we? *Please* help us, we're frightened..."

His voice trembled convincingly.

Please, *please*, don't ham it up, thought Alric.

"Have you permission to sail here?" asked one of the men.

"Permission to be *lost*?" asked Alric, but not so the man could hear.

"I'm sorry," said Aeden pathetically. "*Please* help us..."

"Come closer, boy, let's have a look at you."

Aeden went to the edge; the man who Alric presumed was captain said, "Yes, I though so. *Pagans*. Half-naked *pagans*." His eyes roved round. "Bunch of savages. Can't your parents afford any trousers, then?"

"Any what?" asked Aeden.

"You got no barbers round your way either?" sneered one of the others. "What are you, boys or girls?"

"Boys, of course," said Raxi angrily.

"You could've fooled me," said the third man.

Raxi had reddened and was about to speak again, but Alric prodded him and asked quickly, "Can you help us?"

"You're in our waters, we're responsible for you now," said the captain. He looked in at their cabin windows. "No adults with you, then?"

"No, why should there be?" asked Raxi, a little shortly.

"Oh dear," said the captain, shaking his head. "Oh dear, oh dear." Then he said, "Come on board, then. We'll tow your boat behind."

The boys climbed on to the other boat, Alric hoping that the distinct lump under Chad's tunic would not be noticed. But, in the event, they were told to sit in the back of the launch, out of the circle of the lights, their yacht was attached, and they turned back to the island.

It was almost dark now; the boys could just see the tall cliffs and the buildings as they approached the harbor. There were odd sounds – harsh engines, loud shouts – and unfamiliar smells, mainly unpleasant – oil, rotting vegetation. At the same time, there was the novelty of a place totally different from their own, and Alric watched closely as the buildings slowly grew to fill the skyline, till the high walls, with their hundreds of square dots of light, reached right up to the dark cloud, as far as he could see. Some of the higher windows were, in fact, completely hidden by the heavy murk – but Alric was absorbed by the dim figures he could see moving around at the lower levels; he craned his neck to see more.

"Come on." He was shoved from behind, and realized that the boat had tied up at a jetty. Then the four youngsters were hustled along the crowded street, Raxi muttering protests, but under his breath.

There were crowds of people, some pushing each other off the pavement in their haste, the men dressed in black jackets and long breeches, the women similarly or in heavy dark robes. The street was lit with dim yellow lamps, half-obsured by the swirling murk, but there was still enough light for many people to stare, then shout, at the four boys and their escort.

"Pagans!"

"Savages!"

"Get back to the jungle!"

"Woo-woo-woo!" A man made a monkey-noise, and there was laughter. Fortunately the uniformed men pushed the passers-by aside, keeping the four youngsters moving. Occasionally they saw children, dressed in the same way as everyone else; from a few of these there were taunts too, but others looked at them curiously, and didn't jeer like the adults.

Then they had arrived at a building at the end of the street, with blue lamps over the door. The men pushed the door open. "In there," he said, and it closed behind them.

It was a long room, with wooden benches down both sides, and it smelt. Raxi wrinkled his nose, then said crossly, "They treat us like *criminals*." He banged on the closed door. "I'll tell them, too."

"Sssh." Alric took his arm, and meanwhile Chad very carefully took his box out and opened it. Even in the light, the blue radiance was brighter than ever, and he shut the box quickly, checking the joins to see if the light showed through them. It didn't.

"Maybe in this very *building*..." he breathed.

"I'm hungry," said Aeden.

"Listen," said Alric; he held up a finger. There were footsteps outside, and the door opened again. To their surprise it was a woman who entered; she was dressed rather like the men, in a kind of tight dungarees, but she had a pleasant face, and smiled round at the boys.

"Well – our shipwrecked mariners! And what might your names be, then?"

They told her, and she put down a bundle she had been holding.

"Right then, there's nothing to worry about, we'll look after you. We'll get you something to eat in a little while, and after that we'll put you in a school with some other boys, for the night, and you'll get on really well with them. And then tomorrow – ?"

"You'll let us go?"

The woman smiled again. "Of course. You have nothing to worry about. Now, I want you to change into these clothes – again, just for tonight. They're the same as the other boys wear; they might feel odd, but I'm sure you don't want to look different, do you? Boys don't."

Raxi nodded, a little more relaxed now, feeling she had a point.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Martha. Now just get changed and I'll be back soon."

"I think you'd better help us," said Alric, holding up the strange garments doubtfully.

"I agree," said Raxi, but then a rather odd thing happened; as Raxi pulled off his cloak and tunic and stood naked on the floor turning the black clothes up this way and that, Martha rather pointedly turned her head away. Raxi stared and said, "What's wrong?"

The other boys, their clothes also discarded, looked at her in similar puzzlement.

"Just put them on," said Martha, an unexpected edge coming into her voice.

Raxi, slightly pink, said, "We don't look any different to *your* boys, you know. And we're not *that* ugly."

"We don't *look* at our boys," said Martha, glancing at Raxi, then quickly turning away again. "Now get these things on, all of you – quickly. The trousers first."

The Songboys exchanged shrugs, then struggled into the odd, uncomfortable clothes. When they had finished Martha said, with a return of her earlier bright tone, "Well, boys, it's clear you have a lot to learn here. But, still, we won't say any more about it for the moment, will we? Now, follow me, all of you."

"Any more about *what*?" Alric asked, but Martha either didn't hear him or chose to ignore him. They were taken outside and ushered into a small bus.

As the door was closing Chad said suddenly, "Oh, I've forgotten something."

"Oh, *no!*" thought Alric. Chad had left the box behind.

"What?" asked Martha.

"My tunic," Chad said, half getting up. His face was a pale mask of dismay.

"That's all right," Martha said, pressing him down again. "We'll take them all for washing, and you'll get them when you go."

"But—"

"*Please*," said Martha, signaling to the driver. Alric caught at her arm. "It – it's not just the tunic," he improvised frantically, "He – he's got a – a – picture of his mother in the pocket. She's very ill and he – he always..."

He had begun to run out of steam, but fortunately Martha nodded. "Okay, quickly, then."

Chad was back in a moment, with an extra bump under his already very lumpy clothes.

"Funny shape of picture," said Martha curiously, as the bus started.

"He keeps it in a box," said Alric.

"Can *I* see it?" asked Martha, but Chad simply clutched it tighter and shook his head. Fortunately Martha simply laughed and didn't ask again; she had probably concluded by now, thought Alric, that Chad was rather simple. Well, too bad...

They could see very little from the bus windows. It was completely dark now, and the mist had thickened into a swirling, dense fog that obscured even the lamplight. They were aware only of arriving at a large, silent building. No one else was around except for Martha and a couple of unsmiling woman assistants; in a long room they were given a meal that, though unappetizing, could have been worse. There was plenty of it, at any rate – somewhat greasy chops, a good deal of vegetables, and hot, slightly sweet tea – which again tasted odd, but not altogether unpleasant.

Soon they were conducted up a drab flight of stairs to a dormitory – or that was what they assumed it to be. Whether there were any other boys in it was not clear, as the room was divided up into numerous cubicles, with wooden ceiling-height walls.

"Very well," said Martha, showing them each into one. "You should be quite comfortable, and we'll talk again in the morning."

She pulled a set of curtains across each cubicle, ignored further questions, and left.

There was a small light by Alric's bed; he found it after some exploring and put it on, then looked round. Not *too* bad, he supposed. The cubicle was narrow, but the bed looked comfortable and clean, and – well, it was only for one night. He hoped.

"Hello."

Raxi's face appeared round the curtain. "These two are in bed already, lazy sprogs," he said. He had discarded his clothes. "They leave you some clothes to *sleep* in, I think," he said. "But I wouldn't bother, if I were you. They're crazy."

He reached up to the brass curtain rail, then gently swung to and fro, toes trailing on the floor.

"*I'm* not a *bit* tired," he said.

"I'm not much," said Alric, peeling his clothes off and bundling them in a heap beside his bed. "Gosh, I'm glad to be rid of *these*."

"So we're in the enemy camp now," said Raxi. "Just what you wanted. I hope you'll be lucky. Jay's your friend, isn't he?"

Alric nodded, then, somewhat to his surprise, found himself telling Raxi about Wilfrid, about what he had told them and what they had seen, and about how he wanted to give his amulet to Jay.

"He'd like that," said Raxi, making Alric warm to him; he was the only person so far who hadn't sounded surprised, who hadn't gone on about Jay being just a boy.

"You think so?"

"I know so." Raxi dropped from the rail, came over, then, a little shyly, touched Alric's hair, then his cheek. "He'll be lucky. You're okay."

Alric, still seated on the side of the bed, put an arm round Raxi's hips, then leaned his head against Raxi's bare stomach.

"You could be my friend until you find Jay," Raxi said. "If you wanted."

Alric leaned back, hands still on Raxi's hips, and looked him up and down. Raxi was handsome like all the Songboys, with jet-black hair falling on both sides of his face, with smooth clear cheeks and body; he was a keen footballer, slim and shapely. He was, like Jay, just a few months older than Alric, but his stick was bigger, with quite a few hairs now. Alric, touching it with his fingertip, whispered, half to himself, "*That's okay, too...*"

He would be glad to have Raxi as a friend. Aeden, pretty though he was, was a bit silly, and Chad seemed increasingly wrapped up in Wilfrid and, now, in his precious box.

"They think I'm bossy," said Raxi, with a jerk of his head towards the other cubicles. "But *someone's* got to be captain on a boat – otherwise it would just go around in circles."

"You can boss *me* any time," said Alric quietly, as he spoke pulling Raxi closer, hands sliding over the older boy's thighs, his bottom, then, with one hand behind, began again to stroke Raxi's stick, wide-eyed as it grew and got hard, delighted to feel his own begin to do the same.

"You see?" whispered Raxi, coming a little closer. "That proves it; I *knew* we could be friends. Being with you makes it *rock-hard*. It wouldn't do that with just anyone, you know."

Alric knelt on the carpet, fastened his mouth on Raxi's stick, and then began to work with enormous vigor and enthusiasm, at the same time feeling his own stick harden as he could never remember, almost unbearably. He maneuvered Raxi on to his back on the narrow bed, squirmed on top of him, his whole body electrified by the sensation of his stick bumping against Raxi's even harder and bigger one, then began to wriggle furiously, both his hands clutching Raxi's bottom-cheeks, feeling Raxi's hands tighten on his own, his fingers sliding between them – then pushing, making him shout out uninhibitedly.

"Ssh!" said Raxi suddenly, but Alric was not to be shushed, even when Raxi, laughing, pushed a pillow over his mouth, holding it there. Alric felt his stick pop down between Raxi's thighs, felt them tighten spasmodically, felt surges of electricity roll all through him now.

Then he jolted, yelled, shrieked *fortissimo* and...Raxi felt himself suddenly damp, then hugged Alric again, stroked his hair, kissed him over and over again.

Then, quickly, he turned Alric on his tummy, then Alric felt him push hard up between his thighs and under his bottom. Soon all the energy of a thirteen-year-old footballer was being violently exercised and soon, too, Alric burst into giggles and pushed the pillow into Raxi's face in his turn.

But Raxi's squawks, especially at the end, were only partly muffled and when his contortions had at last ended and he slid down flat on his tummy, both boys listened apprehensively. Clearly, however, the other two Songboys were either as tired as they had seemed, or uninterested, and no other – possibly hostile – ears seemed to have been listening.

The boys pulled the bedclothes over themselves and fell asleep almost immediately, suddenly

overcome by the fatigue of the long day. And next morning, they slept until nearly nine o'clock, which was unusual.

"Hey, *look!*"

"Come and *see!*"

"They're *dirty!*"

Alric, half-awake, jerked upright. Clothes kicked aside, he had been idly stroking Raxi, who was still asleep. But even so, Raxi was beginning to harden, a process which Alric had been watching, and trying – to the very best of his ability – to assist.

