

PRIEST-KINGS OF GOR

Volume three of the Chronicles of Counter-Earth

by John Norman

Chapter One: THE FAIR OF EN'KARA

I, Tarl Cabot, formerly of Earth, am one who is known to the Priest-Kings of Gor.

It came about late in the month of En'Kara in the year 10,117 from the founding of the City of Ar that I came to the Hall of Priest-Kings in the Sardar Mountains on the planet Gor, our Counter-Earth.

I had arrived four days before on tarnback at the black palisade that encircles the dreaded Sardar, those dark mountains, crowned with ice, consecrated to the Priest-Kings, forbidden to me, to mortals, to all creatures of flesh and blood.

The tarn, my gigantic, hawklike mount, had been unsaddled and freed, for it could not accompany me into the Sardar. Once it had tried to carry me over the palisade into the mountains, but never again would I have essayed that flight. It had been caught in the shield of the Priest-Kings, invisible, not to be evaded, undoubtedly a field of some sort, which had so acted on the bird, perhaps affecting the mechanism of the inner ear, that the creature had become incapable of controlling itself and had fallen disoriented and confused to the earth below. None of the animals of Gor, as far as I knew, could enter the Sardar. Only men could enter, and they did not return.

I regretted freeing the tarn, for it was a fine bird, powerful, intelligent, fierce, courageous, loyal. And, strangely, I think it cared for me. At least I cared for it. And only with harsh words could I drive it away, and when it disappeared in the distance, puzzled, perhaps hurt, I wept.

It was not far to the fair of En'Kara, one of the four great fairs held in the shadow of the Sardar during the Gorean year, and I soon walked slowly down the long central avenue between the tents, the booths and stalls, the pavilions and stockades of the fair, toward the high, brassbound timber gate, formed of black logs, beyond which lies the Sardar itself, the sanctuary of this world's gods, known to the men below the mountains, the mortals, only as Priest-Kings.

I would stop briefly at the fair, for I must purchase food for the journey into the Sardar and I must entrust a leather-bound package to some member of the Caste of Scribes, a package which contained an account of what had occurred at the City of Tharna in the past months, a short history of events which I thought should be recorded.

I wished that I had had longer to visit the fair for on another occasion at another time I should have sought eagerly to examine its wares, drink at its taverns, talk with its merchants and attend its contests, for these fairs are free ground for the many competitive, hostile Gorean cities, and provide almost the sole opportunity for the citizens of various cities to meet peaceably with one another.

It is little wonder that the cities of Gor support and welcome the fairs. Sometimes they provide a common ground on which territorial and commercial dispute may be amicably resolved without loss of honour, plenipotentiaries of warring cities having apparently met by accident among the silken pavilions.

Further, members of castes such as the Physicians and Builders use the fairs for the dissemination of information and techniques among Caste Brothers, as is prescribed in their codes in spite of the fact that their respective cities may be hostile. And as might be expected members of the Caste of Scribes gather here to enter into dispute and examine and trade manuscripts.

My small friend, Torm of Ko-ro-ba, of the Caste of Scribes, had been to the fairs four times in his life. He informed me that in this time he had refuted seven hundred and eight scribes from fifty-seven cities, but I will not vouch for the accuracy of this report, as I sometimes suspect that Torm, like most members of his caste, and mine, tends to be a bit too sanguine in recounting his numerous victories. Moreover I have never been too clear as to the grounds on which the

disputes of scribes are to be adjudicated, and it is not too infrequently that both disputants leave the field each fully convinced that he has the best of the contest. In differences among member of my own caste, that of the Warriors, it is easier to tell who has carried the day, for the defeated one often lies wounded or slain at the victor's feet. In the contests of scribes, on the other hand, the blood that is spilled is invisible and the valiant foemen retire in good order, reviling their enemies and recouping their forces for the next day's campaign. I do not hold this against the contests of scribes; rather I commend it to the members of my own caste.

I missed Torm and wondered if I would ever see him again, bounding about excoiating the authors of dusty scrolls, knocking the inkwell from his desk with an imperial sweep of his blue robe, leaping on the table in birdlike fury denouncing one scribe or another for independently rediscovering an idea that had already appeared in a century-old manuscript known to Torm of course but not to the luckless scribe in question, rubbing his nose, shivering, leaping down to thrust his feet against the everpresentm overloaded charcoal brazier that invariably burned under his table, amid the litter of his scraps and parchments, regardless of whatever the outside temperature might be.

I supposed Torm might be anywhere, for those of Ko-ro-ba had been scattered by the Priest-Kings. I would not search the fair for him, nor if he were here would I make my presence known, for by the will of the Priest-Kings no two men of Ko-ro-ba might stand together, and I had no wish to jeopardise the little scribe. Gor would be the poorer were it not for his furious eccentricities; the Counter-Earth would simply not be the same without belligerent, exasperated little Torm. I smiled to myself. if I should meet him I knew he would thrust himself upon me and insist upon being taken into the Sardar, though he would know it would mean his death, and I would have to bundle him in his blue robes, hurl him into a rain barrel and make my escape. Perhaps it would be safer to drop him into a well. Torm had stumbled into more than one well in his life and no one who knew him would think it strange to find him sputtering about at the bottom of one.

The fairs incidentally are governed by Merchant Law and supported by booth rents and taxes levied on the items exchanged. The commercial facilities of these fairs, from money changing to general banking, are the finest I know of on Gor, save those in Ar's Street of Coins, and letters of credit are accepted and loans negotiated, though often at usurious rates, with what seems reckless indifference. Yet perhaps this is not so puzzling, for the Gorean cities will, within their own walls, enforce the Merchant Law when pertinent, even against their own citizens. If they did not, of course, the fairs would be closed to the citizens of that city.

The contests I mentioned which take place at the fairs are, as would be expected, peaceable, or I should say, at least do not involve contests of arms. Indeed it is considered a crime against the Priest-Kings to bloody one's weapons at the fairs. The Priest-Kings, I might note, seem to be more tolerant of bloodshed in other localities.

Contests of arms, fought to the death, whereas they may not take place at the fairs are not unknown on Gor, and are popular in some cities. Contests of this sort, most often involving criminals and impoverished soldiers of fortune, offer prizes of amnesty or gold and are customarily sponsored by rich men to win the approval of the populace of their cities. Sometimes these men are merchants who wish thereby to secure goodwill for their products; sometimes they are practitioners of law, who hope to sway the votes of jury men; sometimes they are Ubars or High Initiates who find it in their interests to keep the crowds amused. Such contests, in which life is lost, used to be popular at Ar, for example, being sponsored in that city by the Caste of Initiates, who regard themselves as being the intermediaries between Priest-Kings and men, though I suspect that, at least on the whole, they know as little about the Priest-Kings as do other men. These contests, it might be mentioned, were banned in Ar when Kazrak of Port Kar became administrator of that city. It was not an action which was popular with the powerful Caste of Initiates.

The contests at the fairs, however, I am pleased to say, offer nothing more dangerous than wrestling, with no holds to the death permitted. Most of the contests involve such things as racing, feats of strength, and skill with bow and spear. Other contests of interest pit choruses and poets and players of various cities against one another in the several theatres of the fair. I had a friend once, Andreas of the desert city of Tor, of the Caste of Poets, who had once sung at the fair and won a cap filled with gold. And perhaps it is hardly necessary to add that the streets of the fair abound with jugglers, puppeteers, musicians and acrobats who, far from the

theatres, compete in their ancient fashions for the copper tarn disks of the broiling, turbulent crowds.

Many are the objects for sale at the fair. I passed among wines and textiles and raw wool, silks, and brocades, copperware and glazed pottery, carpets and tapestries, lumber, furs, hides, salt, arms and arrows, saddles and harness, rings and bracelets and necklaces, belts and sandals, lamps and oils, medicines and meats and grains, animals such as the fierce tarns, Gor's winged mounts, and tharlarions, her domesticated lizards, and long chains of miserable slaves, both male and female.

Although no one may be enslaved at the fair, slaves may be bought and sold within its precincts, and slavers do a thriving business, exceeded perhaps only by that of Ar's Street of Brands. The reason for this is not simply that here is a fine market for such wares, since men from various cities pass freely to and fro at the fair, but that each Gorean, whether male or female, is expected to see the Sardar Mountains, in honour of the Priest-Kings, at least once in his life, prior to his twenty-fifth year. Accordingly the pirates and outlaws who beset the trade routes to ambush and attack the caravans on the way to the fair, if successful, often have more than inanimate metals and cloths to reward their vicious labours.

This pilgrimage to the Sardar, enjoyed by the Priest-Kings according to the Caste of the Initiates, undoubtedly plays its role in the distribution of beauty among the hostile cities of Gor. Whereas the males who accompany a caravan are often killed in its defence or driven off, this fate, fortunate or not, is seldom that of the caravan's women. It will be their sad lot to be stripped and fitted with the collars and chains of slave girls and forced to follow the wagons on foot to the fair, or if the caravan's tharlarions have been killed or driven off, they will carry its goods on their backs. Thus one practical effect of the edict of the Priest-Kings is that each Gorean girl must, at least once in her life, leave her walls and take the very serious risk of becoming a slave girl, perhaps the prize of a pirate or outlaw.

The expeditions sent out from the cities are of course extremely well guarded, but pirates and outlaws too can band together in large numbers and sometimes, even more dangerously, one city's warriors, in force, will prey upon another city's caravans. This, incidentally, is one of the more frequent causes of war among these cities. The fact that warriors of one city sometimes wear the insignia of cities hostile to their own when they make these attacks further compounds the suspicions and internecine strife which afflicts the Gorean cities.

This chain of reflections was occasioned in my mind by sight of some men of Port Kar, a savage, coastal city on the Tamber Gulf, who were displaying a sullen chain of twenty freshly branded girls, many of them beautiful. They were from the island city of Cos and had undoubtedly been captured at sea, their vessel burned and sunk. Their considerable charms were fully revealed to the eye of appraising buyers who passed down the line. The girls were chained throat to throat, their wrists locked behind the small of their backs with slave bracelets, and the knelt in the customary position of Pleasure Slaves. When a possible buyer would stop in front of one, one of the bearded scoundrels from Port Kar would poke her with a slave whip and she would lift her head and numbly repeat the ritual phrase of the inspected slave girl, Buy Me, Master. They had thought to come to the Sardar as free women, discharging their obligation to the Priest-Kings. They would leave as slave girls. I turned away.

My business was with the Priest-Kings of Gor.

Indeed, I had come to the Sardar to encounter the fabled Priest-Kings, whose incomparable power so inextricably influences the destinies of the cities and men of the Counter-Earth.

It is said that the Priest-Kings know whatever transpires on their world and that the mere lifting of their hand can summon all the powers of the universe. I myself had seen the power of Priest-Kings and knew that such beings existed. I myself had traveled in a ship of the Priest-Kings which had twice carried me to this world; I had seen their power so subtly exercised as to alter the movements of a compass needle, so grossly demonstrated as to destroy a city, leaving behind not even the stones of what had once been a dwelling place of men.

It is said that neither the physical intricacies of the cosmos nor the emotions of human beings are beyond the scope of their power, that the feelings of men and the motions of atoms and stars

are as one to them, that they can control the very forces of gravity and invisibly sway the hearts of human beings, but of this latter claim I wonder, for once on a road to Ko-ro-ba, my city, I met one who had been a messenger of Priest-Kings, one who had been capable of disobeying them, one from the shards of whose burnt and blasted skull I had removed a handful of golden wire.

He had been destroyed by Priest-Kings as casually as one might jerk loose the thong of a sandal. He had disobeyed and he had been destroyed, immediately and with grotesque dispatch, but the important thing was, I told myself, that he had disobeyed, that he could disobey, that he had been able to disobey and choose the ignominious death he knew must follow. He had won his freedom though it had, as the Goreans say, led him to the Cities of Dust, where, I think, not even Priest-Kings care to follow. He had, as a man, lifted his fist against the might of Priest-Kings and so he had died, defiantly, though horribly, with great nobility.

I am of the Caste of Warriors, and it is in our codes that the only death fit for a man is that in battle, but I can no longer believe that this is true, for the man I met once on the road to Ko-ro-ba died well, and taught me that all wisdom and truth does not lie in my own codes.

My business with the Priest-Kings is simple, as are most matters of honour and blood. For some reason unbeknown to me they have destroyed my city, Ko-ro-ba, and scattered its peoples. I have been unable to learn the fate of my father, my friends, my warrior companions, and my beloved Talena, she who was the daughter of Marlenus, who had once been Ubar of Ar - my sweet, fierce, wild, gentle, savage, beautiful love, she who is my Free Companion, my Talena, forever the Ubara of my heart, she who burns forever in the sweet, lonely darkness of my dreams. Yes, I have business with the Priest-Kings.

Chapter Two: IN THE SARDAR

I looked down the long, broad avenue to the huge timber gate at its end, and beyond the gate to the black crags of the inhospitable Sardar Range.

It took not much time to purchase a small bundle of supplies to take into the Sardar, nor was it difficult to find a scribe to whom I might entrust the history of the events at Tharna. I did not ask his name nor he mine. I knew his caste, and he knew mine, and it was enough. He could not read the manuscript as it was written in English, a language as foreign to him as Gorean would be to most of you, but yet he would treasure the manuscript and guard it as though it were a most precious possession, for he was a scribe and it is the way of scribes to love the written word and keep it from harm, and if he could not read the manuscript, what did it matter - perhaps someone could someday, and then the words which had kept their secret for so long would at last enkindle the mystery of communication and what had been written would be heard and understood.