Looking up, he saw a row of small heads along the top of the partition.

"Dirty, dirty! Oo – *look* at them!"

They were small boys, their own age or younger, with close-cropped heads.

Alric sat up, nudged Raxi awake, began to reach for his clothes.

"*You'd* be dirty if you'd been in a boat all day," Alric said mildly.

"*You know* what we mean," said one of the boys, nudging his friend, who sniggered. "They were right about you."

"How d'you mean," said Alric. He was getting a bit irritated, but tried to keep calm. "Why don't you come in and tell me?"

"We're not allowed," said a boy, but then the heads disappeared and five youngsters crowded into the cubicle and looked at Alric and Raxi with fascination. Raxi, still half-awake, began to sit up and rub his eyes.

"So it's *true*," said one of the youngsters with relish. "Heathen savages, *naked-bare*, right in our school! Cor!"

Alric was uncertain how to respond to the crop-haired boys, who didn't in fact seem entirely hostile. They were dressed in the same clothes as the adults – dark tunics and long breeches. They looked pale, pasty and unhealthy, possibly undersized for their ages. A couple had spotty faces.

"Look at their long hair," whispered one excitedly. "I *told* you they were savages."

"When did they catch you?" asked one. They remained huddled together at the far side of the small cubicle.

"We came by boat," said Raxi. "They didn't *catch* us. We're not wild animals. *Or* savages either."

The youngsters, perhaps a shade more confident that they were not, apparently, about to be devoured, came a few steps closer.

One asked suddenly, "Is it true you live in the woods and dance round fires and paint your faces and worship idols?"

"And that you run around with no clothes on and do all kinds of naughty things – whatever you want?"

"What d'you do? Tell us?" asked one with a giggle, but another kicked him.

"Ow! *Stoppit!*"

"We're not any naughtier than you are," said Alric, pulling his clothes on. "And we don't mean you any harm."

The youngsters came closer. One nodded towards Raxi and said, "*He'd* better get his things on too before *Fart-Face* comes, or she'll be *mad!*"

"They're in the other cubicle, I'll get them in a minute."

"Who's *Fart-Face* anyway?" asked Alric, though guessing.

"Misery Martha, the Matron. I say—"

But just then, as if on cue, a shrill voice shouted, "You boys, get to your classes at once," and the youngsters scuttled out of the cubicle and disappeared as mysteriously as they had arrived.

Outside their own cubicle they heard Martha say, a degree more mildly, "Now, you boys get dressed, then come down to my office. It's at the end of the dormitory."

"She could have said *please*," grumbled Raxi, getting up. "Come on then. We'll wake the others later."

"Aren't you going to put your clothes on?" asked Alric.

"No, why should I? I don't like these clothes anyway. I want to ask if we can get our own things back, and go; I don't like this place."

The door at the end was marked OFFICE. Raxi knocked and was told to come in; Alric followed.

Martha looked up and smiled; then the smile vanished abruptly, and she looked down at the desk again.

"What did I tell you last night, Ra – Ra... whatever your name is?"

"Raxi. *What* did you tell me?"

"About covering yourself?"

"It's okay, it's quite warm in here."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." Martha glanced up again, turned a little pink, then shifted her gaze to the clock above the door. "You may have your customs where you come from, but here, boys just *don't* – um – show themselves."

Afterwards, as at the time, Alric was never certain whether his friend was deliberately teasing Martha, but he went over to her, put a hand on her arm, and said, "But *why*? You must know what a boy's got, and my mother says mine's a nice one. Don't *you* think so?"

Martha's gaze was again drawn momentarily from her papers, then she said crossly, "No! I mean – I don't know. I mean – oh, just go and—"

"And it goes really *hard* now," said Raxi, beginning to work with his fingers. "Look – *look!*"

"*Out!*" shouted Martha, half-getting up and pushing him away. One of her hands, probably by accident, struck against Raxi's stick, and he squealed. Spinning him round, Martha brought her palm cracking against his bottom, making him yell, then she pushed him out and slammed the door.

"You're *wicked!*" said Alric, convulsed by giggles.

Raxi's eyes opened wide. "What's wrong?" He rubbed his rear. "I was just trying to be friendly."

"Well, don't be *too* friendly, or you'll wreck everything."

"Okay," said Raxi, and reluctantly struggled into his clothes. They then shook the other two awake, after which Raxi said, "Maybe I'd better go and say I'm sorry if I annoyed her. I think she's quite crazy – but it wouldn't do to get on the wrong side of her."

Alric agreed. The office door remained shut. Feeling curious, but hesitant to interrupt Martha in anything important, Raxi noticed a small window that communicated with her office high in the dividing wall. Carefully, he climbed on a table and peered through.

His eyes grew wide. "*Wow!*"

Then he motioned to Alric to join him on the table. "*Take a look!*"

Alric did, and his eyes grew wide too. Martha was still seated at the table, but with head back and eyes closed, almost at first as if she were communicating with her mysterious deity. But then it was apparent that her hand was thrust down under the table, her arm was in vigorous motion, and indeed her whole body was moving rhythmically back and forth. Strangled sounds forced themselves from behind her tightly-closed lips.

"So – you have a fan after all!" Alric said, enthralled.

"*Wow!*" said Raxi again, delighted and flattered.

Then Martha's movements became even more agitated, her face contorted, her back arched, and she

shouted, "Oh-oh-oh!" then swiftly clapped a hand over her lips. The boys judged it best to climb down then, though a few more muffled sounds came through the wall.

Raxi was still pink with pleasure. "My mother was *right!*" he said.

Aeden, then Chad, at last emerged sleepily from their cubicles, their odd clothes in some disarray, Chad blinking in bewilderment.

"What time is it?" he asked. Then he pulled out his box again, as if checking that it was still there.

"Put that *away!*" hissed Raxi. "You want her to take it off you?"

"Okay, okay." Chad slid it under his clothes again, then asked, "What now?"

Raxi drew the other three into a cubicle and said, "Listen..."

"Can't we just get our things and go?" asked Aeden.

"No, we can't."

"Why not?"

"A fat lot of use it would be, wouldn't it?" Alric said. "Coming to find Jay and the others, then just going away again."

"We've done terrific so far, though," said Raxi. "My plan is now, we ask if we can stay a bit longer. I'll spin them some yarn – you know, we want to learn about their religion and so on. Something like that."

"You're good at yarns," said Alric. "Yes, okay."

"S'pose it would be letting the others down if we went now," Chad said. "Wilfrid too."

"Let's get on with it, then," said Aeden. "It's not a lot of fun here."

"We haven't *come* here for fun," said Raxi impatiently. "And hasn't it occurred to any of you chipmunks that they mightn't *let* us leave, anyway? They didn't let Jay and the others leave, did they?"

Aeden looked dismayed. "Oh," he said.

"Oh, indeed," said Raxi. "So, instead of waiting till they get heavy with us – *if* that's their idea – we'll play along. Then perhaps we'll not only get to stay and look around, but we'll get more freedom, perhaps to find the others, then perhaps to leave when we get a chance."

"Um," said Alric doubtfully.

Ignoring him, Raxi continued, "I'll go and speak to Martha now." He had been wriggling into his unshapely set of clothes as he spoke; he straightened everything as best he could, smoothed his hair, then said, "How do I look?"

"Half respectable, I suppose," Alric said. "But are you the best person to go? You're not her blue-eyed favorite at the moment."

Raxi giggled. "I thought I was."

"Sssh!" said Chad. The four boys stood still, almost to attention, as the office door opened and Martha came out. She was her bright composed self again.

"Well, boys, all dressed, I see. Good!"

Raxi stepped forward and said, "Martha, I would like to apologize for having been the unwitting cause of any distress earlier."

"*Distress!* thought Alric, not daring to look at him. *Don't overdo it, Raxi.*

"Well," said Martha, "I..."

"You see," said Raxi, "We poor heathen have not had the benefits of your civilization, and we don't know any better. I can only plead on our behalf that, as mere pathetic pagan savages—"

"What Raxi is trying to say," interposed Alric hastily, "is that we would like to learn more about your religion and your culture and – er – your culture," he finished lamely.

"Well..." said Martha again. She had blinked a little during Raxi's speech, then she smiled. "Well, I'm

very glad to hear that indeed – very glad." She paused for a moment, looking from one to the other, then asked, "May I inquire what has brought about this desire?"

There was a brief, awkward silence. Chad, feeling it was his turn to say something, said, "Well – all the things we've seen since we've been here, you know."

"The – the nice country," Alric said.

"The friendly people," Aeden put in.

"And we've met some of the other boys in the school here," added Raxi.

Martha smiled again. "Ah, yes. Very fine lads, very fine. All born again, of course."

"I *thought* they looked a bit undersized," Raxi said, and Alric kicked him.

"What was that?" asked Martha.

"Sorry – we don't understand everything yet, you know."

"Ah, yes," said Martha, apparently deciding to be pitying. "Yes, of course. Very well – just wait for a minute, then."

She went out. Alric went over to Raxi and squeezed his cheeks between both palms. "*Will* you keep your sense of humor under control!" he demanded.

"I can't help it," said Raxi. "She's so deliciously... But okay then." He leaned forward, kissed Alric, and said, "Sorry."

"Yuk!" came a voice from the door. "*Yük!* You're *nasty!*"

It was one of the crop-headed schoolboys, the one who had been spokesman earlier.

"What's the matter?" asked Raxi. "Don't people kiss people here?"

"Yea, but not your *mates*."

"So *not* your friends, just your enemies?" inquired Alric.

"Oh, you're all weird," said the youngster, shrugging. "They say you're to come for breakfast. I'll show you where to go."

He led the way down the dun-colored stairs and stopped outside a wooden door. "It's in there. We've had ours, we have to go for classes now."

"Thanks," said Alric.

The youngster lingered, looking from one to the other. "What they going to do with you?"

Alric shook his head. "They haven't said. We may be staying for a bit."

"'Cos they're making you or 'cos you want to?"

"Maybe both."

"Well, watch out for Fart-Face, she can turn nasty," said the youngster, pushing the door open, then turning to leave them.

"What's your name?" called Aeden.

"Benjamin," shouted the boy from the bend in the corridor. "Ben."

"Funny name," said Raxi. "Still, no harm to make friends with them, if we can."

"Just what I was thinking." Alric led the way into the dining-room, where they were told to sit and were served again by the same near-silent women as on the previous night. There was slightly damp toast, scrambled eggs and watery coffee – but again plenty of it, and it was welcome enough. Alric was especially interested to see out of the windows in daylight, and kept craning his neck to see more, though the women threw him increasingly suspicious glances. The window on one side gave out on a concrete yard; on the other side was a red-brick feature-less building with narrow windows, and through one of them he could see the schoolboys in their classes, sitting in rows. His stomach jolted as the sight vividly brought back the scene they had witnessed at Wilfrid's. Could this even be the *same room*? His memory of the room wasn't good enough for him to be certain, but...he was fairly confident now that it wasn't. He

couldn't remember any of the surroundings, still less did he recognize any of the boys. But they were getting warm – oh yes, that was certain. He remembered the lamp; he would ask Chad to open it straight after breakfast.

There was little to be seen from the windows on the other side; the sills were high, but there was a sight of gray skies, the pall of smoke as on the previous night, and tall, rain-streaked buildings, some of the windows almost opaque with soot and grease. And the noise... Engines, shouts, horns blowing, footsteps, more shouts. Shadows and lights flickered to and fro on the ceiling, the lights pale yellow, the shadows blue and black. The hubbub was unsettling; the boys found it difficult to talk, and they were glad when one of the women told them to go back upstairs again and wait.

"We'd like to go out," said Aeden.

"Well, you can't," said the woman.

"Who does she think she is?" hissed Raxi crossly, but Alric shushed him and pushed him and the others out. "We have to talk," he said.

Upstairs, while Raxi still grumbled under his breath, Alric said to Chad, "The box – open it. It should be bright as *bright* now."

Chad ran to fetch it from under his bedclothes. He fumbled with the catch, then his mouth fell open with dismay.

"Oh *no*. It's gone *out*." He thumped it.

"It *can't* have," said Alric.

"Thump it harder," Aeden said.

"Don't be silly," said Raxi. "And don't *break* the thing. The light's out – so what?"

"But it was on when we were on the boat – and in the harbor. We were *near* them, there was no doubt about it."

"Well, we're not near them now," said Raxi. "Don't panic. They aren't keeping Jay and the others in the school; we'd guessed that anyway. But they are on the island. It's just that they're somewhere else than here."

"I suppose," said Alric doubtfully.

"No supposing," said Raxi. "*If* you trust Wise Wilfrid, that is."

"Of *course* we do," said Chad indignantly.

"Well, then," said Raxi. "It's simple. We just take your precious box round the island, finding where the light's brightest, and then – well, we'll think about what to do next after that. Could be rather fun, actually."

"If they don't catch us," said Aeden.

"Shut *up*, Goldilocks," said Raxi.

"Who're you calling Goldilocks?" said Aeden, punching him.

The door opened. Chad rushed to hide the box, but the newcomer didn't notice. He was tall, thin, and like most people on Arthuria, dressed in black, but this time completely, from head to foot, with a round hat and a circular white collar, the latter high and stiff, coming up almost to his chin.

Aide's insides contracted again. This man was exactly like one of the priests they had seen in Wilfrid's house, the ones who were giving their friends such a hard time. Look on the positive side, he told himself, it means again that you're *getting warm* – but it didn't help much.

Again, like all the island-dwellers, the man had the pallor of those who rarely saw the sun, but he smiled, clasped his hands together and said, "Well – at last I meet our newcomers! My colleague Martha has told me *all* about you. So—" He looked around them, rubbed his hands together again, then said, "First of all, then – before we go any further – is there anything you need? Anything I can do for you?"

"Can we go out?" asked Aeden, who seemed to have developed a one-track mind on the subject. Alric kicked him, but the tall man was nodding.

"Why, of *course*. If you want – certainly. Naturally we have our little rules here – which are for the benefit of *everyone* – but we do believe in freedom, that's one thing you'll discover. In fact, I was myself about to suggest that I conduct you on a brief walk around at least part of the island."

"Can't we go round on our own?" Raxi asked.

"Really, boys!" came a voice from outside the door, and Martha appeared. "The Reverend Mr. McCrum has *very kindly* suggested giving up some of his most valuable time to show you round our home here. I hope you boys are not going to be *ungrateful*."

She looked round at them. There didn't seem anything else to be said, so Raxi mumbled thanks in the general direction of the Reverend Mr. McCrum, and the party set off downstairs.

Outside, Alric looked around with fascination – though there was little new to see. The street outside was crowded, with drably-clad people pushing past them in all directions and, beyond these, noisy vehicles moved nose-to-tail, so densely packed that they often came to a standstill, puffing out clouds of acrid smoke from their rears. Alric coughed, then held a sleeve across his face. At least no-one stared at them now, dressed as they were in their Arthurian clothes.

"Ah, I see you're looking round at our busy town," said the Reverend McCrum to Alric. "Yes, we believe in work, in *getting on* with things. No dancing around fires, playing music here. Very different from what *you're* accustomed to, I'm sure."

Alric didn't disagree. Soon they left the center of town. The houses began to peter out; they were on a path, among some fields, but there were still crowds of people moving to and fro, hurrying – though where was not clear – and the grass was trampled and litter-strewn, the few trees blackened and stunted, most with nearly all their branches lopped off. A sluggish, foul-smelling stream moved past, its bed almost blocked with old tires, twisted metal and – in a few places, dead animals. Alric turned his face away and then, as they paused at the top of the hill and they had at least a view of the harbor, he asked, "Can we go down and look at the boats?"

He had begun to worry about their own boat, and wanted to check if it was still there.

"Not at the moment," said the man.

"We won't be long."

"I said *no*, boys. Now, if—"

"What about the 'freedom' you have here?" asked Raxi. Alric nudged him but the Reverend McCrum, clasping his hands, turned his eyes up and said, "Ah, yes, freedom. The liberty of the believers, the Freedom of God; the freedom to do God's will, to keep his Commandments."

"Can we go, then?"

"Only if God wills."

"Is this the god with three heads?" asked Aeden.

"I *beg* your pardon?" asked McCrum sharply.

"Or the one head?"

"He doesn't understand," said Alric hastily, nudging Aeden.

"Ah, grant them vision," said McCrum, his eyes upraised again.

"So – does the – the god will that we can look at the boats?" asked Raxi, a little impatiently.

"It is God's will that the heathen be turned from their errors," said McCrum, his eyes swiveling on Raxi fiercely. "Only in true *belief* is there liberty. Freedom without faith is falsehood, liberty outside of God's Law is *licentiousness*."

The boys moved uneasily. "Can we go back now?" asked Aeden.

"Look – look!" shouted McCrum, pointing to something behind them. It was something dreadful, something that made Aide's skin crawl – partly because, once again, it brought back the lurid scene he had witnessed at Wilfrid's. There was a building with an open door and, inside on a kind of altar, stood what they had glimpsed then – the horrible perversion of the image of Odin on the tree Ygdrasil – but, as before, with the figure replaced by one of the Nazarites' own gods, tortured, hideous and bleeding. Before it knelt a number of worshipers drinking red liquid in turn from a huge silver goblet, as if taking part in some form of ritual feast.

"You did that – *you!*" shrilled McCrum, indicating the figure of the god, his face reddening. "You, the heathen, the unbelievers." He stumbled forward, reaching for Chad, who was nearest. "For this God must chastise you *in love*, otherwise you will be burnt alive for ever and ever!"

Chad yelled in terror and stepped back.

"Run!" shouted Raxi, but McCrum had already grabbed Chad by his shoulders. Raxi grappled with the man and temporarily freed Chad, but McCrum rushed forward again. "In their heathen darkness, in their nakedness, they are filled with a *thousand lusts*, with *evil desires*, and a *multitude of filthinesses!*"

He was about to pounce again when an odd thing happened. The air was already murky, even up here, with smoke drifting upwards from the chimneys and the harbor, but now clouds of even more acrid smoke suddenly began to well up from a dip in the ground nearby, to drift across between McCrum and the boys, to envelop the man, swirl around his head, to blind him, make him cough and choke.

And, from somewhere behind the smoke, a voice called, "This way – run! *Quickly!*"

Stumbling, tripping, the four boys ran towards the voice, away from the increasingly desperate gagging and coughing. They swerved to avoid some tree trunks, jumped over a few bushes...

"*This way! Quick!*"

Then they were in a low dell or depression in the ground. The smoke was billowing from a source at the far end, rising, blowing into the woods behind them. Skirting it, they saw that it was being generated by a very strange contraption indeed. It was like an old-fashioned gramophone with a huge funnel. The smoke was coming out of the funnel and, stooping over the machine, a white-bearded man was furiously turning a handle, making the smoke billow out more and more fiercely. Then, suddenly, there was a bang, a flash from the machine, and a column of flame sprang up, making the old man leap back, making him tear off his cloak and beat vainly at the flames.

"Help me, help me!" he shouted to the boys.

They ran forward. Alric and Chad pulled the old man back, while Raxi kicked at the machine till it overbalanced; the flames diminished in a great hissing of water and Aeden, showing unexpected initiative, threw the remains of the cloak over the dying flames, finally quenching them completely.

The old man, on the ground, breathed heavily and wiped his forehead.

"Thank you, thank you," he said. "Ah – a man should not meddle in what he does not understand."

Something in the voice was a little familiar to Alric; as for Chad, however, it seemed as if he had suddenly gone a little crazy. He tugged violently at the man's beard, *removed* it, then pushed him back on the grass, jumping on him, hugging him, covering his face with kisses.

And Alric guessed.

"It's not...?"

"It is," said Wilfrid, freeing himself and sitting up. "And it's a lesson to us all. A good man should not dabble in the black arts."

"The black arts?"

"The arts of weaponry and destruction," said Wilfrid, getting up and dusting himself down, "No matter how primitive they be. But it seemed the best idea at the time. Come with me, quickly now, before the

true enemy recovers breath."

"Which way?"

"Over there." Wilfrid turned each boy round and gently tapped each on the shoulder, three times.

Alric blinked, trying for a moment to focus his eyes. At the back of the dell he now saw something he had noticed before; it looked like a wide waterfall about thirty feet high, formed as if by water falling over a long, flat cliff. But the water fell completely silently and behind it, instead of the darkness of stone, light shimmered, light broken into a thousand shapes and colors by the tumbling water. They walked towards it; there was still no sound and no spray.

"Now go through it," Wilfrid said. No one questioned him; the water was falling on to the grass and vanishing and, walking through the prismatic curtain, none of the boys felt anything, none even got wet. Admittedly Alric shut his eyes momentarily; then, when he opened them, he said, "We're back where we were!"

"Are you sure?" asked Wilfrid. He touched Alric on the shoulder again, this time twice.

Alric screwed up his eyes. "Sort of." It was the same small dell – but at the same time it wasn't the same. At his feet, as if a switch had been turned on, the small stream had started to run, to splash and bubble over the stones and, as if further switches had been thrown simultaneously, thrushes sang like Pan-pipes, the sun shone on deliciously clear water and the branches, miraculously restored to the dying trees, were hung everywhere with fresh spring leaves and blossoms. The grass was abundant and green, speckled with crocuses and snowdrops. The boys knelt, dabbling their hands in the water, laughing as tadpoles and sticklebacks darted out of sight under the stream's overhanging banks.

"Is it the same?" asked Raxi.

"Between good and evil is the thinnest curtain imaginable. You just have to cross."

"Is it so easy?" Raxi asked.

"That, dear Raxi, is the most difficult lesson of all to learn," Wilfrid said, puzzling him even more, then he said, "Now look back."

The shimmering curtain had vanished; now, looking back up the hill, they could see the stone chapel where they had parted from the Reverend McCrum, but the doorway was empty; the interior, also empty, was flooded with light from the open windows. They approached and stood in the stone-flagged doorway. The gruesome image had vanished, and now fresh flowers and blossoms in abundance spilled over the altar and were heaped about its base and steps, filling the building with their heady scent.

"You see, it's ready," Wilfrid said.

The chapel door had closed behind them. The greenery outside covered all the walls like curtains so that nothing beyond them was visible. It was completely silent.

"Ready for what?" asked Alric quietly, though half-guessing.

"Is *he* gone?" Chad asked in a whisper.

"He can't exist here," said Wilfrid simply. "Come, Chad. Sit, the rest of you."

"If you worship Jahweh, you despise humanity," Wilfrid said, gently divesting Chad of his clothes.

"But our gods are the trees, the fields, the wind, the sun – the land – above all, the people." He lifted the now-naked Chad on to a plinth in front of the altar and said. "Humanity we must love, humanity must be our god." He put a crown woven of spring flowers on Chad's head and said quietly, "You I love, *you* are my god."

"And all of you are mine," whispered Chad. "Especially you, Wilf."

Wilfrid, dipping his hand in scented oil, began to stroke Chad's body; as he increasingly stroked his most sensitive places Chad grew hard; his eyes closed, he began to writhe, make tiny sounds. Bending, Wilfrid picked him up in his two muscular arms, lifted the youngster's body to his chest, then bent his

head, licking, kissing. The boy's legs stirred, his toes splayed, his head moved from side to side, he sighed, almost sobbed. And Wilfrid was changing again; his hair had darkened; he looked younger, almost juvenile.

"Take me, Wilf," whispered the boy.

In front of Chad, a row of censers had been smoking; now the smoke became more and more dense. It rose in a great cloud, hiding the two completely. They heard Wilfrid say to them, *Celebrate with us...* And then silence.