At last I stood before the towering gate of black logs, bound with its wide bands of brass. The fair lay behind me and the Sardar before. My garments and my shield bore no insignia, for my city had been destroyed. I wore my helmet. None would know who entered the Sardar.

At the gate I was met by one of the Caste of Initiates, a dour, thin-lipped, drawn man with deep sunken eyes, clad in the pure white robes of his caste.

'Do you wish to speak to Priest-Kings?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Do you know what you do?'

'Yes,' I said.

The Initiate and I gazed evenly at one another, and then he stepped aside, as he must have done many times. I would not be the first, of course, to enter the Sardar. Many men and sometimes women had entered these mountains but it is not known what they found. Sometimes these individuals are young idealists, rebels and champions of lost causes, who wish to protest to Priest-Kings; sometimes they are individuals who are old or diseased and are tired of life and wish to die; sometimes they are piteous or cunning or frightened wretches who think to find the secret of immortality in those barren crags; and sometimes they are outlaws fleeing from Gor's harsh justice, hoping to find at least brief sanctuary in the cruel, mysterious domain of Priest-

Kings, a country into which they may be assured no mortal magistrate or vengeful band of human warriors will penetrate. I suppose the Initiate might account me noe of the latter, for my habiliments bore no insignia.

He turned away from me and went to a small pedestal at one side. On the pedestal there was a silver bowl, filled with water, a vial of oil and a towel. He dipped his fingers in the bowl, poured a bit of oil on his hands, dipped his fingers again and then wiped his hands dry.

On each side of the huge gate there stood a great windlass and chain, and to each windlass a gang of blinded slaves was manacled.

The Initiate folded the towel carefully and replaced it on the pedestal.

'Let the gate be opened,' he said.

The slaves obediently pressed their weight against the timber spokes of the two windlasses and they creaked and the chains tightened. Their naked feet slipped in the dirt and they pressed ever more tightly against the heavy, obdurate bars. Now their bodies humped with pain, clenching themselves against the spokes. Their blind eyes were fixed on nothing. The blood vessels in their necks and legs and arms began to distend until I feared they might burst open through the tortured flesh; the agonised miscles of their straining knotted bodies, like swollen leather, seemed to fill with pain as if pain were a fluid; their flesh seemed to fuse with the wood of the bars; the backs of their garments discoloured with a scarlet sweat. Men had broken their own bones on the timber spokes of the Sardar windlasses.

At last there was a great creak and the vast portal parted a hand's breadth and then the width of a shoulder and the width of a man's body.

'It is enough,' I said.

I entered immediately.

As I entered I heard the mournful tolling of the huge, hollow metal bar which stands some way from the gate. I had heard the tolling before, and knew that it signified that yet another mortal had entered the Sardar. It was a depressing sound, and not made less so by my realisation that in this case it was I who had entered the mountains. As I listened it occurred to me that the purpose of the bar might not be simply to inform the men of the fair that the Sardar had been entered but to inform the Priest-Kings as well.

I looked behind myself in time to see the great gate close. It shut without a sound.

The journey to the Hall of Priest-Kings was not as difficult as I had anticipated. At places there were well-worn paths, at others even stairs had been cut in the sides of mountains, stairs worn smooth in the millenia by the passage of countless feet.

Here and there bones littered the path, human bones. Whether these were the remains of men who had starved or frozen in the barren Sardar, or had been destroyed by Priest-Kings, I did not know. Upon occasion some message would be found scratched in the cliffs along the path. Some of these were obscene, cursing the Priest-Kings; others were paeans in their praise; some were cheerful, if in a rather pessimistic way. One I remember was: 'Eat, drink and be happy. The rest is nothing.' Others were rather simple, and sometimes sad, such as 'No food,' 'I'm cold,' 'I'm afraid.' One such read, 'The mountains are empty. Rena I love you.' I wondered who had written it, and when. The inscription was worn. It had been scratched out in the old Gorean script. It had weathered for perhaps better than a thousand years. But I knew that the mountains were not empty, for I had evidence of Priest-Kings. I continued my journey.

I encountered no animals, nor any growing thing, nothing save the endless black rocks, the black cliffs, and the path cut before me in the dark stone. Gradually the air grew more chill and wisps of snow blew about me; frost began to appear on the steps and I trudged past crevices filled with ice, deposits which had perhaps lain as they were without melting for hundreds of years. I wrapped my cloak more firmly about myself and using my spear as a staff I forced my way upward.

Some four days into the mountains I heard for the first time in my journey the sound of a thing

other than the wind, the sighing of snow and the groaning of ice; it was the sound of a living thing; the sound of a mountain larl.

The larl is a predator, clawed and fanged, quite large, often standing seven feet at the shoulder. I think it would be fair to say that it is substantially feline; at any rate its grace and sinuous power remind me of the smaller but similarly fearsome jungle cats of my old world.

The resemblance is, I suppose, due to the mechanics of convergent evolution, both animals having been shaped by the exigencies of the chase, the stealth of the approach and the sudden charge, and by the requirement of the swift and devastating kill. If there is an optimum configuration for a land predator, I suppose on my old world the palm must go to the Bengal tiger; but on Gor the prize belongs indisputably to the mountain larl; and I cannot but believe that the structural similarities between the two animals, though of different worlds, are more than a matter of accident.

The larl's head is broad, sometimes more than two feet across, and shaped roughly like a triangle, giving its skull something of the cast of a viper's save that of course it is furred and the pupils of the eyes like the cat's and unlike the viper's, can range from knifelike slits in the broad daylight to dark, inquisitive moons in the night.

The pelt of the larl is normally a tawny red or a sable black. The black larl, which is predominantly nocturnal, is maned, both male and female. The red larl, which hunts whenever hungry, regardless of the hour, and is the more common variety, possesses no mane. Females of both varieties tend generally to be slightly smaller than the males, but are quite as aggressive and sometimes even more dangerous, particularly in the late fall and winter of the year when they are likely to be hunting for their cubs. I had once killed a male red larl in the Voltai Range within pasangs of the city of Ar.

Now hearing the growl of such a beast I threw back my cloak, lifted my shield and held my spear ready. I was puzzled that I might encounter a larl in the Sardar. How could it have entered the mountains? Perhaps it was native. But on what could it live among these barren crags? For I had seen nothing on which it might prey, unless one might count the men who had entered the mountains, but their bones, scattered, white and frozen, were unsplintered and unfurrowed; they showed no evidence of having suffered the molestation of a larl's gnawing jaws. I then understood that the larl I had heard must be a larl of Priest-Kings, for no animal and no man enters or exists in the Sardar without the consent of Priest-Kings and if it was fed it must be at the hand of Priest-Kings or their servants.

In spite of my hatred of Priest-Kings I could not help but admire them. None of the men below the mountains, the mortals, had ever succeeded in taming a larl. Even larl cubs when found and raised by men would, on reaching their majority, on some night, in a sudden burst of atavistic fury slay their masters and under the three hurtling moons of Gor lope from the dwellings of men, driven by what instincts I know not, to seek the mountains where they were born. A case is known of a larl who traveled more than twenty-five hundred pasangs to seek a certain shallow crevice in the Voltai in which he had been whelped. He was slain at its mouth. Hunters had followed him. One among them, an old man who had originally been one of the party that had captured the animal, identified the place.

I advanced, my spear ready for its cast, my shield ready to be thrown over my body to protect it from the death throes of the thrashing beast should the cast be successful. My life was in my own hands and I was content that this should be so. I would have it no other way.

I smiled to myself. I was First Spear, for there were no others.

In the Voltai Range bands of hunters, usually from Ar, stalk the larl with the mighty Gorean spear. Normally they do this in single file and he who leads the file is called First Spear, for his will be the first spear cast. As soon as he casts his weapon he throws himself to the ground and covers his body with his shield, as does each man successively behind him. This allows each man to have a clean cast at the beast and provides some protection once the spear is thrown.

The most significant reason, however, becomes clear when the role of the last man on the file, who is spoken of as Last Spear, is understood. Once Last Spear casts his weapon he may not throw

himself to the ground. If he should, and any of his comrades survive, they will slay him. But this seldom occurs for the Gorean hunters fear cowardice more than the claws and fangs of larls. Last Spear must remain standing, and if the beast still lives, receive its charge with only his drawn sword. He does not hurl himself to the ground in order that he will remain conspicuously in the larl's field of vision and thus be the object of its wounded, maddened onslaught. It is thus that, should the spears miss their mark, he sacrifices his life for his companions who will, while the larl attacks him, make good their escape. This may seem cruel but in the long run it tends to be conservative of human life; it is better, as the Goreans say, for one man to die than many.

First Spear is normally the best of the spearmen because if the larl is not slain or seriously wounded with the first strike, the lives of all, and not simply that of Last Spear, stand in considerable jeopardy. Paradoxically, perhaps, Last Spear is normally the weakest of the spearmen, the least skilled. Whether this is because Gorean hunting tradition favours the weak, protecting him with the stronger spears, or tradition scorns the weak, regarding him as the most expendable member of the party, I do not know. The origin of this hunting practice is lost in antiquity, being as old perhaps as men and weapons and larls.

I once asked a Gorean hunter whom I met in Ar why the larl was hunted at all. I have never forgotten his reply. 'Because it is beautiful,' he said, 'and dangerous, and because we are Goreans.'

I had not yet seen the beast whose growl I had heard. The path on which I trod turned a few yards ahead. It was about a yard wide and hugged the side of a cliff, and to my left there was a sheer precipice. The drop to its base must have been at least a full pasang. I remembered that the boulders below were huge but from my present height they looked like grains of black sand. I wished the cliff were on my left rather than my right in order to have a freer cast of my spear.

The path was steep but its ascent, here and there, was lightened by high steps. I have never cared to have an enemy above me, nor did I now, but I told myself that my spear might more easily find a vulnerable spot if the larl leapt downwards toward me than if I were above and had only the base of its neck as my best target. From above I would try to sever the vertebrae. The larl's skull is an even more difficult cast, for its head is almost continually in motion. Moreover, it possesses an unobtrusive bony ridge which runs from its four nasal slits to the beginnings of the backbone. This ridge can be penetrated by the spear but anything less than a perfect cast will result in the weapon's being deflected through the cheek of the animal, inflicting a cruel but unimportant wound. On the other hand if I were under the larl I would have a brief but clean strike at the great, pounding, eight-valved heart that lies in the centre of its breast.

My heart sank for I heard another growl, that of a second beast.

I had but one spear.

I might kill one larl, but then I should almost certainly die under the jaws of its mate.

For some reason I did not fear death but felt only anger that these beasts might prevent me from keeping my rendezvous with the Priest-Kings of Gor.

I wondered how many men might have turned back at this point, and I remembered the innumerable white, frozen bones on the cliff below. It occurred to me that I might retreat, and return when the beasts had gone. It seemed possible that they might not yet have discovered me. I smiled as I thought of the foolishness of this, for these beasts before me must be the larls of Priest-Kings, guardians of the stronghold of Gor's gods.

I loosened my sword in its sheath and continued upwards.

At last I came to the bend in the path and braced myself for the sudden bolt about that corner in which I must cry aloud to startle them and in the same instant cast my spear at the nearest larl and set upon the other with my drawn sword.

I hesitated for a moment and then the fierce war cry of Ko-ro-ba burst from my lips in the clear, chill air of the Sardar and I threw myself into the open, my spear arm back, my shield high.

Chapter Three: PARP

There was a sudden startled rattle of chains and I saw two huge, white larls frozen in the momentary paralysis of registering my presence, and then with but an instant's fleeting passage both beasts turned upon me and hurled themselves enraged to the lengths of their chains.

My spear had not left my hand.

Both animals were jerked up short as mighty chains, fastened to steel and bejeweled collars, terminated their vicious charge. One was thrown on its back, so violent was its rush, and the other stood wildly for a moment towering over me like a rearing giant stallion, its huge claws slashing the air, fighting the collar that held it from me.

Then at the length of their chains they crouched, snarling, regarding me balefully, occasionally lashing out with a clawed paw as if to sweep me into range of their fearsome jaws.

I was struck with wonder, though I was careful to keep beyond the range of their chains, for I had never seen white larls before.

They were gigantic beasts, superb specimens, perhaps eight feet at the shoulder.

Their upper canine fangs, like daggers mounted in their jaws, must have been at least a foot in length and extended well below their jaws in the manner of ancient sabre-toothed tigers. The four nostril slits of each animal were flared and their great chests lifted and fell with the intensity of their excitement. Their tails, long and tufted at the end, lashed back and forth.

The larger of them unaccountably seemed to lose interest in me. He rose to his feet and sniffed the air, turning his side to me, and seemed ready to abandon any intentions of doing me harm. Only an instant later did I understand what was happening for suddenly turning he threw himself on his side and his head facing in the other direction hurled his hind legs at me. I lifted the shield for to my horror in reversing his position on the chain he had suddenly added some twenty feet to the fearful perimeter of the space allotted to him by that hated impediment. Two great clawed paws smote my shield and hurled me twenty feet against the cliff. I rolled and scrambled back further for the stroke of the larl had dashed me into the radius of its mate. My cloak and garments were torn from my back by the stroke of the second larl's claws.

I struggled to my feet.

'Well done,' I said to the larl.

I had barely escaped with my life.

Now the two beasts were filled with a rage which dwarfed their previous fury, for they sensed that I would not again approach closely enough to permit them a repetition of their primitive stratagem. I admired the larls, for they seemed to me intelligent beasts. Yes, I said to myself, it was well done.

I examined my shield and saw ten wide furrows torn across its brassbound hide surface. My back felt wet with the blood from the second larl's claws. It should have felt warm, but it felt cold. I knew it was freezing on my back. There was no choice now but to go on, somehow, if I could. Without the small homely necessities of a needle and thread I should probably freeze. There was no wood in the Sardar with which to build a fire.