Suddenly Alric was aware that he himself, while watching, had gone rock-hard, that his stick was tingling like a lightning-conductor. And he saw, too, that Aeden had pulled his breeches down to his knees and was beginning energetic work on his own rather surprising bowsprit. Raxi had, however, gone one better in that during the mini-ceremony he had managed to peel off his clothes completely. Now, naked as Chad, he locked his arms round the necks of the two younger boys.

"To complete the ceremony," he said in a low voice, "You pair of sprogs are going to sing and dance like never before!"

"Yeeah!"

In a split second both Aeden and Alric, undressed completely now, were bundled up the altar steps, were stood side by side on the marble plinth, then Raxi reached forward with both hands and gripped so forcefully that the two younger boys burst into a shrill treble duet straight away, then as Raxi started working with teeth-clenching concentration, their bare feet were soon beating a merry tattoo on the smooth marble, their hips jumping and gyrating like hula-dancers', then all their bodies and their long bare limbs shimmying frenetically from toes to finger-tips, their high-volume hollerings ringing and echoing all round the temple walls, perfectly in time to Raxi's increasingly enthusiastic ministrations.

"Fingers up each others' botties!" ordered Raxi breathlessly. "Right up." At which more shrill semiquavers... Then, from Aeden, a flurry of high kicks and crescendo of shrieks that finished with his tumbling flat on the plinth, limbs thrashing, but with Raxi's hand still clamped firmly in place with both of his, his hands still moving Raxi's till Raxi at long last detached them. And then Alric, who had tumbled down with the others, finished the dance – as once before – on his back, legs kicking like a jack-rabbit as Raxi, now with head bent and using teeth, tongue and lips with maximum vigor, finally drew from him shriek after piercing shriek, while his legs flew out, spun and scissored and as his suddenly rigid body banged up and down, unhurting, on the hard marble underneath.

Already, though, Aeden was up on hands and knees, catching hold of Raxi's arm. "And now it's your turn," he said, a little hoarsely. "Alric, come and help."

"Wait, wait," gasped Alric, still whooping for breath. To Raxi he said, admiringly, "Gosh, you make us dance like *crazy*."

"It's nothing to the song and dance *you're* going to do," said Aeden, now on his feet. "Come on, Alric."

Alric struggled up too, then together they stood an unresisting Raxi on the plinth; Aeden said, "And now..." leaning forward, but was arrested by clapping and shouts of *Go!* from behind him. Somehow, Wilfrid and Chad had appeared at the rear of the chapel, standing in the aisle, Wilfrid gray-haired and in his long black robe again, the boy in a similar robe, edged in silver.

"You have an audience!" Aeden said to the "victim" already squirming and shrieking in his grip. "You must do your best!"

And he did, with the enthusiastic four-handed attention of Aeden and Alric – Aeden working hard on his stick with one hand, rubbing and tickling all round it with the other, Alric with fingers deep between his opened bottom-cheeks, pushing, prodding, twisting... Raxi delighted his audience immeasurably as he

yelled, laughed, whistled, sobbed, even more as his leaping and twisting *pas seul* on the marble became ever more frenzied – till he too in turn was extended on his back, his long legs spinning and thrashing, then his entire body flailing to one ear-splitting cadenza after another as his solo ended on a high note that would not have shamed any Songboy in the land.

An instant later a loud crash rang through the chapel; there was a sound of tumbling masonry from somewhere beyond and above the great altar.

"Behold the abomination of wickedness!"

All the boys jumped. In the wall behind the altar was a narrow alcove; between its edges the smoke-blackened but recognizable features of the Reverend McCrum had risen into view.

"They who are given to carnal desires will be tortured in the fire, they will burn for ever and ever!"

Alric turned to Wilfrid. "Here he can't *exist*, you said?"

"He's outside," said Wilfrid. "Just."

"Yea!" shouted McCrum, "They who are given to fleshly lusts shall be cast where the flame dieth not, Collisions three-and-fifteen, Thessalickians two-and-fifty-seven, Phillipipipipi..." He burst into a coughing fit.

"Was that a curse?" asked Chad.

"No, the writings of their prophets," Wilfrid said. He walked over to the alcove and said, "Coming in, Reverend?"

"Into a place of *iniquity*? Into an abode of sin, of *evil*, of nakedness and fornication? Nay, rather—"

Wilfrid said softly, "*You*, brother, are evil – *you!*"

"Nay!"

"Yea! We build, evil destroys. You have destroyed love, life, the trees, the rivers, the very air. Your hatred, your *poison*, has soured humanity for two thousand years. You have—"

The Reverend threw his hands up. "Ah, repent, repent. Be washed in the blood!"

Wilfrid laughed shortly, "You have indeed washed in blood, bathed in it, wallowed in it, many times over. And I can hear your guns outside still."

The Reverend's face tightened, his eyes grew big. "You are the devil! Get thee away from me."

"Reverend," said Wilfrid, mildly again, "The devil is the power of destruction that lives in every one of us. Those who do not recognize it are possessed by it. Let me—"

"Tempt me no more!" cried the Reverend, half-closing his eyes. "*I* am free from the devil, my sin is washed away, praise the Lord, I'm happy, happy, happy..."

Then he had gone – so quickly that Alric wondered whether he had really been there in the first place. As it happened, Alric had scarcely been listening to the exchange in any case, but was still kneeling on the plinth, idly stroking Raxi, whispering quietly into his ear.

"On with your clothes then, all of you, and let's be away," Wilfrid said.

"Was that *really* the Reverend McCrum?" asked Alric with a frown, as he struggled back into the ungainly Arthurian clothes.

"Either that or a remarkably good materialization," said Wilfrid enigmatically. Alric, still dissatisfied, was starting to ask another question, but then his attention was caught by something that hung on a chain round Wilfrid's neck – an intricately worked silver brooch with the letter C in the center.

"His *amulet*," he whispered.

Wilfrid nodded. He said slowly, "Some day *you* will be given one – and it will make you very proud...and wonderfully happy."

Now Alric, looking at Chad, saw that the latter also wore an amulet, one that swung and glittered, one that Chad could scarcely take his eyes off for a moment; he kept lifting it, fingering it, staring at it.

Alric went over, kissed him, and said, "I *told* you. Will you live in the big house now?"

"Yes," said Chad. "But you'll be there too, as much as you can. It won't be the same if you're not."

Then Alric asked curiously, "Before you gave it to him... Where was it?"

Chad tapped the box that hung round his neck again.

"Before I left, my mother put it in a secret compartment!"

Alric laughed. So something else was explained; Chad had had a double reason for guarding the box with such zeal.

They were ready to go; Wilfrid led the way outside, touched the boys on their shoulders again and indicated the shimmering curtain, which had now re-appeared in the center of a light pall of mist. Alric blinked again, and it became more clear – though there was still no sound.

"You must go back now," he said. "For the moment. Sorry."

Again they felt no sensation on crossing to the other side of the grass dell, but Alric wrinkled his nose as the reek of the blocked stream assailed them, as their feet trailed again through oil and litter.

"Where's Wilf?" asked Aeden suddenly, looking back.

Wilfrid had gone, also the great shining curtain. Chad was, however, the least concerned. He cradled his jewel in his hand and said, "Don't worry, he's never too far away."

Then all four jumped as there was a scurrying in the undergrowth; Raxi jumped forward into the bushes, then returned holding the small squirming figure of Ben by one arm.

"Ow, you're *hurting!*"

"Sorry," said Raxi, releasing his hold, "But you were spying on us, weren't you?"

"Sort of," said Ben frankly. "I lost you, though. Where did you go?"

"Just over there," replied Alric, waving back vaguely the way they had come. Then he asked, "Shouldn't you be in your classes?"

The boy nodded. "S'pose." Then he asked, "Shouldn't *you?*"

It occurred to Alric that the Songboys, back in Mercantaria, would just be beginning their second rehearsal of the day. He laughed. "S'pose," he said in turn.

"How old are you?" asked Chad.

"Thirteen."

"Me too."

There was a silence. Ben trailed a toe on the ground, looked down, then said hesitantly. "You know what you said at first, about you not meaning us no harm...?"

Alric nodded.

"Well, I just come to say that...well, we don't mean *you* no harm either. Least, not me nor most of the other kids."

"Thanks," said Alric, touched. Then he asked, "But the adults?"

The youngster drew in breath through his teeth and threw his eyes up expressively.

"Them!"

"So!" For the second time Ben's arm was firmly grasped, this time by a fiery-eyed priest who came bursting through the filthy undergrowth and stood holding the boy and glaring at him, red-faced and panting. For a moment Alric thought it was the Reverend McCrum, but no, it was a different and younger version.

"So!" breathed the newcomer again in Ben's direction, "Not only do you miss school, but I find you consorting with these *godless heathen!*"

"Do you *mind?*" said Raxi.

The priest's glare turned on them. "I don't bandy words with the likes of you. Return to your room in

the school and you will be dealt with in due course."

He turned back to the boy in his grasp. "As for you, I'm afraid it is my unhappy duty to *chastise* you for your wickedness."

Ben was dragged into the chapel building, struggling and squawking protests.

"The *likes* of us...!" said Raxi indignantly.

Aeden put a finger to his lips, pointed towards the chapel and said, "Come on. Quietly."

They tiptoed across and into the chapel; it was dark and grim as it had been before, the walls hung with the same caricatures of their own Pagan images. The door of the priest's office was closed, but intriguing sounds already proceeded from the other side. As with Martha's sanctum, there was a long communicating window high in the wall, and in a moment the four boys were in tiptoe on a bench, faces pressed to the glass, but their bodies tense, ready for immediate flight.

There was no need to worry, however, as the priest, seated on a wooden bench inside, was already deeply absorbed in his task. Ben lay across his knee, pants rucked to his knees, and the priestly palm beat a diligent tattoo on Ben's pale, wriggling bottom, while the youngster ow-ed, shouted, whistled and yelled.

"Whom-God-loveth-he-chastiseth," panted the priest, "and it is my *painful* duty to do G-God's will." His voice shook a little. And, as the smacks continued to land and Ben became more and more lively on his lap, the priest's eyes closed, his face began to contort, and he too was beginning to squirm, to and fro, then from side to side on the bench.

He paused, then, rubbing his palm over Ben's unfortunate rear, said, "I must check how warm your b-bottom is, to make sure the punishment is *sufficient*." He did this with care, taking some time, then, after some more spanking, he suddenly thrust another hand in between Ben and his lap, saying, "And it is also my duty to make sure that you are not guilty of any *more wickedness*."

He made sure, as Ben squalled, then operations to the rear were resumed, though this time with both parties in increasingly vigorous motion till all at once the priest's face contorted again, his body became rigid, and he moaned, "Oh-oh-oh!"

The youngster looked round in surprise.

"Oh-oh! Oh, it *does* so pain me that I have to act in this way for your *good*," said the priest, releasing him at last. "Now, go back to your dormitory and *pray for forgiveness*."

They left through the opposite door, the boy rubbing himself and the priest walking a little awkwardly; meanwhile the four watchers had dropped silently from their vantage-point and scuttled on tiptoe for the main door.

"Poor kid," Chad commiserated. Then he suddenly pointed to Chad, and said, "Look!"

Aeden also exclaimed in surprise. In the deep shadow of the arched building, it was as if Chad had mysteriously lit up, somewhere around his middle.

Chad looked and gasped, "The box!"

He took it out. Though it was still clasped, bright blue light spilled through the joint all round and, when he opened it, all the boys screwed up their eyes at the brilliance of the small globe inside.

"We're *there*," exclaimed Alric. "We *have* to be."

"But where?" Raxi looked round.

"Underneath here," Chad said, "The catacombs have to be underneath. You know – perhaps that's where that McCrum came up from."

"Oh," said Alric unhappily.

"Hello," said a voice from behind. It was Ben, cheerfulness undimmed.

"Gotta sore bum off Father Fish-Face," he volunteered, "But I don't care."

"Shouldn't you go back?" asked Raxi.

"No, don't want to. Can I stick with you lot?"

Raxi hesitated. He had taken a liking to the youngster, but could he be trusted not to give away their secrets, even perhaps without meaning to?

"I can help you," said Ben eagerly. "If I don't they'll keep you here, like the others."

Alric was immediately alert.

"What others?" he asked sharply.

"The kids they brought over here a while back – the ones like you."

"Have you seen them?" Raxi asked eagerly.

"Where are they?" asked Chad.

On impulse Alric took a crumpled photograph of Jay out of his pocket and showed it to Ben. "You seen him?"

Ben screwed up his face. "He's one of them, isn't he? I think so – but he looks different. I saw them once; they brought them to sing in the chapel, but they weren't very keen."

"We've come to try and find them," Alric told him simply.

Ben nodded. "I guessed so. And the Reverends, they guess so too."

"Oh," said Raxi, dismayed.

A thoughtful look had come into Ben's face.

"If I help you..."

"Yes?"

"And *if* you find your friends and get to go home..?"

"Yes?" asked Raxi again, impatiently.

"Then, when you go can I go with you?" asked Ben quickly. "Please – I wouldn't be no trouble. *Can I?*"

"Let him," said Alric.

Raxi shrugged. "Okay, then."

"And any of my mates who want to come? Please?"

Raxi thought, smiled, then said, "Why not? We'll have to ask Wilfrid, though."

"Who?"

"I'll explain later. But, Ben—" Raxi went on slowly, "It really is best if you go back for now, pretend that nothing has happened, say nothing about what we've just said. Okay?"

The boy wrinkled his nose. "*No!*" he wailed.

"We won't forget you when the time comes – we promise."

Ben hesitated. "Okay, then." On impulse, he slapped each boy's hand, said Mates! – to which they responded in kind – then he was gone.

"He didn't tell us much," said Chad doubtfully.

"He told us a *lot*," Alric said protectively. "Come on, back in the chapel again."

Inside, heads together, they peered down the alcove in the rear wall. The space seemed to go down a long way, but it was dark, and no-one had a light of any kind.

"It can't be down *there*," said Aeden.

"It has to be," Raxi said, "There are probably catacombs all through the island, with lots of entrances; this is just one."

"Look – there's a steel ladder," said Alric doubtfully. He added even more doubtfully, "Maybe that's how the McCrum got up." The thought of going down had suddenly become doubly uninviting.

"Hello, boys!"

All four started and swung round.

"Continuing to take an interest – looking and learning? Good – good!"

It was Martha and another woman, the latter tall and thin and a with rather short and severe haircut, but looking round the four with a bright smile. Alric stirred uneasily. In a way, the determinedly smirking Martha – and now this other one – felt more menacing than the gruesome Reverends; at least you knew where you were with the latter.

"All right, boys, this is Miss Wellfly, our Care Worker. She's just like you to pop back to the school with her and have a little chat."

"Okay," said the trusting Aeden. "And lunch too?"

Martha nodded. The others had little choice but to follow.

Martha left them, and the rest went into a small room, slightly better furnished than most, with a desk and some chairs. There were, however, several cushions on the floor and the boys were motioned to these, and sat. Miss Wellfly also sat on a cushion, though she seemed uncertain where to put her legs and she looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"You're a bit big for that," said Aeden.

"That – that's as may be." Miss Wellfly regained her poise, then said, "Well, it does help, doesn't it, if we're on the same level? Think of me as your *friend*, not another adult, then it will help when we have our little chat. By the way, my name's Susan, though of course my friends call me Sue."

"What do people who *don't* like you call you?" inquired Aeden innocently.

"Ha, ha! What a funny question! Ha, ha, ha! Well, anyhow..." She leaned forward. "Now, boys, first of all you must understand that no-one is blaming you, no-one *at all*."

"Blaming us for what?" asked Raxi, a little impatiently. "And can I sit on a chair, please? Toadstools are for pixies."

"In a minute, dear. But first I have to tell you that I have heard things that cause me *very serious concern*."

The boys were silent now.

"I have certain responsibilities, you know, and not only have I heard certain things about practices which took place where you come from, but I have also learned that when you were outside *here* today, you met a *man*."

She sat up, looking from face to face with a no-point-denying-it expression. No-one denied it.

"Now, as I said, there are things you may not perhaps understand yet, and therefore we have to *protect* you, and also explain certain things – all in your own best interests – but first it is necessary that you *disclose* what occurred."

"Why?" asked Chad, forehead wrinkled. "It's – well, it's *our* affair, isn't it?"

"So you have *secrets* then," said Miss Wellfly, leaning forward again and fixing him with an accusing stare. "Children should *not* have secrets from the adults responsible for them."

"Why not?"

"Because children don't know what's best for them," said the woman, a slight edge on her voice. "So we decide."

"I'm *not* a child," said Raxi crossly. "I'm fourteen next month."

"Under *our* law you are."

"So you're an adult and know better?"

Miss Wellfly nodded, the smile returning. "I'm glad you understand, Raxi."

"Then what's seventeen times three hundred and eighty-seven?" said Raxi suddenly.

Miss Wellfly stared. "What d'you mean? Don't be ridiculous."

"It's six thousand, five hundred and seventy-nine. Now *you* give *me* one."

Alric grinned. Raxi was one of the brightest boys in the choir – and he liked showing off.

"*Please!*" said the woman.

"What's the distance of the sun from the earth? The angle subtended by the orbit of Saturn? If you don't know I'll tell you, then you can ask *me* some."

Miss Wellfly banged her fist on the floor. "That's *enough!*"

"If it's enough," said Raxi, "You should be pleased, not angry. You shouldn't get angry until it's *too much*. Anyway – you still say that you know best?"

Miss Wellfly breathed deeply, then making an effort, bared her teeth and said, "This is hardly the point, is it?" She looked round at the others. "Well – I'm waiting to hear what you have to *disclose*. I can wait quite a long time, you know. And—" the teeth were exposed a little further – "there are others of us, you know."

None of the boys said anything. The Care Worker pursed her lips, then nodded. "Quite, quite – a *guilty silence*. I thought so – I was right!" She looked round them triumphantly.

"But now, please – since I know everything at last – the *details*."

Suddenly Alric struggled to his feet. "Yes, I must tell all – everything that happened in the woods – *everything*."

"Yes?" asked Miss Wellfly eagerly.

"We met a man, there was a terrible *ceremony*, and we were *abused* – all of us!"

Alric was aware of the wide stares of Aeden and Chad; Raxi, however, was expressionless.

The woman took out a crumpled tissue and wiped a large drop of liquid from her lower lip. "Yes, yes?"

"There was this great *altar* in the middle of the forest," said Alric, lowering his voice dramatically.

"It was in this dark, dark building, and there were all these people inside it in dark, dark clothes, kneeling in front of it, pretending to *drink blood*. And then this man in black came and abused us *terribly*, shouting at us that we were all wicked, all sinful, and that we would be burnt up for *ever and ever*. We were *really frightened*." He paused. "That's all."

Alric sat down and there was another short silence.

At length the Care Worker spoke, lips tight. "The matter is *not funny*, boys."

"I didn't say it *was*," said Alric.

She made another effort. "Are there any more disclosures?"

"Yes – the man had a black face – all sooty," said Aeden. "All you could see were big white eyes and teeth. He was like a *devil*."

"Aeden's a bit crazy," Chad said, "That's *my disclosure*."

"You want to *wrestle?*" said Aeden to him.

"Love to," said Chad, jostling him amicably.

"Please, *please!*" Still, you had to admire Miss Wellfly in a way, thought Alric. Once again she took deep breaths, grinned, and said, "Well, I think it's time for me to bring this little chat to an end with just a few words." She looked round the four again, then continued, "Just remember this, all of you." Her eyes fell on Aeden, "And, perhaps, especially you..."

"*Me?* Why?"

The woman hesitated, then said, "Your pants are too short, for one thing. Report to the office for another pair afterwards."

Aeden made a face. The Care Worker continued, "Just remember, here as in your own country you will meet many people, some of them *strangers*. Worse, some of them might even start getting *friendly*

with you." Her expression had become grim.

"But surely—" Aeden began.

"I haven't *finished*. Now, always remember – your body belongs to *you*. You have the right to say *no* – always *you*, no-one else."

"What are you talking about?" asked Chad, frowning.

"I mean, if somebody wants to do something *bad* – something *nasty* – to you. *You* have the right to say *no* – and always remember it."

"You mean," said Chad, "Like one of the Reverends wanting to spank you, something like that?"

"Well – um – no, not that. But – well, if they want to do anything *else*, anything *really nasty*, I meant."

"Quite right too!" agreed Aeden. "But what if they want to do something nice?"

"Like...what?" asked Miss Wellfly, suddenly wary.

Aeden put a hand on his stick and made expressive motions. "You know?"

The woman went bright pink. "Stop that *at once!* No – of *course* not!"

"Of course not what?"

"Of course they can't."

Aeden frowned. "But," he said slowly, "If it belongs to me so I can say *no* – then it belongs to me so I can say *yes*."

"It's not the same thing," snapped the woman.

"Why not?"

She drew herself up, drew a deep breath. At length she said, looking around the group, "Well – I can see now that I was right to be *very seriously concerned*. I can see that, particularly with regard to you, Aeden, I shall have to call a *case conference*."

"Am I a case?" inquired Aeden with interest.

"After what I have heard," Miss Wellfly said, "you have become my client."

"Oh, don't bother, I don't want to buy anything," said Aeden. "But thanks anyway."

Miss Wellfly said tightly, "I repeat that, while I do not wish to become emotionally over-involved, I must hold a multi-disciplinary case conference with my colleagues and give it as my professional opinion that I must now act in your best interests."

"Oh, good!", enthused Raxi, smiling. "You do want to play." He thought, then said, "Unconstitutionally serendipitous confabulations. Now you again."

"I beg your pardon?" The Care Worker cleared her throat, then said, "Don't be silly. I have to tell you that it will be my duty to recommend that you all have intensive at-risk survivor therapy."

"Not bad!" Raxi closed his eyes, then said, "Um – paradoxical interstitial prehensile discontinuity. Now your turn again."

"That's *enough!*"

"Are these all you know?" said Raxi. "I win, then. Sorry."

Miss Wellfly rose. "We must *certainly* have a case conference," she said, picking up her papers. "But for the moment, I have decided that you are a corrupting influence on our children here, and you will remain in this room until you hear from us further."

"How does she *know* we will?" muttered Alric as she departed.

"What does she mean, corrupting influence?" asked Raxi indignantly. "They make you feel *dirty* in this place. If it wasn't for what we've got to do, I'd be up and off out of here."

"Me too!" Aeden said.

"Has she gone?" The four looked round at the voice, and saw Ben's face at the open window, two other wide-eyed youngsters with him.

"Locked you in, has she?" asked Ben.

"I think so," Alric replied.

"Don't worry," said Ben, grinning, "I got news."

"What?"

Ben looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "Can't tell you now. She's just round the corner talking to Fart-Face, and one of them'll be back any minute. I'll come round tonight, after it's dark. But it's something *good*." He looked round again. "Wo-ow, here she comes! See you."

The three faces vanished as suddenly as they had appeared; the boys in the room fled back to their seats, and in a moment the door opened and Martha the Matron came in. She surveyed the three unsmilingly.

"So!" she said. "I have been talking to Miss Wellfly, and I am shocked – very shocked – by what she had to tell me. We have decided that you must be *punished* for your behavior. On this occasion we will be relatively lenient, but I warn you that if there is any repetition you will be punished *very severely indeed*."

"For what?" asked Chad.

"For questioning our authority and answering back, for one thing," said Martha sharply. "None of you appear to realize that it is God who sets adults, parents and teachers in authority over you, so that any sin against them is a sin against *God himself*."

The boys were silent.