Yes, I repeated grimly to myself, glaring at the larls, though smiling, it was well done, too well done.

Then I heard the movement of chains and I saw that the two chains which fastened the larls were not hooked to rings in the stone but vanished within circular apertures. Now the chains were being slowly drawn in, much to the obvious frustration of the beasts.

The place in which I found myself was considerably wider than the path on which I had trod, for the path had given suddenly onto a fairly large circular area in which I had found the chained larls. One side of this area was formed by the sheer cliff which had been on my right and now curved about making a sort of cup of stone; the other side, on my left, lay partly open to the

frightful drop below, but was partly enclosed by another cliff, the side of a second mountain, which impinged on the one I had been climbing. The circular apertures into which the larls' chains were being drawn were located in these two cliffs. As the chains were drawn back, the protesting larls were dragged to different sides. Thus a passage of sorts was cleared between them, but the passage led only, as far as I could see, to a blank wall of stone. Yet I supposed this seemingly impervious wall must house the portal of the Hall of Priest-Kings.

As the beasts had felt the tug of the chains they had slunk snarling back against the cliffs, and now they crouched down, their chains little more than massive leashes. I thought the snowy whiteness of their pelts was beautiful. Throaty growls menaced me, and an occasional paw, the claws extended, was lifted, but the beasts made no effort now to pull against the grim, jewel-set collars which bound them.

I had not long to wait for only a few moments later, perhaps no more than ten Gorean Ihn, a section of stone rolled silently back and upward revealing a rock passage beyond of perhaps some eight feet square.

I hesitated, for how did I know but that the chains of the larls might be loosed once I was between them. How did I know what might lie before me in that dark, quiet passage? As I hesitated that moment, I became aware of a motion inside the passage, which gradually became a white-clad rather short, rotund figure.

To my amazement a man stepped from the passage, blinking in the sun. He was clad in a white robe, somewhat resembling those of the Initiates. He wore sandals. His cheeks were red and his head bald. He had long whiskery sideburns which flared merrily from his muffinlike face. Small bright eyes twinkled under heavy white eyebrows. Most was I surprised to find him holding a tiny, round pipe from which curled a bright wisp of smoke. Tobacco is unknown on Gor, though there are certain vices or habits to take its place, in particular the stimulation afforded by chewing on the leaves of the Kanda plant, the roots of which, oddly enough, when ground and dried, constitute an extremely deadly poison.

I carefully regarded the small, rotund gentleman who stood framed so incongruously in the massive stone portal. I found it impossible to believe that he could be dangerous, that he could in any way be associated with the dreaded Priest-Kings of Gor. He was simply too cheerful, too open and ingenious, too frank, and only too obviously pleased to see and welcome me. It was impossible not to be drawn to him; I found that I liked him, though I had just met him; and that I wanted him to like me, and that I felt he did, and that this pleased me.

If I had seen this man in my own world, this small, rotund, merry gentleman with his florid colouring and cheerful manner I would have thought him necessarily English, and of a sort one seldom encounters nowadays. If one had encountered him in the Eighteenth Century one might take him for a jolly, snuff-sniffing, roisterous country squire, knowing himself the salt of the earth, not above twitting the parson nor pinching the serving girls; in the Nineteenth Century he would have owned an old book shop and worked at a high desk, quite outdated, kept his money in a sock, distributed it indiscriminately to all who asked him for it, and publicly read Chaucer and Darwin to scandalise lady customers and the local clergy; in my own time such a man could only be a college professor, for there are few other refuges save wealth left in my world for men such as he; one could imagine him ensconced in a university chair, perhaps affluent enough for gout, reposing in his tenure, puffing on his pipe, a connoisseur of ales and castles, a gusty aficionado of bawdy Elizabethan drinking songs, which he would feel it his duty to bequeath, piously, as a portion of their rich literary heritage, to generations of recent, proper graduates of Eton and Harrow. The small eyes regarded me, twinkling.

With a start I noticed that the pupils of his eyes were red.

When I started a momentary flicker of annoyance crossed his features, but in an instant he was again his chuckling, affable, bubbling self.

'Come, come,' he said. 'Come along, Cabot. We have been waiting for you.'

He knew my name.

Who was waiting?

But of course he would know my name, and those who would be waiting would be the Priest-Kings of Gor.

I forgot about his eyes, for it did not seem important at the time, for some reason. I suppose that I thought that I had been mistaken. I had not been. He now stepped back into the shadows of the passage.

'You are coming, aren't you?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'My name is Parp,' he said, standing back in the passage. He puffed once on his pipe. 'Parp,' he repeated, puffing once again.

He had not extended his hand.

I looked at him without speaking.

It seemed a strange name for a Priest-King. I do not know what I expected. He seemed to sense my puzzlement.

'Yes,' said the man, 'Parp.' He shrugged. 'It's not much of a name for a Priest-King, but then I'm not much of a Priest-King.' He chuckled.

'Are you a Priest-King?' I asked.

Again a momentary flicker of annoyance crossed his features. 'Of course,' he said.

It seemed that my heart stopped beating.

At that moment one of the larls gave a sudden roar. I shivered, but to my surprise the man who called himself Parp clutched his pipe in his white hand and seemed to give a start of terror. In a moment he was quite recovered. I found it strange that a Priest-King should fear a larl.

Without waiting to see if I would follow him he turned suddenly and went back down the passage.

I gathered my weapons and followed him. Only the rumbling growl of the now sullen mountain larls as I passed between them convinced me that I could not be dreaming, that I had come at last to the Hall of Priest-Kings.

Chapter Four: THE HALL OF PRIEST-KINGS

As I followed the man who called himself Parp down the stone passage the portal behind me closed. I remember one last glimpse of the Sardar Range, the path I had climbed, the cold, blue sky and two snowy larls, one chained on either side of the entrance.

My host did not speak but led the way with a merry stride, an almost constant curl of smoke from his little round pipe encircling his bald pate and muttonchop whiskers and drifting back down the passage.

The passage was lit with energy bulbs, of the sort which I had encountered in the tunnel of Marlenus which led beneath the walls of Ar. There was nothing in the lighting of the passage, or its construction, to suggest that the Priest-Kings' Caste of Builders, if they had one, was any more advanced than that of the men below the mountains. Too, the passage was devoid of ornament, lacking the mosaics and tapestries with which the beauty-loving Goreans below the mountains are wont to glorify the places of their own habitation. The Priest-Kings, as far as I could tell, had no art. Perhaps they would regard it as a useless excrescence detracting from the more sombre values of life, such as, I supposed, study, meditation and the manipulation of the lives of men.

I noted that the passage which I trod was well worn. It had been polished by the sandals of countless men and women who had walked before where I now walked, perhaps thousands of years ago, perhaps yesterday, perhaps this morning.

Then we came to a large hall. It was plain, but in its sheer size it possessed a severe, lofty grandeur.

At the entrance to this room, or chamber, I stopped, overcome with a certain sense of awe.

I found myself on the brink of entering what appeared to be a great and perfect dome, having a diameter I am sure of at least a thousand yards. I was pleased to see that its top was a sparkling curvature of some transparent substance, perhaps a special glass or plastic, for no glass or plastic with which I was familiar would be likely to withstand the stresses generated by such a structure. Beyond the dome I could see the welcome blue sky.

'Come, come, Cabot,' remonstrated Parp.

I followed him.

In this great dome there was nothing save that at its very centre there was a high dais and on this dais there was a large throne carved from a single block of stone.

It seemed to take us a long time to reach the dais. Our footsteps echoed hollowly across the great stone floor. At last we arrived.

'Wait here,' said Parp, who pointed to an area outside a tiled ring which surrounded the dais.

I did not stand precisely where he asked but several feet away, but I did remain outside the tiled ring.

Parp puffed his way up the nine steps of the dais and climbed onto the stone throne. He was a strange contrast to the severe regality of the majestic seat on which he perched. His sandaled feet did not reach the floor, and he made a slight grimace as he settled himself on the throne.

'Frankly,' said Parp, 'I think we made a mistake in sacrificing certain creature comforts in the Sardar.' He tried to find some position that would satisfy him. 'For example, a cushion would not be out of place on such a throne, do you think, Cabot?'

'On such a throne it would be out of place,' I said.

'Ah yes,' sighed Parp, 'I suppose so.'

Then, smartly, Parp cracked his pipe a few times against the side of the throne, scattering ashes and unsmoked tobacco about on the floor of the dais.

I regarded him without moving.

Then he began to fumble with the wallet which was slung from his belt, and removed a plastic envelope. I watched him closely, following every move. A frown crossed my face as I saw him take a pinch of tobacco from the bag and refill his pipe. Then he fumbled about a bit more and emerged with a narrow cylindrical, silverish object. For an instant it seemed to point at me.

I lifted my shield.

'Please, Cabot!' said Parp, with something of impatience, and used the silverish object to light his pipe.

I felt foolish.

Parp began to puff away contentedly on a new supply of tobacco. He had to turn slightly on the throne to look at me, as I had not chosen to stand directly where he had suggested.

'I do wish you would be more cooperative,' he said.

Tapping the floor with the butt of my spear, I finally stood where he had directed.

Parp chuckled and puffed away.

I did not speak and he smoked one pipe. Then he cleaned it as before, knocking it against the

side of the throne, and refilled it. He lit it again with the small, silverish object, and leaned back against the throne. He gazed up at the dome, so high above, and watched the smoke curl slowly upward.

'Did you have a good trip to the Sardar?' asked Parp.

'Where is my father?' I asked. 'What of the city of Ko-ro-ba?' My voice choked. 'What of the girl Talena, who was my Free Companion?'

'I hope you had a good trip,' said Parp.

Then I began to feel rage creeping like hot, red vines through my blood.

Parp did not seem concerned.

'Not everyone has a good trip,' said Parp.

My hand clenched on the spear.

I began to feel the hatred of all the years I had nursed against the Priest-Kings now uncontrollably, slowly, violently growing in my body, wild, fierce, those foliating scarlet vines of my fury that now seemed to encircle me, to enfold me, to engulf me, swelling, steaming, now writhing aflame about my body and before my eyes in the turbulent, burned air that separated me from the creature Parp and I cried, 'Tell me what I want to know!'

'The primary difficulty besetting the traveler in the Sardar,' continued Parp, 'is probably the general harshness of the environment - for example, the inclemencies of the weather, particularly in the winter.'

I lifted the spear and my eyes which must have been terrible in the apertures of my helmet were fixed on the heart of the man who sat upon the throne.

'Tell me!' I cried.

'The larks also,' Parp went on, 'are a not formidable obstacle.'

I cried with rage and strode forward to loose my spear but I wept and retained the weapon. I could not do murder.

Parp puffed away, smiling. 'That was wise of you,' he said.

I looked at him sullenly, my rage abated. I felt helpless.

'You could not have injured me, you know,' said Parp.

I looked at him with wonder.

'No,' he said. 'Go ahead, if you wish, cast your spear.'

I took the weapon and tossed it toward the foot of the dais. There was a sudden splintering burst of heat and I fell back, staggering. I shook my head to drive out the scarlet stars that seemed to race before my eyes.

At the foot of the dais there was a bit of soot and some droplets of melted bronze.

'You see,' said Parp, 'it would not have reached me.'

I now understood the purpose of the tiled circle which surrounded the throne.

I removed my helmet and threw my shield to the floor.

'I am your prisoner,' I said.

'Nonsense,' said Parp, 'you are my guest.'

'I shall keep my sword,' I said. 'If you want it, you must take it from me.'

Parp laughed merrily, his small round frame shaking on the heavy throne. 'I assure you,' he said, 'I have no use for it.' He looked at me, chuckling. 'Nor have you,' he added.

'Where are the others?' I asked.

'What others?' asked he.

'The other Priest-Kings,' I said.

'I am afraid,' said Parp, 'that I am the Priest-Kings. All of them.'

'But you said before "We are waiting",' I protested.

'Did I?' asked Parp.

'Yes,' I said.

'Then it was merely a manner of speaking.'

'I see,' I said.

Parp seemed troubled. He seemed distracted.

He glanced up at the dome. It was getting late. He seemed a bit nervous. His hands fumbled more with the pipe; a bit of tobacco spilled.

'Will you speak to me of my father, of my city, and of my love?' I asked.

'Perhaps,' said Parp, 'but now you are undoubtedly tired from your journey.'

It was true that I was tired, and hungry.

'No,' I said, 'I would speak now.'

For some reason Parp now seemed visibly uneasy. The sky above the dome was now grey and darkening. The Gorean night above, often black and beautiful with stars, now seemed to be approaching with swift stealth.

In the far distance, perhaps from some passage leading away from the Hall of Priest-Kings, I heard the roar of a larl.

Parp seemed to shiver on the throne.

'Is a Priest-King frightened of a larl?' I asked.

Parp chuckled, but not quite so merrily as usual. I could not understand his perturbation. 'Do not be afraid,' he said, 'they are well secured.'

'I am not afraid,' I said, looking at him evenly.

'Myself,' he said, 'I'm forced to admit I've never quite gotten used to that awful racket they make.'

'You are a Priest-King,' I said, 'why do you not simply lift your hand and destroy it?'

'Of what use is a dead larl?' asked Parp.

I did not reply.

I wondered why I had been allowed to reach the Sardar, to find the Hall of Priest-Kings, to stand before this throne.

Suddenly there was the sound of a distant, reverberating gong, a dull but penetrating sound which

carried from somewhere even into the Hall of Priest-Kings.

Abruptly Parp stood up, his face white. 'This interview,' he said, 'is at an end.' He glanced about himself with ill-concealed terror.