"Right, come with me. You three..." She indicated Alric, Chad and Aeden. "...will stay in your cubicles for the rest of the day. You, Raxi or whatever your name is, are clearly the ringleader, and you will come up to the dormitory and be bathed and put *straight to bed*. Now, come along."

"Bathed?"

"Yes – *very* thoroughly indeed."

"Wow!" said Raxi in a tone that immediately made Martha dart him a suspicious glance, but his face was expressionless.

Upstairs, the three condemned to their cubicles were immediately snibbed in, but Alric, quickly peeling off his clothes, stood on his bed and peered over the top, and guessed the others were doing the same. Martha and Raxi, he rightly guessed, would be too preoccupied to notice.

There was a square stone bath protruding from the far wall, with taps running into it, and Martha, kneeling, was already beginning to unbutton her victim.

Furrowing his brow, Raxi asked, "Are you going to take *all* my clothes off?"

"Of course."

"But you wouldn't let me be naked before. When I came into your office this morning, you were angry."

"This is *not* the same thing at all. You must realize that I am in charge of you, and have certain *responsibilities*, one being to ensure that you are *completely clean*. Your being n-naked now is normal, *quite different*." Her voice shook a little on the last sentence; she had pulled off Raxi's shirt, then peeled down his pants and took him over to stand by the bathtub. She turned the water off, then soaping her hands, she began to rub Raxi vigorously from top to toe.

"And this morning," Raxi said, as distinctly as he could with his mouth full of soap, "you wouldn't even *look* at me – now you do."

"Naturally I averted my eyes from your *shamelessness*," Martha said shortly. "But I can't *bath* you properly without *looking* at you. Don't be silly. If you don't like it, that's too bad."

"Actually, I *do* like it," said Raxi.

"Well, you're not supposed to!" said Martha crossly, slapping him.

"Ow!"

"And now just keep quiet."

She spread a towel over the side of the bath and made him turn tummy-down over the edge, bottom protruding; she spread his thighs and then, holding his bottom cheeks widely apart with one hand, began to soap diligently below and between with the other – up and down, to and fro, back and forth. Raxi squirmed, his thighs twitching, his toes clenching; he began to make small muffled sounds.

"Quiet!" said Martha breathlessly, continuing to rub. Then she pushed a hand underneath and lifted, making Raxi gasp, hoisting his hips up even further before resuming work in the same general area. He looked so funny that Alric wanted suddenly to giggle, but clamped a hand over his mouth just in time.

"Boys have to be kept clean *down here*," panted Martha; she stopped rubbing and pushed everything apart again for a final – and prolonged – inspection, then she stood him upright and in the water and made him turn to face her, adding, "And *here* as well!"

Alric this time had to clamp two hands over his mouth. Raxi's stick was standing up every bit as hard as it had been in the earlier "ceremony" and Martha, ignoring the fact and, hands soaped again, was starting work on it and all around it. Then she took it in her hand, moved it from side to side, looking at it, underneath it.

"I'm afraid that I am also obliged to check for any *spots*," she said, continuing her explorations, making him separate his thighs again.

"Why?"

"Because spots are evidence of *filthy practices*, that's why," said Martha sharply.

"I don't think I've got any spots," said Raxi. "But I've got some hairs now – look! You want to help me to count them?"

"I said *quiet!*" Martha slapped him again.

"Ow!"

"So – whether you like this or not," said Martha, breathless again, "I have to get you really c-c-clean here." Now, one hand, behind him, she was soaping his stick with increasing vigor. Raxi, eyes tight closed now, had begun to gasp, sigh, whimper.

"Oh – oh – *M-Martha...*"

"No – no point complaining. And next time you are tempted to m-misbehave, just remember the *s-s-severe punishment* you had today."

Suddenly Raxi yelled, his hips contorted, and he jolted forward, clasping Martha convulsively round the neck.

"Oh, *Martha!* Waaa-aaaa-AAAAH!!!"

Martha continued, but slower; she pushed Raxi away, but he continued to wriggle and yodel for a little longer, until at length Martha stood up, quickly splashed him over with water, then said in a low, rapid voice, "Now, get out and dry yourself and get dressed quickly. I'll be back in five minutes to see that you're in bed."

With that she turned, went into her office and banged the door.

Raxi looked up and caught Alric's eye. He stepped out of the bath and picked up the large, coarse towel beside it. "Come and dry me," he said.

Alric looked dubiously towards the office door, but Raxi said confidently, "*She* won't be out for a while. *Come on!*"

Alric wriggled over the top of the cubicle door, dropped on the linoleum floor as softly as he could, then picked up the towel and started drying his friend enthusiastically.

Raxi asked, "Were you watching?"

"Of course."

"I'd hoped you were."

Alric sat down, took Raxi to sit on his lap and then went on drying, enjoying the sight of Raxi's long smooth thighs spread on his knees, and the feeling of rubbing the rough towel all over his body, feeling Raxi move and twitch in response on his lap. He started to speak, but Raxi held a hand up, said *sssh!* and pointed.

From behind the closed office door came a just-audible *oh-oh-OH*, that was as suddenly muffled again.

"*She's enjoying herself*," Raxi said.

"Not just her!" Alric said, putting down the towel, having completed his delectable task, then stroking Raxi's thighs, then his stick, now growing hard again. And as for his *own...*

Raxi shifted on Alric's lap, suddenly grinned wickedly, then started extravagantly to wriggle his bottom, grinding it down hard, squirming and twisting with increasing speed and enthusiasm.

Grabbing Raxi's stick with one hand, with the other cramming the towel against his face, Alric responded with a half-muffled *arioso* of whoops, sobs and squeals, till at once his legs flexed with a force that lifted even Raxi a perceptible distance into the air, until even the towel was inadequate for its purpose as he flexed again, then several times more, grasping Raxi round the neck with both arms even more tightly than Raxi had earlier grasped the dread Martha.

"*Run!*" breathed Raxi, getting up. He pulled Alric over to his cubicle, unsnibbed the door, pushed it in, then banged it shut behind him, and was back across the room and struggling into his clothes as the office door opened and Martha came out. She looked around suspiciously.

"Did you hear anything?" she asked him.

Raxi wrinkled his brow. "I think I may have done. You think there are mice here, perhaps?"

Martha looked searchingly at him again, then said shortly, "Hurry up and get into your cubicle." She waited till he did so, then she went out of the dormitory and the sound of her footsteps faded on the stairs.

A moment later, Raxi's head appeared over the dividing wall between their cubicles.

"Where are those two sprogs?" he asked.

"I dunno. They've been very quiet."

"That's because they've *gone!* *Both* of them."

They had. Alric climbed out of his cubicle and the two stood puzzling for a moment, then heard shouts from outside the half-open window. They went over and hung out. Down below, not far from the base of a large drainpipe, their two friends were engaged in a vigorous game of football with Ben and his own two companions, shouting, leaping and yelling with enthusiasm as the ball slammed hither and thither about the small courtyard.

"They've got a nerve," said Alric admiringly. "They'll get into terrible trouble."

"Perhaps, if they're lucky, Mad Martha will give them a very *severe bath!*"



That evening, Ben appeared as promised, a small shadowy figure sliding into Alric's cubicle just after dark. Raxi was fetched, then Ben said, "Right, listen – these friends of yours. Well, they're going to come and give another concert in the school hall tomorrow night. Like they did before."

"Great!" said Raxi. Then he said, "I suppose they enjoy putting them on display?"

"Reckon."

Something inside Alric jolted at the thought of being so near seeing Jay again – if indeed Ben was right. He fingered the amulet in his pocket, then asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes – we're all going. All the school-kids."

"How long will they stay down in the...catacombs or whatever?" asked Raxi curiously.

"Dunno. I think they've got to burn them again first. But if any of them have been done now, they'll probably move them to the school with us."

"But you don't know that."

Ben shook his head, and Raxi asked, "And us?"

"They're going to take you as well, I think. But tonight I reckon you'll be well away from them, at the back maybe, so you can't do anything."

"I reckon so too," said Alric regretfully. "But *can* we do anything?"

"Maybe not," Ben said, "I've got a plan, though."

"What?"

"I'm still working on it." Then Ben, as ever, had vanished into the dark before anyone realized he was going.

"Slippery as an eel, that kid," grumbled Raxi.

"I trust him, though," Alric said. Then, lifting his hands up, fists clenched, he said, "I think we're going to *do* it, Raxi, I really do!"

Raxi grabbed both his hands. "I *know* we will."

"Stay with me now," whispered Alric, locking his arms round Raxi's waist. "There's no-one to hear, not even the sprogs – though I don't mind them, of course."

Alric was in fact no older than the two friends to whom he referred in such condescending terms, but he had unconsciously adopted Raxi's superior terminology. Chad and Aeden were, in fact, both asleep. Although Raxi had been joking earlier when he had predicted their punishment if they were caught at the football game, he had in fact proved a true prophet.

Martha, drawn by the noise, had come into the yard with an assistant, female voices had been raised in outrage, and Chad and Aeden had been hustled upstairs to be bathed and put to bed just as Raxi had been.

There was a variation this time, though. After pushing the culprits into the dormitory and disappearing for an interval, Martha returned with two serious-faced young men in Arthurian priests' garb, each clasping black leather-bound books.

"Our younger ministers were gathering for a prayer meeting and, when I asked for assistance, these two godly Brothers volunteered immediately," she said. "An example to you all of our dedication."

Aeden grimaced and Alric put his tongue out, though behind Martha's back.

Then one of the priests undressed both boys while the other, from his black book, read a droning passage about "the defilement of sin" and the "cleanliness of repentance".

The bath filled, and the godly Brothers draped in plastic aprons, Chad and Aeden were for the second time that day the naked performers in a spectacular and highly vocal double act, this time orchestrated by the surprisingly vigorous and unsparing hands of the young priests working in tandem. Though as a variant, each was after a moment or two draped over a plastic-aproned lap, then each with a hand thrust underneath and lifting up as high as possible, was held, thighs splayed wide and uncompromisingly open-bottomed, for an exceedingly diligent bare-handed soaping of every possible nook and cranny, while the culprits shrieked like banshees and kicked like jitterbugs, making the walls echo even more deafeningly than Raxi had.

"Are we clean like repentance now?" asked Aeden during a brief interval.

"Ah, grant them understanding!" said one Brother, rolling his eyes up.

"Not yet," said the other.

The last burst of soaping was also carried out on the two Brothers' laps, the hapless youngsters on their backs now, each supported round the shoulders by one firm arm while the other hand applied soap with a degree of robustness that made the culprits thighs hammer frenetically, their feet kick the air, flex and flail. Chad was the first to convulse and squall, then Aeden; for a little longer both were yelling and thrashing on the two bony laps, then the soaping was at last completed more quietly and, as in Raxi's case, the pair were splashed down fairly perfunctorily and left to get dried and dressed.

Aeden, whose cupid lips framed a remarkably large mouth – in one sense at least – asked if he could be bathed again, and the same way, on the following night. Deservedly in Alric's opinion, he received a well-placed smack – though one which bothered him not a whit – before the godly Brothers departed – somewhat abruptly, one leaving his book behind.

Alric quickly and eagerly helped Raxi with the drying process, but after that the miscreants were so exhausted by their exertions that they went to bed and fell asleep almost straight away. And after Ben's visit, Alric too was so tired by the events of the day that any earlier plans were postponed and he was asleep, legs and arms entangled with Raxi's, almost before he knew.



The school hall was a depressing barn of a place, with high, filthy windows, and dark, water-streaked walls. For the concert, the boys from the school were arranged in dense rows at the front, there were a number of rows of adults and, as Ben had predicted, Alric and his friends were placed well to the back, two "attendants" on either side. A dispirited-looking pianist took her place on the platform, and Alric began to tense inwardly as a hush fell and the hands of the grimy clock over the stage reached seven. Unfortunately there had been no contact with Ben since they had met, in spite of their efforts, and he wondered if Ben had after all planned anything. He doubted it; what after all could he do with such a crowd around?

To make the prospect of the evening even more pleasant, the first figure on the platform was in the event the tall spare form of the Reverend Mr McCrum.

"*Boo!*" whispered Aeden, and Alric nudged him to be quiet.

The Reverend had washed all the soot off his face and he looked a lot more cheerful, in fact he positively smirked with self-satisfaction.

"Tonight, dear friends," he said, beaming around, "you will see before you those, who, though once children of the Devil, have now been delivered from heathen darkness into God's wonderful freedom. Praise the Lord!"

"Amen!" shouted the congregation.

"*Double boo!*" hissed Aeden.

"Sssh!"

"Ah yes, once enslaved in night and misery, sunk in unspeakable iniquity, they are now freed from the yoke of Satan, and full of God's wonderful joy. Hallelujah!"

There were more shouts from the audience, someone started clapping, and a shrill chorus was set up that went *joy-joy-joy...* until the Reverend, smirking indulgently, at length held up a hand for silence. There was a good deal more from him in the same vein and then, amid shouts of *Amen!* and *Praise the Lord!* a short chain of youngsters – about a dozen – dressed alike in dark uniforms similar to the school's were marched on, then stood in two rows facing the audience. Alric's heart was hammering now and he half stood up in his eagerness – therefore the disappointment was doubly cruel. Yes, he recognized some

of the boys, though much changed, with their shapeless clothes, now-pasty faces and short hair, but there was *no Jay!*

He pulled at Raxi. "Where *is* he?" he hissed.

"I don't know," Raxi whispered back, his impatient tone covering his own disappointment. "Maybe – maybe those aren't all of them."

Alric doubted it; he scanned the rows of faces distractedly once again, in case he had missed Jay. But of course he would have recognized him at once – even if his appearance had been as much altered as that of the others.

By now the piano had played some bars, and the choir had struck up a spiritless song – one that Alric didn't recognize – but he was too preoccupied to listen properly. Other songs followed, equally dreary; in fact a bearded Reverend seated near Alric had already fallen asleep. However, Alric's mind was so much on the mystery of Jay's whereabouts that he only pricked up his ears at the end of the group of items when the Reverend McCrum came forward with the next announcement.

"And now, dear friends, a very special item indeed. One who was not long since a very servant of Satan, a vassal of Beelzebub, one indeed marked out as a leader in the dens of darkness and wickedness, and since delivered (*hallelujah!*) now has put his great talents in the hands of *the Lord*. Now, before all of you, he will express his joy at his emancipation, the feelings of his heart at being saved and delivered. Praise the Lord!"

He turned to face the wings as there were echoing shouts from the hall. Alric's stomach had turned over. It *had* to be...

It was. Erect, confident, Jay walked across the platform and faced the audience.

Alric had been right; he would never have failed to pick out Jay. The clothes were ugly, but under the lights his strands of cut hair shone pale gold as ever, his skin was as clear, his eyes as brilliantly blue. Even the audience fell silent, every eye on the boy at the microphone.

But what was this? Jay was speaking, in a steady confident voice.

As Alric listened, increasingly horrified, and as the Reverend McCrum beamed, Jay said, "Yes, friends, it is true, I do indeed now know darkness from light, and the following item does truly express my feelings, the feelings deep in my heart, about my having come to this place, and about all the great changes that have taken place in my life since then."

Alric felt sick. What had they *done* to him?

The piano struck up a few bars, then on his cue Jay took a very deep breath, threw his shoulders back, and.... blew a long and loud raspberry, one that echoed all round the hall, resounded from the walls and ceiling, that went on until Jay, face flushed and contorted with the effort, had completely run out of breath.

Face flushed, he turned to the Reverend McCrum.

"There!" he said, "*That's* what I think!"

The Reverend, face twisted with fury, had started forward but, behind Jay, the double row of former Song-boys had come magically to life. Leaping up and down, they waved their arms, blew a hundred raspberries in their turn, contorted their features into grotesque shapes, made finger signs not in any dance manual, shrieked, jeered.

"Get them off!" yelled McCrum. "Now – this minute!"

Uniformed attendants in the audience was already rising, making for the platform. And McCrum was trying to herd the choir off to the rear, but without any success. Then something else happened. A voice – Alric was sure it was Ben's – shrilled, "*Right!*", then all the schoolboys, screeching like demons, were on their feet, jumping on the seats, getting in the way of the attendants, tripping them, pulling them, grabbing at their clothes, forming a shrill, maniacal human shield between the boys on the platform and their

assailants. Almost at the same time the somnolent elderly Reverend beside the four boys at the back had leaped up from his place, had shouted to them, "This way!" and was leading the way to the front, leaping amazingly over seats, throwing others aside.

In his wake, Alric shouted to Raxi, "No – it *can't* be!"

"It is!" said Chad. "Didn't you *know*?"

Alric certainly hadn't known – as Wilfrid had so many different manifestations – but it had occurred to him that Chad had looked oddly unruffled during the concert...

On-stage, the Reverend McCrum appeared to be submerged under a yelling, heaving group of small schoolboys. Wilfrid quickly ushered the Songboys to the rear of the stage, through a door and door and down a set of narrow stairs. He had, mysteriously, produced a supply of outdoor cloaks, and the Songboys were quickly wrapped up in them.

Then he said, "Right, this way. We're going down through the catacombs."

"No!" said Alric.

"It's the only way."

"Take us to the harbor, we'll find our boat."

"You don't *need* a boat," said Wilf urgently. "Trust me. How d'you think the Nazarites get back and forth from the mainland so easily? *They* don't use boats."

"The catacombs go...all the way?" asked Raxi, brows furrowing.

"Yes – and this is our best chance, while they're all up above. Quick!"

They had started to clatter down the steps again, when Alric again came to a sudden halt.

"Now what?" asked Aeden, who had bumped into him.

"Ben and his friends – we promised to take them with us. We can't go without them."

"True – we can't," said Raxi, stopping too.

"I'll go back," Alric said, but as soon as he had got to the top of the staircase Ben's head had already appeared in the doorway, five or six other eager-faced youngsters with him.

"This all of you?" Alric asked.

Ben nodded. "We're the only ones got the *bottle*," he added proudly.

Soon the entire group was together at the bottom of the stairway; they followed a long succession of brick-lined corridors, dimly-lit and mercifully empty. Carrying a lamp high above his head, Wilfrid led the way with confidence, though how he knew the way was, as always with Wilfrid, beyond speculation.

The corridors, oddly, didn't bear much resemblance to the vaulted labyrinth they had seen at Wilfrid's house; however, the numerous wall-paintings left them in no doubt that they were in still the uninviting haunts of the Nazarites; all were alike gruesome and terrifying, depicting torturings, burnings, horned devils gleefully pushing their victims into seas of leaping flame.

Alric averted his eyes. The monks who lived in the catacombs, Wilfrid explained, were the "old" Nazarites, and those above the "new", but more recently the two groups, feeling increasingly threatened, had begun to join forces. Then the paintings petered out, the light grew dimmer, and the brickwork gave way to rough-hewn rock; these were now indeed the true catacombs they had glimpsed all those weeks ago.

In a vast, gloomy chamber, Wilfrid made the group stop for a rest. An instant later, in an alcove in the near-dark, Alric was at long last pressing himself against Jay, arms locked tight round his friend's waist, kissing him and being kissed repeatedly; then he was murmuring, again and again, things into Jay's ear that he had never imagined himself saying aloud to anyone until now. And Jay was crushing the younger boy, now wet-cheeked, tight against him, whispering back the same things, and more, over and over...

After a time Alric, pushing back, squirmed – squirmed again. Jay heard him make a strange noise and

looked down enquiringly.

"What's the matter?"

Alric said in an odd voice, "Being with you now....after so long..."

"Yes?"

The boy giggled. "I think I'm going to sticky!"

Jay slid his palm down on to the youngster's bottom, pressed him in again.

Alric, ultra-hard now and tingling almost unendurably, pushed, wriggled, writhed...then abruptly he crammed a handful of Jay's cloak in to his mouth, jolted from top to toe, and again – and a third time – while his crescendo of squawks was only partly muffled by the cloak's thick material. A few moments later, still held tight, he put his hand in his pocket and fingered the amulet. After all that Jay had just said, there could no longer be any doubt – if there ever had been – but this wasn't the time. Already Wilfrid was beginning to muster the troops again; there followed a quite long and difficult walk over rough ground with no light except from Wilfrid's lantern. The tedium was only broken once, when Wilfrid unslung a large shoulder-bag he had been carrying and placed it carefully on the ground before moving the group on again.

"A present for our friends," he said. "In just over an hour – well, no longer will there be a tunnel here but, with luck, there will be quite a lot of water. We won't see them on the mainland for quite some time to come. They've preserved this access route carefully, they've kept it pumped dry, for years and years. But, no more."

"Only an hour?" asked Alric dubiously.

"We'll be out in a few minutes now," said Wilf comfortingly.

And sure enough, the corridor soon began to slope upwards and, into its dark corners, the sun was returning.



The great monastery clock struck ten, slowly and ponderously, the sound echoing all round the stone courtyard, penetrating the long flagged corridors and the tiny tower room where Alric still lay wide awake. Then he sat up as the door creaked open. It was Raxi, who came and sat on the edge of his bed.

"You tired?" he asked.

"Not a bit. Just bored."

Raxi nodded, understanding. Jay and the returned Songboys, also Ben and his friends, had been ordered a period of complete rest and observation under the eye of the monastery physician – this in spite of vehement protests all round – and Chad and Aeden were presumably asleep.

Raxi said, looking down and scraping his foot on the wooden leg of the bed, "I – suppose it will be different for us – you and me – now that Jay's back. They come out tomorrow, don't they?"

Alric nodded, then furrowed his brow. "We'll still be friends, of *course*. But different – yes, maybe."

Then he suddenly kicked back the blankets and said,

"But that's *tomorrow!* Come in and talk. And I'll give you your bath after."

Raxi laughed, skinned his clothes off and slid in beside Alric quickly, pulling the blankets over them both, then cuddled the youngster energetically, kissing him on his cheeks, lips and forehead. He stroked Alric's bottom, his stomach, then his stick...which went hard almost instantly.

"The nicest in the choir," Raxi whispered.

"The nicest what?"

"You *know*."

Alric slid his hand down over Raxi's stomach in turn, then he said, "That's a matter of opinion! Gosh, *s'big* now!"

"I know. I'll be a Segundo soon."

Alric asked hesitantly, "You never gave an amulet to anyone?"

"No," said Raxi. "Nor will I."

That didn't surprise Alric greatly. Raxi was the independent type, very much his own boy, and he would see giving an amulet as, so to speak, handing himself over to someone else. Of course, it wasn't quite like that, but – yes, that was the way Raxi would imagine it.

Then Raxi *did* surprise Alric. He said, "But there's someone wants to give me *his* – when I'm a Segundo, that is."

"Who?" asked Alric. Then, when Raxi didn't answer, he asked, "Will you take it?"

"Yes," said Raxi, this time without hesitation. "Oh, yes."

"Who is it?" Alric asked again.

"Promise not to tell? Not yet anyway."

"Promise. Songboy's honor."

"Aeden."

Alric sat up and stared. "*Aeden!* But I thought – like, you and he just couldn't stand one another. You're always squabbling."

Raxi shifted. "Yes, on the surface maybe – or when other people are there. But when there's nobody – or when it's dark...it's not like that. Not...not a bit." Then he said again quickly, "Remember – you promised."

"But – you'll have to put it on him in front of everybody."

"I know. But not yet."

"And isn't he a bit of a – well..."

"A what?"

Alric hesitated; maybe he was again about to touch an unexpected layer of sensitivity.

"A bit of a...clown?"

Raxi laughed. "Yes, I suppose so. But I'll work on him – you'll see."