'But what of me,' I asked, 'your prisoner?'

'My guest,' insisted Parp irritably, nearly dropping his pipe. He pounded it once sharply against the throne and thrust it into the wallet he wore at his side.

'Your guest?' I asked.

'Yes,' snapped Parp, darting his eyes from right to left, '-at least until it is time for you to be destroyed.'

I stood without speaking.

'Yes,' he repeated, looking down at me, 'until it is time for you to be destroyed.'

Then it seemed in the impending darkness in the Hall of Priest-Kings as he looked down on me that the pupils of his eyes for an instant glowed briefly, fiercely, like two tiny fiery disks of molten copper. I knew then that I had not been mistaken before. His eyes were unlike mine, or those of a human being. I knew then that Parp, whatever he might be, was not a man.

Then again came the sound of that great unseen gong, that distant sound, dull, penetrating, reverberating even in the vastness of the great hall in which we stood.

With a cry of terror Parp cast one last wild glance about the Hall of Priest-Kings and stumbled behind the great throne.

'Wait!' I cried.

But he had gone.

Wary of the tiled circle I traced its perimeter until I stood behind the throne. There was no sign of Parp. I walked the full ambit of the circle until I stood once more before the throne. I picked up my helmet and tossed it toward the dais. It clattered noisily against the first step. I followed it across the tiled circle which seemed harmless now that Parp had left.

Once more the distant and unseen gong rang out, and once more the Hall of Priest-Kings seemed filled with its ominous vibrations. It was the third stroke. I wondered why Parp had seemed to fear the coming of night, the sound of the gong.

I examined the throne and found no trace of a door behind it, but I knew that one must exist. Parp was, I was sure, though I had not touched him, as palpable as you or I. He could not simply have vanished.

It was now night outside.

Through the dome I could see the three moons of Gor and the bright stars above them.

They were very beautiful.

Then seized by an impulse I sat myself down on the great throne in the Hall of Priest-Kings, drew my sword and placed it across my knees.

I recalled Parp's words, 'until it is time for you to be destroyed'.

For some reason I laughed and my laugh was the laugh of a warrior of Gor, full and mighty, unafraid, and it roared in the dark and lonely Hall of Priest-Kings.

Chapter Five: VIKA

I awakened to the soothing touch of a small sponge that bathed my forehead.

I grasped the hand that held the sponge and found that I held a girl's wrist.

'Who are you?' I asked.

I lay on my back on a large stone platform, some twelve feet square. Beneath me, twisted and tangled, lay heavy sleeping pelts, thick robes of fur, numerous sheets of scarlet silk. A cushion or two of yellow silk lay randomly on the platform.

The room in which I lay was large, perhaps forty feet square, and the sleeping platform lay at one end of the room but not touching the wall. The walls were of plain dark stone with energy bulbs fixed in them; the furnishings seemed to consist mostly of two or three large chests against one wall. There were now windows. The entire aspect was one of severity. There was no door on the room but there was a great portal, perhaps twelve feet wide and eighteen feet high. I could see a large passageway beyond.

'Please,' said the girl.

I released her wrist.

She was comely to look on. Her hair was very light, the colour of summer straw; it was straight and bound simply behind the back of her neck with a small fillet of white wool. Her eyes were blue, and sullen. Her full, red lips, which could have torn the heart of a man, seemed to pout; they were sensuous, unobtrusively rebellious, perhaps subtly contemptuous.

She knelt beside the platform.

Beside her, on the floor, rested a laver of polished bronze, filled with water, a towel and a straight-bladed Gorean shaving knife.

I rubbed my chin.

She had shaved me as I slept.

I shivered, thinking of the blade and my throat. 'Your touch is light,' I said.

She bowed her head.

She wore a long, simple sleeveless white robe, which fell gracefully about her in dignified classic folds. About her throat she had gracefully wrapped a scarf of white silk.

'I am Vika,' she responded, 'your slave.'

I sat upright, cross-legged in the Gorean fashion, on the stone platform. I shook my head to clear it of sleep.

The girl rose and carried the bronze laver to a drain in one corner of the room and emptied it.

She walked well.

She then moved her hand past a glass disk in the wall and water emerged from a concealed aperture and curved into the shallow bowl. She rinsed the bowl and refilled it, and then took another towel of soft linen from a carved chest against the wall. She then again approached the stone platform and knelt before me, lifting the bowl. I took it and first drank from it and then set it on the stone platform before me, and washed. I wiped my face with the towel. She then gathered up the shaving knife, the towels I had used, and the bowl and went again to one side of the room.

She was very graceful, very lovely.

She rinsed the bowl again and set it against the wall to drain dry. She then rinsed and dried the shaving knife and put it into one of the chests. Then with a motion of her hand, which did not touch the wall, she opened a small, circular panel into which she dropped the two towels which I had used. When they had disappeared the circular panel closed.

She then returned into the vicinity of the stone platform, and knelt again before me, though some feet away.

We studied one another.

Neither spoke.

Her back was very straight and, kneeling, she rested back on her heels. In her eyes there seemed to burn an irritable fury of helpless rage. I smiled at her, but she did not smile back but looked away, angrily.

When she looked again my eyes fixed on hers and we looked into one another's eyes for a long time until her lip trembled and her eyes fell before mine.

When she raised her head again I curtly gestured her nearer.

A look of angry defiance flashed in her eyes, but she rose to her feet and slowly approached me, and knelt beside the stone platform. I, still remaining cross-legged on the platform, reached forward and took her head in my hands, drawing it to mine. She knelt now but no longer on her heels and her face was brought forward and lifted to mine. The sensuous lips parted slightly and I became acutely conscious of her breathing, which seemed to deepen and quicken. I removed my hands from her head but she left it where I had placed it. I slowly unwrapped the white, silken scarf from her throat.

Her eyes seemed to cloud with angry tears.

As I had expected about her white throat there was fastened, graceful and gleaming, the slender, close-fitting collar of a Gorean slave girl.

It was a collar like most others, of steel, secured with a small, heavy lock which closed behind the girl's neck.

'You see,' said the girl, 'I did not lie to you.'

'Your demeanour,' I said, 'does not suggest that of a slave girl.'

She rose to her feet and backed away, her hands at the shoulders of her robe. 'Nonetheless,' she said, 'I am a slave girl.' She turned away. 'Do you wish to see my brand?' she asked, contemptuously.

'No,' I said.

So she was a slave girl.

But on her collar there was not written the name of her owner and his city, as I would have expected. Instead I had read there only the Gorean numeral which would correspond to '708'.

'You may do with me what you please,' said the girl, turning to face me. 'As long as you are in this room I belong to you.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'I am a Chamber Slave,' she said.

'I don't understand,' I said.

'It means,' she said, irritably, 'that I am confined to this room, and that I am the slave of whoever enters the room.'

'But surely you can leave,' I protested.

I gestured to the massive portal which, empty of a door or gate, led only too clearly into the corridor beyond.

'No,' she said bitterly, 'I cannot leave.'

I arose and walked through the portal and found myself in a long stone passageway beyond it which stretched as far as I could see in either direction. It was lit with energy bulbs. In this passageway, placed regularly but staggered from one another, about fifty yards apart, were numerous portals like the one I had just passed through. From within any given room, one could not look into any other. None of these portals were hung with doors or gates, nor as far as I could see had they ever been hinged.

Standing in the passageway outside the room I extended my hand to the girl. 'Come,' I said, 'there is no danger.' She ran to the far wall and crouched against it. 'No,' she cried.

I laughed and leaped into the room.

She crawled and stumbled away, for some reason terrified, until she found herself in the stone corner of the chamber.

She shrieked and clawed at the stone.

I gathered her in my arms and she fought like a she-larl, screaming. I wanted to convince her that there was no danger, that her fears were groundless. Her fingernails clawed across my face.

I was angered and I swept her from her feet so that she was helpless in my arms.

I began to carry her toward the portal.

'Please,' she whispered, her voice hoarse with terror. 'Please, Master, no, no, Master!'

She sounded so piteous that I abandoned my plan and released her, though I was irritated by her fear.

She collapsed at my feet, shaking and whimpering, and put her head to my knee.

'Please, no, Master,' she begged.

'Very well,' I said.

'Look!' she said, pointing to the great threshold.

I looked but I saw nothing other than the stone sides of the portal and on each side three rounded red domes, of perhaps four inches width apiece.

'They are harmless,' I said, for I had passed them with safety. To demonstrate this I again left the chamber.

Outside the chamber, carved over the portal, I saw something I had not noted before. In Gorean notation, the numeral '708' was carved above the door. I now understood the meaning of the numeral on the girl's collar. I re-entered the chamber. 'You see,' I said, 'they are harmless.'

'For you,' she said, 'not for me.'

'Why not?' I asked.

She turned away.

'Tell me,' I said.

She shook her head.

'Tell me,' I repeated, more sternly.

She looked at me. 'Am I commanded?' she asked.

I did not wish to command her. 'No,' I said.

'Then,' said she, 'I shall not tell you.'

'Very well,' I said, 'then you are commanded.'

She looked at me through her tears and fear, with sudden defiance.

'Speak, Slave,' I said.

She bit her lip with anger.

'Obey,' I said.

'Perhaps,' she said.

Angrily I strode to her and seized her by the arms. She looked up into my eyes and shivered. She saw that she must speak. She lowered her head in submission. 'I obey,' she said, '- Master.'

I released her.

Again she turned away, going to the far wall.

'Long ago,' she said, 'when I first came to the Sardar and found the Hall of Priest-Kings, I was a young and foolish girl. I thought that the Priest-Kings possessed great wealth and that I, with my beauty -' she turned and looked at me and threw back her head - 'for I am beautiful, am I not?'

I looked at her. And though her face was stained with the tears of her recent terror and her hair and robes were disarranged, she was beautiful, perhaps the more so because of her distress, which had at least shattered the icy aloofness with which she had originally regarded me. I knew that she now feared me, but for what reason I was uncertain. It had something to do with the door, with her fear that I might force her from the room.

'Yes,' I said to her, 'you are beautiful.'

She laughed bitterly.

'Yes,' she continued, 'I, armed with my beauty, would come to the Sardar and wrest the riches and power of the Priest-Kings from them, for men had always sought to serve me, to give me what I wanted, and were the Priest-Kings not men?'

People had strange reasons for entering the Sardar, but the reason of the girl who called herself Vika seemed to me one of the most incredible. It was a plot which could have occurred only to a wild, spoiled, ambitious, arrogant girl, and perhaps as she had said, to one who was also young and foolish.

'I would be Ubara of all Gor,' she laughed, 'with Priest-Kings at my beck and call, at my command all their riches and their untold powers!'

I said nothing.

'But when I came to the Sardar -' She shuddered. Her lips moved, but she seemed unable to speak.

I went to her and placed my arms about her shoulders, and she did not resist.

'There,' she said, pointing to the small rounded domes set in the sides of the portal.

'I don't understand,' I said.

She moved from my arms and approached the portal. When she was within perhaps a yard of the exit the small red domes began to glow.

'Here in the Sardar,' she said, turning to face me, trembling, 'they took me into the tunnels and locked over my head a hideous metal globe with lights and wires and when they freed me they showed me a metal plate and told me that the patterns of my brain, of my oldest and most primitive memories, were recorded on that plate...'

I listened intently, knowing that the girl could, even if of High Caste, understand little of what had happened to her. Those of the High Castes of Gor are permitted by the Priest-Kings only the Second Knowledge, and those of the lower castes are permitted only the more rudimentary First Knowledge. I had speculated that there would be a Third Knowledge, that reserved for Priest-Kings, and the girl's account seemed to justify this conjecture. I myself would not understand the intricate processes involved in the machine of which she spoke but the purpose of the machine and the theoretical principles that facilitated its purpose were reasonably clear. The machine she spoke of would be a brain-scanner of some sort which would record three-dimensionally the microstates of her brain, in particular those of the deeper, less alterable layers. If well done, the resulting plate would be more individual than her fingerprints; it would be as unique and personal as her own history; indeed, in a sense, it would be a physical model of that same history, an isomorphic analogue of her past as she had experienced it.

'That plate,' she said, 'is kept in the tunnels of the Priest-Kings, but these -' and she shivered and indicated the rounded domes, which were undoubtedly sensors of some type, 'are its eyes.'

'There is a connection of some sort, though perhaps only a beam of some type, between the plate and these cells,' I said, going to them and examining them.

'You speak strangely,' she said.

'What would happen if you were to pass between them?' I asked.

'They showed me,' she said, her eyes filled with horror, 'by sending a girl between them who had not done her duty as they thought she should.'

Suddenly I started. 'They?' I asked.

'The Priest-Kings,' she replied simply.

'But there is only one Priest-King,' I said, 'who calls himself Parp.'

She smiled but did not respond to me. She shook her head sadly. 'Ah, yes, Parp,' she said.

I supposed at another time there might have been more Priest-Kings. Perhaps Parp was the last of the Priest-Kings? Surely it seemed likely that such massive structures as the Hall of Priest-Kings must have been the product of more than one being.

'What happened to the girl?' I asked.

Vika flinched. 'It was like knives and fire,' she said.

I now understood why she so feared to leave the room.

'Have you tried shielding yourself?' I asked, looking at the bronze laver which was drying against the wall.

'Yes,' she said, 'but the eye knows.' She smiled ruefully. 'It can see through metal.'

I looked puzzled.

She went to the side of the room and picked up the bronze laver. Holding it before her as though to shield her face she approached the portal. Once more the rounded domes began to glow.

'You see,' she said, 'it knows. It can see through metal.'

'I see,' I said.

I silently congratulated the Priest-Kings on the efficacy of their devices. Apparently the rays which must emanate from the sensors, rays not within that portion of the spectrum visible to the human eye, must possess the power to penetrate at least common molecular structures, something like an X-ray pierces flesh.

Vika glared at me sullenly. 'I have been a prisoner in this room for nine years,' she said.

'I am sorry,' I said.

'I came to the Sardar,' she laughed, 'to conquer the Priest-Kings and rob them of their riches and power!'

She ran to the far wall, suddenly breaking into tears. Facing it she pounded on it weeping.

She spun to face me.

'And instead,' she cried, 'I have only these walls of stone and the steel collar of a slave girl!'

She helplessly, enraged, tried to tear the slender, graceful, obdurate band from her white throat. Her fingers tore at it in frenzy, in fury, and she wept with frustration, and at last she desisted. Of course she still wore the badge of her servitude. The steel of a Gorean slave collar is not made to be removed at a girl's pleasure.

She was quiet now.

She looked at me, curiously. 'At one time,' she said, 'men sought to please me but now it is I who must please them.'

I said nothing.

Her eyes regarded me, rather boldly I thought, as though inviting me to exercise my authority over her, to address to her any command I might see fit, a command which she of course would have no choice but to obey.

There was a long silence I did not feel I should break. Vika's life, in its way, had been hard, and I wished her no harm.

Her lips curled slightly in scorn.

I was well aware of the taunt of her flesh, the obvious challenge of her eyes and carriage.

She seemed to say to me, you cannot master me.

I wondered how many men had failed.

With a shrug she went to the side of the sleeping platform and picked up the white, silken scarf I had removed from her throat. She wrapped it again about her throat, concealing the collar.

'Do not wear the scarf,' I said gently.

Her eyes sparkled with anger.

'You wish to see the collar,' she hissed.

'You may wear the scarf if you wish,' I said.

Her eyes clouded with bewilderment.

'But I do not think you should,' I said.

'Why?' she asked.

'Because I think that you are more beautiful without it,' I said, 'but more importantly to hide a collar is not to remove it.'

Rebellious fire flared in her eyes, and then she smiled. 'No,' she said, 'I suppose not.' She turned away bitterly. 'When I am alone,' she said, 'I pretend that I am free, that I am a great lady, the Ubara of a great city, even of Ar -but when a man enters my chamber, then again I am only a slave.' She slowly pulled the scarf from her throat and dropped it to the floor, and turned to face me. She lifted her head arrogantly and I saw that the collar was very beautiful on her throat.

'With me,' I said gently, 'you are free.'

She looked at me scornfully. 'There have been a hundred men in this chamber before you,' she said, 'and they have taught me - and taught me well - that I wear a collar.'

'Nonetheless,' I said, 'with me you are free.'

'And there will be a hundred after you,' she said.

I supposed she spoke the truth. I smiled. 'In the meantime,' I said, 'I grant you freedom.'

She laughed. 'To hide a collar,' she said, in a mocking tone, 'is not to remove it.'

I laughed. She had had the best of the exchange. 'Very well,' I conceded, 'you are a slave girl.'

When I said this, though I spoke in jest, she stiffened as though I might have lashed her mouth with the back of my hand.

Her old insolence had returned. 'Then use me,' she said bitterly. 'Teach me the meaning of the collar.'

I marveled. Vika, in spite of her nine years of captivity, her confinement in this chamber, was still a headstrong, spoiled, arrogant girl, and one fully aware of her yet unconquered flesh, and the sinuous power which her beauty might exercise over men, its capacity to torture them and drive them wild, to bend them in the search for its smallest favours compliantly to her will. There stood before me insolently the beautiful, predatory girl who had come so long ago to the Sardar to exploit Priest-Kings.

'Later,' I said.

She choked with fury.

I bore her no ill will but I found her as irritating as she was beautiful. I could understand that she, a proud, intelligent girl, could not but resent the indignities of her position, being forced to serve with the full offices of the slave girl whomsoever the Priest-Kings might see fit to send to her chamber, but yet I found in these grievances, great though they might be, no excuse for the deep hostility towards myself which seemed to suffuse her graceful being. After all, I, too, was a prisoner of Priest-Kings and I had not chosen to come to her chamber.

'How did I come to this chamber?' I asked.

'They brought you,' she said.

'Priest-Kings?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'Parp?' I asked.

For answer she only laughed.

'How long did I sleep?' I asked.

'Long,' she said.

'How long?' I asked.

'Fifteen Ahn,' she said.

I whistled to myself. The Gorean day is divided into twenty Ahn. I had nearly slept around the clock.

'Well, Vika,' I said, 'I think I am now ready to make use of you.'

'Very well, Master,' said the girl, and the expression by which she had addressed me seemed dipped in irony. Her hand loosened the clasp by which her garment was secured over her left shoulder.

'Can you cook?' I asked.

She looked at me. 'Yes,' she snapped. She fumbled irritably with the clasp of her robe, but her fingers were clumsy with rage. She was unable to fasten the clasp.

I fastened it for her.

She looked up at me, her eyes blazing. 'I will prepare food,' she said.

'Be quick, Slave Girl,' I said.

Her shoulders shook with rage.

'I see,' I said, 'that I must teach you the meaning of your collar.' I took a step toward her and she turned stumbling with a cry and ran to the corner of the room.

My laugh was loud.

Almost instantly, reddening, Vika regained her composure and straightened herself, tossing her head and brushing back a melody of blond hair which had fallen across her forehead. The wool fillet she had worn to bind her hair had loosened. She fixed on me a look of the most lofty disdain and, standing against the wall, lifting her arms behind the back of her neck, she prepared to replace the fillet.

'No,' I said.

I had decided I liked her better with her hair loose.

Deliberately, testing me, she continued to tie the fillet.

My eyes met hers.

Angrily she pulled the fillet from her hair and threw it to the floor, and turned away to busy herself with the preparation of my meal.

Her hair was very beautiful.

Chapter Six: WHEN PRIEST-KINGS WALK

Vika could cook well and I enjoyed the meal she prepared.

Stores of food were kept in concealed cabinets at one side of the room, which were opened in the same fashion as the other apertures I had observed earlier.

At my command Vika demonstrated for me the manner of opening and closing the storage and disposal areas in her unusual kitchen.

The temperature of the water which sprang from the wall tap, I learned, was regulated by the direction in which the shadow of a hand fell across a light-sensitive cell above the tap; the amount of water was correlated with the speed with which the hand passed before the sensor. I was interested to note that one received cold water by a shadow passing from right to left and hot water by a shadow passing from left to right. This reminded me of faucets on Earth, in which the hot water tap is on the left and the cold on the right. Undoubtedly there is a common reason underlying these similar arrangements on Gor and Earth. More cold water is used than hot, and most individuals using the water are right-handed.

The food which Vika withdrew from the storage apertures was not refrigerated but was protected by something resembling a foil of blue plastic. It was fresh and appetising.

First she boiled and simmered a kettle of Sullage, a common Gorean soup consisting of three standard ingredients and, as it is said, whatever else may be found, saving only the rocks of the

field. The principal ingredients of Sullage are the golden Sul, the starchy, golden-brown vine-borne fruit of the golden-leaved Sul plant; the curled, red, ovate leaves of the Tur-Pah, a tree parasite, cultivated in host orchards of Tur trees; and the salty, blue secondary roots of the Kes Shrub, a small, deeply rooted plant which grows best in sandy soil.

The meat was a steak, cut from the loin of a bosk, a huge, shaggy, long-horned, ill-tempered bovine which shambles in large, slow-moving herds across the prairies of Gor. Vika seared this meat, as thick as the forearm of a warrior, on a small iron grill over a kindling of charcoal cylinders, so that the thin margin of the outside was black, crisp and flaky and sealed within by the touch of the fire was the blood-rich flesh, hot and fat with juice.

Beyond the Sullage and the bosk steak there was the inevitable flat, rounded loaf of the yellow Sa-Tarna bread. The meal was completed by a handful of grapes and a draught of water from the wall tap. The grapes were purple and, I suppose, Ta grapes from the lower vineyards of the terraced island of Cos some four hundred pasangs from Port Kar. I had tasted some only once before, having been introduced to them in a feast given in my honour by Lara, who was Tatrix of the city of Tharna. If they were indeed Ta grapes I supposed they must have come by galley from Cos to Port Kar, and from Port Kar to the Fair of En'Kara. Port Kar and Cos are hereditary enemies, but such traditions would not be likely to preclude some profitable smuggling. But perhaps they were not Ta grapes for Cos was far distant, and even if carried by tarns, the grapes would probably not seem so fresh. I dismissed the matter from my mind. I wondered why there was only water to drink, and none of the fermented beverages of Gor, such as Paga, Ka-la-na wine or Kal-da. I was sure that if these were available Vika would have set them before me.

I looked at her.

She had not prepared herself a portion but, after I had been served, had knelt silently to one side, back on her heels in the position of a Tower Slave, a slave to whom largely domestic duties would be allotted in the Gorean apartment cylinders.

On Gor, incidentally, chairs have special significance, and do not often occur in private dwellings. They tend to be reserved for significant personages, such as administrators and judges. Moreover, although you may find this hard to understand, they are not thought to be comfortable. Indeed, when I had returned to Earth from my first trip to Gor I had found that one of the minor inconveniences of my return was reaccustoming myself to the simple business of sitting on chairs. I felt, for some months, rather awkward, rather unsteady perched on a little wooden platform supported by four narrow sticks. Perhaps if you can imagine yourself suddenly being forced to sit on rather high end tables you can sense the feeling.

The Gorean male, at ease, usually sits cross-legged and the female kneels, resting back on her heels. The position of the Tower Slave, in which Vika knelt, differs from that of a free woman only in the position of the wrists which are held before her and, when not occupied, crossed as though for binding. A free woman's wrists are never so placed. The Older Tarl, who had been my mentor in arms years ago in Ko-ro-ba, had once told me the story of a free woman, desperately in love with a warrior, who, in the presence of her family was entertaining him, and whose wrists, unconsciously, had assumed the position of a slave. It was only with difficulty that she had been restrained from hurling herself in mortification from one of the high bridges. The Older Tarl had guffawed in recounting this anecdote and was scarcely less pleased by its sequel. It seems she thereafter, because of her embarrassment, would never see the warrior and he, at last, impatient and desiring her, carried her off as a slave girl, and returned to the city months later with her as his Free Companion. At the time that I had been in Ko-ro-ba the couple had still been living in the city. I wondered what had become of them.

The position of the Pleasure Slave, incidentally, differs from the position of both the free woman and the Tower Slave. The hands of a Pleasure Slave normally rest on her thighs but, in some cities, for example, Thentis, I believe, they are crossed behind her. More significantly, for the free woman's hands may also rest on her thighs, there is a difference in the placing of the knees. In all these kneeling positions, incidentally, even that of the Pleasure Slave, the Gorean woman carries herself well; her back is straight and her chin is high. She tends to be vital and beautiful to look upon.

'Why is there nothing but water to drink?' I asked Vika.

She shrugged. 'I suppose,' she said, 'because the Chamber Slave is alone much of the time.'

I looked at her, not fully understanding.

She gazed at me frankly. 'It would be too easy then,' she said.

I felt like a fool. Of course the Chamber Slaves would not be permitted the escape of intoxication, for if they were so allowed to lighten their bondage undoubtedly, in time, their beauty, their utility to the Priest-Kings would be diminished; they would become unreliable, lost in dreams and wines.

'I see,' I said.

'Only twice a year is the food brought,' she said.

'And it is brought by Priest-Kings?' I asked.

'I suppose,' she said.'

'But you do not know?'

'No,' said she. 'I awaken on some morning and there is food.'

'I suppose Parp brings it,' I said.

She looked at me with a trace of amusement.

'Parp the Priest-King,' I said.

'Did he tell you that?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'I see,' she said.

The girl was apparently unwilling to speak more of this matter, and so I did not press her.

I had almost finished the meal. 'You have done well,' I congratulated her. 'The meal is excellent.'

'Please,' she said, 'I am hungry.'

I looked at her dumbfounded. She had not prepared herself a portion and so I had assumed that she had eaten, or was not hungry, or would prepare her own meal later.

'Make yourself something,' I said.

'I cannot,' she said simply. 'I can eat only what you give me.'

I cursed myself for a fool.

Had I now become so much the Gorean warrior that I could disregard the feelings of a fellow creature, in particular those of a girl, who must be protected and cared for? Could it be that I had, as the Codes of my Caste recommended, not even considered her, but merely regarded her as a rightless animal, no more than a subject beast, an abject instrument to my interests and pleasures, a slave?

'I am sorry,' I said.

'Was it not your intention to discipline me?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

'Then my master is a fool,' she said, reaching for the meat that I had left on my plate.

I caught her wrist.

'It is now my intention to discipline you,' I said.

Her eyes briefly clouded with tears. 'Very well,' she said, withdrawing her hand.

Vika would go hungry that night.

Although it was late, according to the chamber chronometer, fixed in the lid of one of the chests, I prepared to leave the room. Unfortunately there was no natural light in the room and so one could not judge the time by the sun or the stars and moons of Gor. I missed them. Since I had awakened, the energy bulbs had continued to burn at a constant and undiminished rate.

I had washed as well as I could squatting in the stream of water which emerged from the wall.

In one of the chests against the wall I had found, among the garments of various other castes, a warrior's tunic. I donned this, as my own had been torn by the larl's claws.

Vika had unrolled a straw mat which she placed on the floor at the foot of the great stone couch in the chamber. On this, wrapped in a light blanket, her chin on her knees, she sat watching me.