"Mm," said Alric. He didn't doubt for a moment that Raxi would work on Aeden. But as to the result... Still, as Raxi had said, they would see.

Then Raxi asked, "Will you ever come back to the monastery?"

"With the choir next year, of course. Though Jay won't be Head Songboy by then. It'll probably be Ran, I'd guess. But I'll be coming back on my own too – for the art lessons, that is."

Raxi considered the stone ceiling. "Nice kid, Tacca," he said casually.

Alric laughed. "Course he is – and he's a mate now. But it's different for them; I think he's made promises to someone in the monastery and...well, *I* haven't been with him, if that's what you were wondering about. Though if I'm staying longer, well... But it's for the painting and the illuminating I'll be coming, that's the most important thing."

He squirmed down flat on the bed and then, almost idly, started sucking Raxi's stick, enjoying the sensation of Raxi writhing all over as he did, hearing the older boy gasp or *aah* if he chewed a little more vigorously, or if he bit. And behind him, Raxi's fingers stroked, explored; his forefinger prodded, twisted, *pushed*.

Which touched off something extraordinary, because in a moment Alric, working like a bugaboo, had thrown Raxi's lithe fourteen-year-old body into astonishing athletics, increased the volume of his noise to an amazing degree, sent his long legs extravagantly kicking the air, flying, separating, scissoring until at

last Raxi shrieked to a crescendo, jerking and jolting like an electric eel, then shrieked again, Alric couldn't have said how often or for how long. But after that Raxi flipped over, bared his teeth, dropped his head and...made certain that Alric engaged in an even more spectacular set of gymnastics before he slept, also that Alric too made the walls echo, over and over again.

Later still, Raxi rolled over once more, then buried his face in the younger boy's black tumbled hair.

"Au revoir, Alric," he whispered. "*Au revoir.*"

But he stayed where he was. And when the monastery bell swung, creaking, eleven times and the walls shivered as it told out the hours, neither boy heard it, neither boy stirred, not in the very slightest.



Spring comes no more quickly to Durnovaria than to anywhere else in England, but there is no other city in the land where its coming is so wholeheartedly celebrated, or where such crowds muster to take part in the last great Lupercal celebration, that of the Sun itself, the Fourth Great Light, at last unmistakably manifest in all its splendor. Nor were there any singers and performers more celebrated, any more associated with the highest arts of the time, than they of the great Fane, the musicians and Songboys of Durnovaria.

Two months have passed since the Fane's beloved Head Songboy, with some of the more junior boys, returned from his harrowing experience at the hands of the barbarians, but already, as boys do, the youngsters have virtually forgotten these dark weeks. The sun, the harmony, and the life of their own country has had its healing effect, and the fair-cheeked flaxen-haired youngsters are indistinguishable from their friends again, as carefree, as healthy and – occasionally – as mischievous. And a kind of miracle has been wrought, too, for the pale and frightened urchins who have come back with them, hostages from the very lair of the enemy. In the loose brown jerkins of the school, they too, sun-tanned and tangle-haired, no longer stand out from their new friends, nor do they want to.

Enfin, on the Day of the Fourth Light, flags flew all round the broad green alongside the Fane, musicians played on a decorated platform, and bonfires and beacons were being kindled in all the squares, and on the low hills that ringed the city, for the last great fire ceremony of the year. They would be lit, one by one, as it grew dark. But now the sun shone, the crowds had assembled and, on the stroke of noon the musicians fell silent, Great Edwyn began to boom from his dizzying eyrie in the tower, then all the bells began clanging, and the festal procession came from out the Fane, led by the Songboys in scarlet and white, and behind, two great white oxen, garlanded and drawing carts crowded with the musicians. The bells fell silent as the procession circled the altar to Dagda, its base heaped high with meats, raisins and other fruits. It halted, the Highfather read aloud from the Runes, then cried out – as he had shouted at Yule, and now for the last time this year: "*Hie est Dies Natalis Invicta Solis!*"

At this, all the bells began to peal again, the people cheered, the musicians struck up, and the Songboys, flinging their robes on the grass, ran naked to the center of the green for their fourth fire-dance, the one that heralds spring and the final dance of the festival. Today Alric led the boy dancers, springing up on tiptoe at every fifth step, fingers touching above his head, his entire body a-thrill with excitement as always at the beginning of a dance.

Again, as the merry overture sounded from the ox-carts, the boys' bodies were streaked with dye by the priests – but this time in more brilliant colors than ever – golds, oranges, yellows. On their heads were placed spring coronets of coltsfoot and daisies, and around their necks were hung the plants and flowers that symbolized the mystery and the magic of the awakening earth – clover and cinquefoil, centaury and bistort.

Then, to rhythmic drumming and piping, the young dancers spun and capered on tiptoe in a circle, in a line, in a circle again, leaping and twirling, arms raised high, hands clasped.

Alric, breathless, counted the circuits in an undertone.

"One, two, three.....seven."

After which, at his signal, the boys started criss-crossing the circle in a dizzying pattern of cartwheels, hand walks and somersaults, all to express the joy and exhilaration of the first spring day.

"Look happy!" the boys had been sternly instructed beforehand, but neither Alric nor the others in any case could have helped laughing and giggling at their own antics – especially in the last section – opening with the great wheel where they lay on their backs on the grass in a wide circle, legs outwards and raised, separating, with each boy's feet touching his neighbor's, then coming together again – a spectacular effect representing the pulsating light of the sun. But, in spite of the boys' merriment, this too, like the entire sequence, had been meticulously choreographed and thoroughly rehearsed in advance.

On their toes again, into a long, skipping chain where lead-boy Alric grasped the hand of each in turn, swung round with him thrice, then on to the next...

Chad...whose face as always broke into a wide smile as Alric's eyes met his. But also, the almost imperceptible flicker of his eyes to the side, to the audience, where his now remarkably youthful-looking friend was just recognizable in the flamelight.

Raxi...who, touching Aide's hand, dared to *whisper*. Scarcely believable, indeed, with Aeden unsurprisingly next to him in line.

Aeden...who, his eyes meeting Aide's, grinned, who with incredible impertinence pursed and protruded his lips. Aide's palm itched, then...he laughed and did the same back. It was the feast-day...

Ran... Aide's eyes dropped for a moment, widened slightly. Ran would certainly be a Segundo soon...

Ori... Thai... Vali...

The chain spun on, Alric slightly dizzied now, almost drunk with elation as the whirling kaleidoscope spun past him – the lithe pale-skinned naked boys, red and yellow in the fires – the flames, the audience, the torchlight...

Finally, picking up castanets, cymbals and tambourines, the boys bounded round the heaped altar again, warbling, whistling and shouting. They were spring-elves now, but also the Liosalfar, the Elves of Light. These, in accordance with tradition and in the words of Snorri Sturlson are "brighter than the sun, fairer than the moon, more lovely even than goddesses and, clad only in their beauty, sport eternally in the realm of the Sun-God himself."

And now Aide's heart began to thud. The climactic set-piece – his and Jay's – was next. At a clap of his hands, the boys broke from the line and clustered into two groups on either side of the central dais.

Alric stepped forward and stood alone, motionless for several seconds. Someone hung a green sash round his neck. And the music grew quieter, fading to a soft melody on pan-pipes and tabors.

It was Jay's moment. Now he was Geri-Dagda, the supreme Spirit of Spring, and Alric was Raga, his elf-acolyte. Attired only in his gold necklet, Jay rose from a flower-strewn litter of green leaves and new grass; as if awakening, he drew himself up to his full height slowly, stretching both arms, one alternately to each side, then together above his head. The sun fell full on his flawless nude body, his blond locks flickered on his cheeks and forehead in the light warm breeze, his cheeks now faintly flushed, his cornflower-blue eyes sparkling in the spring light, and from the audience there was a kind of collective in-drawing of breath like a cupful of wind, then a hush that continued as Geri-Dagda's elf-acolyte ran on tiptoe across the stage and, kneeling before his spirit-god, repeatedly stroked, kissed, caressed his body.

The music faded completely. And the audience fell utterly silent as the Alric-Raga rose slowly and

with immense dignity to his feet. He was handed something that glittered; he lifted it high, then he hung it round the young god's neck – a beautifully-worked amulet with, in its center, Alric's birthstone, sapphire for September.

Now the silence *had* to be broken; waves of applause crashed round and round the arena as the bells began to swing and as Geri-Dagda, stooping to accept the self-offering of his naked acolyte, lifted him bodily with arms under knees and armpits and placed him on his back on a low stone altar to the rear. There, kneeling in his turn, head bent, he took what the acolyte offered, which is the most precious thing a boy has to give to his living idol, the unstinting gift of his body. And soon the touch of the godlet's lips drew from his acolyte the most exquisite love-music; and the young Raga was no longer still, but writhed and twisted on the flat stone, his slim legs flip-flopping on its hard surface, his thighs beginning to flex, his feet to rise and vigorously kick the air. And then there was no longer from Raga a melodious song, but uninhibited cries that grew in volume and intensity, till at once paroxysms seized him, till his body bounded on the altar like a jumping-jack, his screams echoing round and round the arena as, unceasingly, the audience cheered, shouted and applauded.

And then, to complete the ceremony, the victim was now himself the priest and the devoured; the golden Spring-Spirit once more stood before the altar, arms upraised, his love-wand so tight against his stomach that not a blade of grass could have been inserted behind it.

And the dark-headed boy devotee, kneeling again, devoured the offering with a degree of fervor that now convulsed the audience with delighted laughter, mixed with cries of encouragement. Jay-Geri-Dagda seemed for a time to struggle to maintain a measure of dignity, his eyes tight-closed, his face contorted; nevertheless he soon began to writhe from head to toe, till he too burst into melodious song, the melody becoming ever louder and merrier, and then he in turn convulsed and whooped unrestrainedly... And again and again, till all at once his knees gave and he sank to the ground, still yodeling and with all limbs flailing as the acolyte's attentions continued unabated. There was again some applause, though at this stage it was questionable how many of the audience were still watching; many, with the hour of the orgy approaching, had begun their own celebrations, and the audience's own sounds of enjoyment now came from all around. But, by the same token, Alric was scarcely aware of them; at last, head cradled on Jay's stomach, with Jay stroking his hair, he felt wonderful, he felt a mile high. He knew that Jay, the proud, beautiful Jay, would never in a thousand years have starred thus center-stage – would never had given what he had before such a vast audience – except at the hands of Alric-Raga, his beloved acolyte in fact as in fiction.

Hours later and the feast over, in the tower room that was the Head Songboy's exclusive domain, April-god and spring-elf lay tumbled naked on the room's long couch in the near-dark, watching idly as the light from the fires outside flickered on the stone walls and ceiling. Then Jay sat up, touched Alric's arm and coughed importantly; there was one more thing he had to do. A double chain hung round his neck now; on one chain was the golden amulet with Alric's birthstone. Sapphire for September when – this year – Alric would be fourteen. Jay removed the other chain, on which hung the treasured jewel of the Head Songboy, and held it in his extended palm.

"I spoke to Geirrod today," he said. "Tomorrow I shall be a Segundo and, from tonight, this is yours."

Tears sprang into the younger boy's eyes; he pushed his face into Jay's chest, unable to speak. For him now, there were almost no wonders left. *Almost...*

Jay quietly assembled cushions on the couch, and now he sprawled on them, face to the open tower window. Alric knelt almost reverently, stroking, drawing apart his godling's slim adolescent thighs, opening his boy-idol's smooth pubertal cheeks; it was the last offering of the day, its final and crowning

ceremony. And soon the tower room echoed to Alric's most exquisite solo ever, as the flamelight grew brighter, as sparks began to spin through the open window, to light on the boy's naked skin, to enter and invade his frenetic body. Till, in an instant, the scarlet and crimson lights of the ceremony seared all through him like wildfire, the flames leaping and burning as if, even in another bimillennium, they would never go out.

Alan Edward
Durnovaria (Dorchester), 12 June Anno Lux 9993