A heavy slave ring was set in the bottom of the couch to which I might have, had I pleased, chained her.

I buckled on my sword. 'You are not going to leave the chamber, are you?' asked Vika, the first words she had said to me since the meal.

'Yes,' I said.

'But you may not,' she said.

'Why?' I asked, alert.

'It is forbidden,' she said.

'I see,' I said.

I started for the door.

'When the Priest-Kings wish you, they will come for you,' she said. 'Until then you must wait.'

'I do not care to wait,' I said.

'But you must,' she insisted, standing.

I went to her and placed my hands on her shoulders. 'Do not fear the Priest-Kings so,' I said.

She saw that my resolve was not altered.

'If you go,' she said, 'return at least before the second gong.'

'Why?' I asked.

'For yourself,' she said, looking down.

'I am not afraid,' I said.

'Then for me,' she said, not raising her eyes.

'But why?' I asked.

She seemed confused. 'I am afraid to be alone,' she said.

'But you have been alone many nights,' I pointed out.

She looked up at me and I could not read the expression in her troubled eyes. 'One does not cease to be afraid,' she said.

'I must go,' I said.

Suddenly in the distance I heard the rumble of the gong which I had heard before in the Hall of Priest-Kings.

Vika smiled up at me. 'You see,' she said in relief, 'it is too late. Now you must remain.'

'Why?' I asked.

She looked away, avoiding my eyes. 'Because the energy bulbs will soon be dimmed,' she said, 'and it will be the hours allotted for sleep.'

She seemed unwilling to speak further.

'Why must I remain?' I asked.

I held her shoulders more firmly and shook her to force her to speak. 'Why?' I insisted.

Fear crept into her eyes.

'Why?' I demanded.

Then came the second rumbling stroke of the distant gong, and Vika seemed to tremble in my arms.

Her eyes were wide with fear.

I shook her again, savagely. 'Why?' I cried.

She could hardly speak. Her voice was scarcely a whisper. 'Because after the gong -' she said.

'Yes?' I demanded.

'- they walk,' she said.

'Who!' I demanded.

'The Priest-Kings!' she cried and turned from me.

'I am not afraid of Parp,' I said.

She turned and looked at me. 'He is not a Priest-King,' she said quietly.

And then came the third and final stroke of that distant gong and at the same instant the energy bulbs in the room dimmed and I understood that now somewhere in the long corridors of that vast edifice there walked the Priest-Kings of Gor.

Chapter Seven: I HUNT FOR PRIEST-KINGS

In spite of Vika's protests it was with a light heart that I strode into the passageway beyond her chamber. I would seek the Priest-Kings of Gor.

She followed me almost to the portal, and I can remember how the sensors set in that great threshold in the dimmed light of the energy bulbs began to glow and pulse as she neared them.

I could see her white garment and sense the pale beauty of her skin as she stood back from the portal in the semi-darkened chamber.

'Please do not go,' she called to me.

'I must,' I said.

'Come back,' she cried.

I did not answer her but began to prowl down the hallway.

'I'm afraid,' I heard her call.

I assumed she would be safe, as she had been on countless nights and so I went on.

I thought I heard her weep, and supposed that she did so for herself, because she was frightened.

I continued down the passageway.

My business was not to console her, not to tell her not to be afraid, not to give her the comfort of another human presence. My business was with the dread denizens of these dim passageways which had so inspired her terror; my business was not that of the comforter or friend, but that of the warrior.

As I went down the passageway I looked into the various chambers, identical with my own, which lined it. Each, like mine, lacked a gate or door, and had for its entrance only that massive portal, perhaps some twelve feet wide and eighteen feet high. I would not have enjoyed sleeping in such a room, for there was no way to protect oneself from the hall, and of course eventually one would need sleep.

Almost all of the chambers I passed, and I passed many, seemed to be empty.

Two, however, housed Chamber Slaves, girls like Vika, clad and collared identically. I suppose the only difference in the attire of the three girls would have been the numerals engraved on their collars. Vika of course had worn a scarf and these girls did not, but now Vika no longer wore her scarf; now her collar, steel and gleaming, locked, encircling her fair throat, was as evident and beautiful as theirs, proclaiming her to the eyes of all, like them, only a slave girl.

The first girl was a short, sturdy wench with thick ankles and wide, exciting shoulders, probably of peasant stock. Her hair had been braided and looped over her right shoulder; it was hard in the light to determine its colour. She had risen from her mat at the foot of the couch unbelievably, blinking and rubbing her heavy-lidded, ovoid eyes. As far as I could tell she was alone in the chamber. When she approached the portal its sensors began to glow and pulse as had Vika's.

'Who are you?' asked the girl, her accent suggesting the Sa-Tarna fields above Ar and toward the Tamber Gulf.

'Have you seen Priest-Kings?' I asked.

'Not this night,' she said.

'I am Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' I said and went on.

The second girl was tall, fragile and willowy, with slender ankles and large, hurt eyes; she had dark, curling hair that fell about her shoulders and stood out against the white of her garment; she may have been of High Caste; without speaking to her it would be hard to tell; even then it might be difficult to be sure, for the accents of some of the higher artisan castes approximate pure High Caste Gorean; she stood with her back against the far wall, the palms of her hands against it, her eyes fastened on me, frightened, scarcely breathing. As far as I could tell she too was alone.

'Have you seen Priest-Kings?' I asked.

She shook her head vigorously, No.

Still wondering if she were of High Caste, and smiling to myself, I continued down the passageway.

Both of the girls had in their way been beautiful but I found Vika superior to both.

My Chamber Slave's accent had been pure High Caste Gorean though I could not place the city. Probably her caste had been that of the Builders or Physicians, for had her people been Scribes I would have expected a greater subtlety of inflections, the use of less common grammatical cases; and had her people been of the Warriors I would have expected a blunter speech, rather belligerently simple, expressed in great reliance on the indicative mood and, habitually, a rather arrogant refusal to venture beyond the most straightforward of sentence structures. On the other hand these generalisations are imperfect, for Gorean speech is no less complex than that of any of the great natural language communities of the Earth nor are its speakers any the less diverse. It is, incidentally, a beautiful language; it can be as subtle as Greek; as direct as Latin; as expressive as Russian; as rich as English; as forceful as German. To the Goreans it is always, simply, The Language, as though there were no others, and those who do not speak it are regarded immediately as barbarians. This sweet, fierce, liquid speech is the common bond that tends to hold together the Gorean world. It is the common property of the Administrator of Ar, a herdsman beside the Vosk, a peasant from Tor, a scribe from Thentis, a metalworker from Tharna, a physician from Cos, a pirate from Port Kar, a warrior from Ko-ro-ba.

I found it difficult to remove from my mind the image of the two Chamber Slaves, and that of Vika, perhaps because the plight of these girls touched my heart, perhaps because each, though differently, was beautiful. I found myself congratulating myself that I had been taken to the chamber of Vika, for I had thought her the most beautiful. Then I wondered if my having been brought to her chamber, and not to that of one of the others had been simply my good fortune. It occurred to me that Vika, in some ways, resembled Lara, who was Tatrix of Tharna, for whom I had cared. She was shorter than Lara and more fully bodied but they would have been considered of the same general physical type. Vika's eyes were a sullen, smouldering, taunting blue; the blue of Lara's eyes had been brighter, as clear and, when not impassioned, as soft as the summer sky over Ko-ro-ba; when impassioned they had burned as fiercely, as beautifully, as helplessly as the walls of a raped city. Lara's lips had been rich and fine, sensitive and curious, tender, eager, hungry; the lips of Vika were maddening; I recalled those lips, full and red, pouting, defiant, scornful, scarlet with a slave girl's challenge to my blood; I wondered if Vika might be a bred slave, a Passion Slave, one of those girls bred for beauty and passion over generations by the zealous owners of the great Slave Houses of Ar, for lips such as Vika's were a feature often bred into Passion Slaves; they were lips formed for the kiss of a master.

And as I pondered these things I sensed that it had not been accident that I had been carried to Vika's chamber but that this had been part of a plan by the Priest-Kings. I had sensed that Vika had defeated and broken many men, and I sensed that the Priest-Kings might be curious to see how I might fare with her. I wondered if Vika herself had been instructed by Priest-Kings to subdue me. I gathered that she had not. It was not the way of Priest-Kings. Vika would be all unconscious of their machinations; she would simply be herself, which is what the Priest-Kings would desire. She would simply be Vika, insolent, aloof, contemptuous, provocative, untamed though collared, determined to be the master though she were the slave. I wondered how many men had fallen at her feet, how many men she had forced to sleep at the foot of the great stone couch, in the shadow of the slave ring, while she herself reclined on the pelts and silks of the master.

After some hours I found myself again in the Hall of Priest-Kings. I was gladdened to see once more the moons and stars of Gor hurtling in the sky above the dome.

My footsteps rang hollowly on the stones of the floor. The great chamber reposed in vastness and stillness. The empty throne loomed silent and awesome.

'I am here!' I cried. 'I am Tarl Cabot. I am a warrior of Ko-ro-ba and I issue the challenge of a warrior to the Priest-Kings of Gor! Let us do battle! Let us make war!'

My voice echoed for a long time in the vast chamber, but I received no response to my challenge.

I called out again and again there was no response.

I decided to return to Vika's chamber.

On another night I might explore further, for there were other passageways, other portals visible

from where I stood. It might take days to pursue them all.

I set out on my way back to Vika's chamber.

I had walked perhaps an Ahn and was deep inside one of the long, dimly lit passageways which led in the direction of her chamber when I seemed somehow to sense a presence behind me.

I spun quickly about drawing my sword in the same motion.

The corridor behind me was empty.

I slammed the blade back in the sheath and continued on.

I had not walked far when I again became uneasy. This time I did not turn, but walked slowly ahead, listening behind me with every fibre I could bend to the effort. When I came to a bend in the passageway I rounded it, and then pressed myself against the wall and waited.

Slowly, very slowly, I drew the sword, taking care that it made no sound as it left its sheath.

I waited but nothing occurred.

I have the patience of a warrior and I waited for a long time. When men stalk one another with weapons it is well to have patience, great patience.

It of course occurred to me a hundred times that I was foolish for actually I was conscious of having heard nothing. Yet my awareness or sense that something followed me in the corridor might well have been occasioned by some tiny sound which my conscious mind had not even registered, but yet which had impinged on my senses, leaving as its only conscious trace a vague wind of suspicion. At last I decided to force the game. My decision was motivated in part by the fact that the hall allowed few concealments for ambush and I would presumably see my pursuer almost as soon as he saw me. If he were not carrying a missile weapon it would make little difference. And if he had been carrying a missile weapon why had he not slain me before? I smiled grimly. If it were a matter of waiting I acknowledged that the Priest-King, if such it were, who followed me had had the best of things. For all I knew a Priest-King could wait like a stone or tree, nerveless until necessary. I had waited perhaps better than an Ahn and I was covered with sweat. My muscles ached for motion. It occurred to me that whatever followed might have heard the cessation of my footsteps. That it knew that I was waiting. How acute would be the senses of Priest-Kings? Perhaps they would be relatively feeble, having grown accustomed to reliance on instrumentation; perhaps they would be other than the senses of men, sharper if only from a differing genetic heritage, capable of discriminating and interpreting sensory cues that would not even be available to the primitive five senses of men. Never before had I been so aware of the thin margin of reality admitted into the human nervous system, little more than a razor's width of apprehension given the multiple and complex physical processes which formed our environment. The safest thing for me would be to continue on as I had been doing, a pattern of action which would give me the benefit of the shield formed by the turn in the passage. But I had no wish to continue on. I tensed myself for the leap and cry that would fling me into the open, the sudden interruption in the stillness of the passageway that might be sufficient to impair the steadiness of a spear arm, the calm setting of a crossbow's iron quarrel on its guide.

And so I uttered the war cry of Ko-ro-ba and leaped, sword ready, to face what might follow me.

A howl of bitter rage escaped my lips as I saw that the passageway was empty.

Maddened beyond understanding I began to race down the passageway, retracing my steps to confront what might be in the passage. I had run for perhaps half a pasang when I stopped, panting and furious with myself.

'Come out!' I cried. 'Come out!'

The stillness of the passageway taunted me.

I remembered Vika's words, When the Priest-Kings wish you, they will come for you.

Angrily I stood alone in the passageway in the dimmed light of its energy bulbs, my unused sword grasped futilely in my hand.

Then I sensed something.

My nostrils flared slightly and then as carefully as one might examine an object by eye I smelled the air of the passageway.

I had never much relied on this sense.

Surely I had enjoyed the scent of flowers and women, of hot, fresh bread, roasted meat, Paga and wines, harness leather, the oil with which I protected the blade of my sword from rust, of green fields and storm winds, but seldom had I considered the sense of smell in the way one would consider that of vision or touch, and yet it too had its often neglected store of information ready for the man who was ready to make use of it.

And so I smelled the passageway and to my nostrils, vague but undeniable, there came an odour that I had never before encountered. It was, as far as I could tell at that time, a simple odour, though later I would learn that it was the complex product of odours yet more simple than itself. I find it impossible to describe this odour, much as one might find it difficult to describe the taste of a citrus fruit to one who had never tasted it or anything much akin to it. It was however slightly acrid, irritating to my nostrils. It reminded me vaguely of the odour of an expended cartridge.

Although there was nothing now with me in the passage it had left its trace.

I knew now that I had not been alone.

I had caught the scent of a Priest-King.

I resheathed my sword and returned to Vika's chamber. I hummed a warrior's tune, for somehow I was happy.

Chapter Eight: VIKA LEAVES THE CHAMBER

'Wake up, wench!' I cried, striding into Vika's chamber, clapping my hands sharply twice.

The startled girl cried out and leaped to her feet. She had been lying on the straw mat at the foot of the stone couch. So suddenly had she arisen that she had struck her knee against the couch and this had not much pleased her. I had meant to scare her half to death and I was pleased to see that I had.

She looked at me angrily. 'I was not asleep,' she said.

I strode to her and held her head in my hands, looking at her eyes. She had spoken the truth.

'You see!' she said.

I laughed.

She lowered her head, and then looked up shyly. 'I am happy,' she said, 'that you have returned.'

I looked at her and sensed that she was.

'I suppose,' I said, 'that in my absence you have been in the pantry.'

'No,' she said, 'I have not,' adding as an acrimonious afterthought, '- Master.'

I had offended her pride.

'Vika,' I said, 'I think it is time that some changes were made around here.'

'Nothing ever changes here,' she said.

I looked around the room. The sensors in the room interested me. I examined them again. I was elated. Then, methodically, I began to search the room. Although the sensors and the mode of their application were fiendish and beyond my immediate competence to fully understand, they suggested nothing ultimately mysterious, nothing which might not eventually be explained. There was nothing about them to encourage me to believe that the Priest-Kings, or King as it might be, were ultimately unfathomable or incomprehensible beings.

Moreover in the corridor beyond I had sensed the traces, tangible traces, of a Priest-King. I laughed. Yes, I had smelled a Priest-King, or its effects. The thought amused me.

More fully than ever I now understood how much the forces of superstition have depressed and injured men. No wonder the Priest-Kings hid behind their palisade in the Sardar and let the myths of the Initiates build a wall of human terror about them, no wonder they let their nature and ends be secret, no wonder they took such pains to conceal and obscure their plans and purposes, their devices, their instrumentation, their limitations! I laughed aloud.

Vika watched me, puzzled, surely convinced that I must have lost my mind.

I cracked my fist into my open palm. 'Where is it?' I cried.

'What?' whispered Vika.

'The Priest-Kings see and the Priest-Kings hear!' I cried, 'But how?'

'By their power,' said Vika, moving back to the wall.

I had examined the entire room as well as I could. It might be possible, of course, to use some type of penetrating beam which if subtly enough adjusted might permit the reception of signals through walls and then relay these to a distant screen, but I doubted that such a device, though perhaps within the capacities of the Priest-Kings, would be used in the relatively trivial domestic surveillance of these chambers.

Then my eye saw, directly in the centre of the ceiling, another energy bulb, like those in the walls, only the bulb was not lit. That was a mistake on the Priest-Kings' part. But of course the device could be in any of the bulbs. Perhaps one of the almost inexhaustible energy bulbs, which can burn for years, had as a simple matter of fact at last burned out.

I leaped to the centre of the stone platform. I cried to the girl, 'Bring me the laver.'

She was convinced I was mad.

'Quickly!' I shouted, and she fairly leapt to fetch the bronze bowl.

I seized the bowl from her hand and hurled it underhanded up against the bulb which, though it had apparently burned out, shattered with a great flash and hiss of smoke and sparks. Vika screamed and crouched behind the stone platform. Down from the cavity where the energy bulb had been there hung, blasted and smoking, a tangle of wire, a ruptured metal diaphragm and a conical receptacle which might once have held a lens.

'Come here,' I said to Vika, but the poor girl cringed beside the platform. Impatient, I seized her by the arm and yanked her to the platform and held her there in my arms. 'Look up!' I said. But she kept her face resolutely down. I thrust my fist in her hair and she cried out and looked up. 'See!' I cried.

'What is it?' she whimpered.

'It was an eye,' I said.

'An eye?' she whimpered.

'Yes,' I said, 'something like the "eye" in the door.' I wanted her to understand.

'Whose eye?' she asked.

'The eye of Priest-Kings,' I laughed. 'But it is now shut.'

Vika trembled against me and in my joy with my fist still in her hair I bent my face to hers and kissed her full on those magnificent lips and she cried out helpless in my arms and wept but did not resist.

It was the first kiss I had taken from the lips of my slave girl, and it had been a kiss of mad joy, one that astonished her, that she could not understand.

I leaped from the couch and went to the portal.

She remained standing on the stone platform, bewildered, her fingers at her lips.

Her eyes regarded me strangely.

'Vika,' I cried, 'would you like to leave this room?'

'Of course,' she said. Her voice trembled.

'Very well,' I said, 'you shall do so.'

She shrank back.

I laughed and went to the portal. Once again I examined the six red, domed sensors, three on a side, which were fixed there. It would be, in a way, a shame to destroy them, for they were rather beautiful.

I drew my sword.

'Stop!' cried Vika, in terror.

She leaped from the stone couch and ran to me, seizing my sword arm but with my left hand I flung her back and she fell stumbling back against the side of the stone couch.

'Don't!' she cried, kneeling there, her hands outstretched.

Six times the hilt of my sword struck against the sensors and six times there was a hissing pop like the explosion of hot glass and a bright shower of scarlet sparks. The sensors had been shattered, their lenses broken and the wired apertures behind them a tangle of black, fused wire.

I resheathed my sword and wiped my face with the back of my forearm. I could taste a little blood and knew that some of the fragments from the sensors had cut my face.

Vika knelt beside the couch numbly.

I smiled at her. 'You may now leave the room,' I said, 'should you wish to do so.'

Slowly she rose to her feet. Her eyes looked to the portal and its shattered sensors. Then she looked at me, something of wonder and fear in her eyes.

She shook herself.

'My master is hurt,' she said.

'I am Tarl Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' I said to her, telling her my name and city for the first time.

'My city is Treve,' she said, for the first time telling me the name of her city.

I smiled as I watched her go to fetch a towel from one of the chests against the wall.

So Vika was from Treve.

That explained much. Treve was a warlike city somewhere in the trackless magnificence of the Voltai Range. I had never been there but I knew her reputation. Her warriors were said to be fierce and brave, her women proud and beautiful. Her tarnsmen were ranked with those of Thentis,

famed for its tarn flocks, and Ko-ro-ba, even great Ar itself.

Vika returned with the towel and began dabbing at my face.

It was seldom a girl from Treve ascended the auction block. I suppose Vika would have been costly had I purchased her in Ar or Ko-ro-ba. Even when not beautiful, because of their rarity, they are prized by collectors.

Treve was alleged to lie above Ar, some seven hundred pasangs distant, and toward the Sardar. I had never seen the city located on a map but I had seen the territory she claimed so marked. The precise location of Treve was not known to me and was perhaps known to few save its citizens. Trade routes did not lead to the city and those who entered its territory did not often return.

There was said to be no access to Treve save on tarnback and this would suggest that it must be as much a mountain stronghold as a city.

She was said to have no agriculture, and this may be true. Each year in the fall legions of tarnsmen from Treve were said to emerge from the Voltai like locusts and fall on the fields of one city or another, different cities in different years, harvesting what they needed and burning the rest in order that a long, retaliatory winter campaign could not be launched against them. A century ago the tarnsmen of Treve had even managed to stand off the tarnsmen of Ar in a fierce battle fought in the stormy sky over the crags of the Voltai. I had heard poets sing of it. Since that time her depredations had gone unchecked, although perhaps it should be added that never again did the men of Treve despoil the fields of Ar.

'Does it hurt?' asked Vika.

'No,' I said.

'Of course it hurts,' she sniffed.

I wondered if many of Treve's women were as beautiful as Vika. If they were it was surprising that tarnsmen from all the cities of Gor would not have descended on the place, as the saying goes, to try chain luck.

'Are all the women of Treve as beautiful as you?' I asked.

'Of course not,' she said irritably.

'Are you the most beautiful?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said simply, and then she smiled and added, 'perhaps...'

With a graceful movement she rose and went back again to the chests against the wall. She returned with a small tube of ointment.

'They are deeper than I thought,' she said.

With the tip of her finger she began to work the ointment into the cuts. It burned quite a bit.

'Does it hurt?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

She laughed, and it pleased me to hear her laugh.

'I hope you know what you are doing,' I said.

'My father,' she said, 'was of the Caste of Physicians.'

So, I thought to myself, I had placed her accent rather well, either Builders or Physicians, and had I thought carefully enough about it, I might have recognised her accent as being a bit too refined for the Builders. I chuckled to myself. In effect, I had probably merely scored a lucky hit.

'I didn't know they had physicians in Treve,' I said.

'We have all the High Castes in Treve,' she said, angrily.

The only two cities, other than Ar, which I knew that Treve did not periodically attack were mountainous Thentis, famed for its tarn flocks, and Ko-ro-ba, my own city.

If the issue was grain, of course, there would be little point in going to Thentis, for she imports her own, but her primary wealth, her tarn flocks, is not negligible, and she also possesses silver, though her mines are not as rich as those of Tharna. Perhaps Treve has never attacked Thentis because she, too, is a mountain city, lying in the Mountains of Thentis, or more likely because the men of Treve respect her tarnsmen almost as much as they do their own.

The cessation of attacks on Ko-ro-ba began during the time my father, Matthew Cabot, was Ubar of that city.

He organised a system of far-flung beacons, set in fortified towers, which would give the alarm when unwelcome forces entered the territory of Ko-ro-ba. At the sight of raiders one tower would set its beacons aflame, glittering by night, or dampen it with green branches by day to produce a white smoke, and this signal would be relayed from tower to tower. Thus when the tarnsmen of Treve came to the grain fields of Ko-ro-ba, which lie for the most part some pasangs from the city, toward the Vosk and Tamber Gulf, they would find her tarnsmen arrayed against them. Having come for grain and not war, the men of Treve would then turn back, and seek out the fields of a less well-defended city.

There was also a system of signals whereby the towers could communicate with one another and the city. Thus if one tower failed to report when expected the alarm bars of Ko-ro-ba would soon ring and her tarnsmen would saddle and be aflight.

Cities, of course, would pursue the raiders from Treve, and carry the pursuit vigorously as far as the foothills of the Voltai, but there they would surrender the chase, turning back, not caring to risk their tarnsmen in the rugged, formidable territory of their rival, whose legendary ferocity among her own crags once gave pause long ago even to the mighty forces of Ar.

Treve's other needs seemd to be satisfied much in the same way as her agricultural ones, for her raiders were known from the borders of the Fair of En'Kara, in the very shadow of the Sardar, to the delta of the Vosk and the islands beyond, such as Tyros and Cos. The results of these raids might be returned to Treve or sold, perhaps even at the Fair of En'Kara, or another of the four great Sardar Fairs, or if not, they could always be disposed of easily without question in distant, crowded, malignant Port Kar.

'How do the people of Treve live?' I asked Vika.

'We raise the verr,' she said.

I smiled.

The verr was a mountain goat indigenous to the Voltai. It was a wild, agile, ill-tempered beast, long-haired and spiral-horned. Among the Voltai crags it would be worth one's life to come within twenty yards of one.

'Then you are a simple, domestic folk,' I said.

'Yes,' said Vika.

'Mountain herdsmen,' I said.

'Yes,' said Vika.

And then we laughed together, neither of us able to restrain ourselves.

Yes, I knew the reputation of Treve. It was a city rich in plunder, probably as lofty, inaccessible and impregnable as a tarn's nest. Indeed, Treve was known as the Tarn of the Voltai.

It was an arrogant, never-conquered citadel, a stronghold of men whose way of life was banditry, whose women lived on the spoils of a hundred cities.

And it was the city from which Vika had come.

I believed it.

But yet tonight she had been gentle, and I had been kind to her.

Tonight we had been friends.

She went to the chest against the wall, to replace the tube of ointment.

'The ointment will soon be absorbed,' she said. 'In a few minutes there will be no trace of it, nor of the cuts.'

I whistled.

'The physicians of Treve,' I said, 'have marvellous medicines.'

'It is an ointment of Priest-Kings,' she said.

I was pleased to hear this, for it suggested vulnerability. 'Then Priest-Kings can be injured?' I asked.

'Their slaves can,' said Vika.

'I see,' I said.

'Let us not speak of Priest-Kings,' said the girl.

I looked at her, standing across the room, lovely, facing me in the dim light.

'Vika,' I asked, 'was your father truly of the Caste of Physicians?'

'Yes,' she said, 'why do you ask?'

'It does not matter,' I said.

'But why?' she insisted.

'Because,' I said, 'I thought you might have been a bred Pleasure Slave.'

It was a foolish thing to say, and I regretted it immediately. She stiffened. 'You flatter me,' she said, and turned away. I had hurt her.

I made a move to approach her but without turning, she said, 'Please do not touch me.'

And then she seemed to straighten and turned to face me, once again the old and scornful Vika, challenging, hostile. 'But of course you may touch me,' she said, 'for you are my master.'

'Forgive me,' I said.

She laughed bitterly, scornfully.

It was truly a woman of Treve who stood before me now.

I saw her as I had never seen her before.

Vika was a bandit princess, accustomed to be clad in silk and jewels from a thousand looted caravans, to sleep on the richest furs and sup on the most delicate viands, all purloined from galleys, beached and burnt, from the ravished storerooms of outlying, smoking cylinders, from the tables and treasure chests of homes whose men were slain, whose daughters wore the chains of slave girls, only now she herself, Vika, this bandit princess, proud Vika, a woman of lofty, opulent Treve, had fallen spoils herself in the harsh games of Gor, and felt on her own throat the same

encircling band of steel with which the men of her city had so often graced the throats of their fair, weeping captives.

Vika was now property.

My property.

Her eyes regarded me with fury.

Insolently she approached me, slowly, gracefully, as silken in her menace as the she-larl, and then to my astonishment when she stood before me, she knelt, her hands on her thighs, her knees in the position of the Pleasure Slave, and dropped her head in scornful submission.

She raised her head and her taunting blue eyes regarded me boldly. 'Here, Master,' she said, 'is your Pleasure Slave.'

'Rise,' I said.

She rose gracefully and put her arms about my neck and moved her lips close to mine. 'You kissed me before,' she said. 'Now I shall kiss you.'

I looked into those blue eyes and they looked into mine, and I wondered how many men had been burned, and had died, in that smouldering, sullen fire.

Those magnificent lips brushed mine.

'Here,' she said softly, imperiously, 'is the kiss of your Pleasure Slave.'

I disengaged her arms from my neck.

She looked at me in bewilderment.

I walked from the room into the dimly lit hall. In the passageway, I extended my hand to her, that she might come and take it.

'Do I not please you?' she asked.

'Vika,' I said, 'come here and take the hand of a fool.'

When she saw what I intended she shook head slowly, numbly. 'No,' she said. 'I cannot leave the chamber.'

'Please,' I said.

She shook with fear.

'Come,' I said, 'take my hand.'

Slowly, trembling, moving as though in a dream, the girl approached the portal, and this time the sensors could not glow.

She looked at me.

'Please,' I said.

She looked again at the sensors, which stared out of the wall like black, gutted metal eyes. They were burned and still, shattered, and even the wall in their vicinity showed the seared, scarlet stain of their abrupt termination.

'They can hurt you no longer,' I said.

Vika took another step and then it seemed her legs would fail her and she might swoon. She put out her hand to me. Her eyes were wide with fear.

'The women of Treve,' I said, 'are brave, as well as beautiful and proud.'

She stepped through the portal and fell fainting in my arms.

I lifted her and carried her to the stone couch.

I regarded the ruined sensors in the portal and the wreckage of the surveillance device which had been concealed in the energy bulb.

Perhaps now I would not have so long to wait for the Priest-Kings of Gor.

Vika had said that when they wished me, they would come for me.

I chuckled.

Perhaps now they would be encouraged to hasten their appointment.

I gently placed Vika on the great stone couch.

Chapter Nine: THE PRIEST-KING

I would allow Vika to share the great stone couch, its sleeping pelts, and silken sheets.

This was unusual, however, for normally the Gorean slave girl sleeps at the foot of her master's couch, often on a straw mat with only a thin, cottonlike blanket, woven from the soft fibres of the Rep Plant, to protect her from the cold.

If she has not pleased her master of late, she may be, of course, as a disciplinary measure, simply chained nude to the slave ring at in the bottom of the couch, sans both blanket and mat. The stones of the floor are hard and the Gorean nights are cold and it is a rare girl who, when unchained in the morning, does not seek more dutifully to serve her master.

This harsh treatment, incidentally, when she is thought to deserve it, may even be inflicted on a Free Companion, in spite of the fact that she is free and usually much loved. According to the Gorean way of looking at things a taste of the slave ring is thought to be occasionally beneficial to all women, even the exalted Free Companions.

Thus when she has been irritable or otherwise troublesome even a Free Companion may find herself at the foot of the couch looking forward to a pleasant night on the stones, stripped, with neither mat nor blanket, chained to a slave ring precisely as though she were a lowly slave girl.

It is the Gorean way of reminding her, should she need to be reminded, that she, too, is a woman, and thus to be dominated, to be subject to men. Should she be tempted to forget this basic fact of Gorean life the slave ring set in the bottom of each Gorean couch is there to refresh her memory. Gor is a man's world.

And yet on this world I have seen great numbers of women who were both beautiful and splendid.

The Gorean woman, for reasons that are not altogether clear to me, considering the culture, rejoices in being a woman. She is often an exciting, magnificent, glorious creature, outspoken, talkative, vital, active, spirited. On the whole I find her more joyful than many of her earth-inhabiting sisters who, theoretically at least, enjoy a more lofty status, although it is surely true that on my old world I have met several women with something of the Gorean zest for acknowledging the radiant truth of their sex, the gifts of joy, grace and beauty, tenderness, and fathoms of love that we poor men, I suspect, may sometimes and tragically fail to understand, to comprehend.

Yet with all due respect and regard for the most astounding and marvellous sex, I suspect that, perhaps partly because of my Gorean training, it is true that a touch of the slave ring is occasionally beneficial.

Of custom, a slave girl may not even ascend the couch to serve her master's pleasure. The point of this restriction, I suppose, is to draw a clearer distinction between her status and that of a

Free Companion. At any rate the dignities of the couch are, by custom, reserved for the Free Companion.

When a master wishes to make use of a slave girl he tells her to light the lamp of love which she obediently does, placing it in the window of his chamber that they may not be disturbed. Then with his own hand he throws upon the stone floor of his chamber luxurious love furs, perhaps from the larl itself, and commands her to them.

I had placed Vika gently on the great stone couch.

I kissed her gently on the forehead.

Her eyes opened.

'Did I leave the chamber?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said.

She regarded me for a long time. 'How can I conquer you?' she asked. 'I love you, Tarl Cabot.'

'You are only grateful,' I said.

'No,' she said, 'I love you.'

'You must not,' I said.

'I do,' she said.

I wondered how I should speak to her, for I must disabuse her of the illusion that there could be love between us. In the house of Priest-Kings there could be no love, nor could she know her own mind in these matters, and there was always Talena, whose image would never be eradicated from my heart.

'But you are a woman of Treve,' I said, smiling.

'You thought I was a Passion Slave,' she chided.

I shrugged.

She looked away from me, toward the wall. 'You were right in a way, Tarl Cabot.'

'How is that?' I asked.

She looked at me directly. 'My mother,' she said bitterly, '- was a Passion Slave - bred in the pens of Ar.'

'She must have been very beautiful,' I said.

Vika looked at me strangely. 'Yes,' she said, 'I suppose she was.'

'Do you not remember her?' I asked.

'No,' she said, 'for she died when I was very young.'

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'It doesn't matter,' said Vika, 'for she was only an animal bred in the pens of Ar.'

'Do you despise her so?' I asked.

'She was a bred slave,' said Vika.

I said nothing.

'But my father,' said Vika, 'whose slave she was, and who was of the Caste of Physicians of Treve,

loved her very much and asked her to be his Free Companion.' Vika laughed softly. 'For three years she refused him,' she said.

'Why?' I asked.

'Because she loved him,' said Vika, 'and did not wish him to take for his Free Companion only a lowly Passion Slave.'

'She was a very deep and noble woman,' I said.

Vika made a gesture of disgust. 'She was a fool,' she said. 'How often would a bred slave have a chance of freedom?'

'Seldom indeed,' I admitted.

'But in the end,' said Vika, 'fearing he would slay himself she consented to become his Free Companion.' Vikar regarded me closely. Her eyes met mine very directly. 'I was born free,' she said. 'You must understand that. I am not a bred slave.'

'I understand,' I said. 'Perhaps,' I suggested, 'your mother was not only beautiful, but proud and brave and fine.'

'How could that be?' laughed Vika scornfully. 'I have told you she was only a bred slave, an animal from the pens of Ar.'

'But you never knew her,' I said.

'I know what she was,' said Vika.

'What of your father?' I asked.

'In a way,' she said, 'he is dead too.'

'What do you mean, in a way?' I asked.

'Nothing,' she said.

I looked about the room, at the chests against the wall dim in the reduced light of the energy bulbs, at the walls, at the shattered device in the ceiling, at the broken sensors, at the great, empty portal that led into the passageway beyond.

'He must have loved you very much, after your mother died,' I said.

'Yes,' said Vika, 'I suppose so - but he was a fool.'

'Why do you say that?' I asked.

'He followed me into the Sardar, to try and save me,' she said.

'He must have been a very brave man,' I said.

She rolled away from me and stared at the wall. After a time she spoke, her words cruel with contempt.

'He was a pompous little fool,' she said, 'and afraid even of the cry of a larl.'

She sniffed.

Suddenly she rolled back to face me. 'How,' she asked, 'could my mother have loved him? He was only a fat, pompous little fool.'

'Perhaps he was kind to her,' I suggested, '- when others were not.'

'Why would anyone be kind to a Passion Slave?' asked Vika.

I shrugged.

'For the Passion Slave,' she said, 'it is the belled ankle, perfume, the whip and the furs of love.'

'Perhaps he was kind to her,' I suggested again, '- when others were not.'

'I don't understand,' said Vika.

'Perhaps,' I said, 'he cared for her and spoke to her and was gentle - and loved her.'

'Perhaps,' said Vika. 'But would that be enough?'

'Perhaps,' I said.

'I wonder,' said Vika. 'I have often wondered about that.'

'What became of him,' I asked, 'when he entered the Sardar?'

Vika would not speak.

'Do you know?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'Then what?' I asked.

She shook her head bitterly. 'Do not ask me,' she said.

I would not press her further on the matter.

'How is it,' I asked, 'that he allowed you to come to the Sardar?'

'He did not,' said Vika. 'He tried to prevent me but I sought out the Initiates of Treve, proposing myself as an offering to the Priest-Kings. I did not, of course, tell them my true reason for desiring to come to the Sardar.' She paused. 'I wonder if they knew,' she mused.

'It is not improbable,' I said.

'My father would not hear of it, of course,' she said. She laughed. 'He locked me in my chambers, but the High Initiate of the City came with warriors and they broke into our compartments and beat my father until he could not move and I went gladly with them.' She laughed again. 'Oh how pleased I was when they beat him and he cried out - for he was not a true man and even though of the Caste of Physicians could not stand pain. He could not even bear to hear the cry of a larl.'

I knew that Gorean caste lines, though largely following birth, were not inflexible, and that a man who did not care for his caste might be allowed to change caste, if approved by the High Council of his city, an approval usually contingent on his qualifications for the work of another caste and the willingness of the members of the new caste to accept him as a Caste Brother.

'Perhaps,' I suggested, 'it was because he could not stand pain that he remained a member of the Caste of Physicians.'

'Perhaps,' said Vika. 'He always wanted to stop suffering, even that of an animal or slave.'

I smiled.

'You see,' she said, 'he was weak.'

'I see,' I said.

Vika lay back in the silks and furs. 'You are the first of the men in this chamber,' she said, 'who have spoken to me of these things.'

I did not reply.

'I love you, Tarl Cabot,' she said.

'I think not,' I said gently.

'I do!' she insisted.

'Someday,' I said, 'you will love - but I do not think it will be a warrior of Ko-ro-ba.'

'Do you think I cannot love?' she challenged.

'I think someday you will love,' I said, 'and I think you will love greatly.'

'Can you love?' she challenged. 'I don't know,' I said. I smiled. 'Once - long ago - I thought I loved.'

'Who was she?' asked Vika, not too pleasantly.

'A slender, dark-haired girl,' I said, 'whose name was Talena.'

'Was she beautiful?' asked Vika.

'Yes,' I said.

'As beautiful as I?' asked Vika.

'You are both very beautiful,' I said.

'Was she a slave?' asked Vika.

'No,' I said, '- she was the daughter of a Ubar.'

Rage transfigured Vika's features and she leaped from the couch and strode to the side of the room, her fingers angrily inside her collar, as though they might pull it from her throat. 'I see!' she said. 'And I - Vika - am only a slave girl!'

'Do not be angry,' I said.

'Where is she?' demanded Vika.

'I don't know,' I admitted.

'How long has it been since you have seen her?' demanded Vika.

'It has been more than seven years,' I said.

Vika laughed cruelly. 'Then,' she gloated, 'she is in the Cities of Dust.'

'Perhaps,' I admitted.

'I - Vika -' she said, 'am here.'

'I know,' I said.

I turned away.

I heard her voice over my shoulder. 'I will make you forget her,' she said.

Her voice had borne the cruel, icy, confident, passionate menace of a woman from Treve, accustomed to have what she wanted, who would not be denied.

I turned to face Vika once more, and I no longer saw the girl to whom I had been speaking but a woman of High Caste, from the bandit kingdom of Treve, insolent and imperious, though collared.

Casually Vika reached to the clasp on the left shoulder of her garment and loosened it, and the

garment fell to her ankles.

She was branded.

'You though I was a Passion Slave,' she said.

I regarded the woman who stood before me, the sullen eyes, the pouting lips, the collar, the brand.

'Am I not beautiful enough,' she asked, 'to be the daughter of a Ubar?'

'Yes,' I said, 'you are that beautiful.'

She looked at me mockingly. 'Do you know what a Passion Slave is?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'It is a female of the human kind,' she said, 'but bred like a beast for its beauty and its passion.'

'I know,' I said.

'It is an animal,' she said, 'bred for the pleasure of men, bred for the pleasure of a master.'

I said nothing.

'In my veins,' she said, 'flows the blood of such an animal. In my veins flows the blood of a Passion Slave.' She laughed. 'And you, Tarl Cabot, she said, 'are its master. You, Tarl Cabot, are my master.'

'No,' I said.

Amused, tauntingly, she approached me. 'I will serve you as a Passion Slave,' she said.

'No,' I said.

'Yes,' she said, 'for you I will be an obedient Passion Slave.' She lifted her lips to mine.

My hands on her arms held her from me.

'Taste me,' she said.

'No,' I said.

She laughed. 'You cannot reject me,' she said.

'Why not?' I asked.

'I shall not allow you to do so,' she said. 'You see, Tarl Cabot, I have decided that you shall be my slave.'

I thrust her from me.

'Very well,' she cried, her eyes flashing. 'Very well, Cabot,' she said, 'then I shall conquer you!'

And she seized my head in her hands and pressed her lips to mine.

In that moment I sensed once more that slightly acrid scent which I had experienced in the corridors beyond the chamber, and I pressed my mouth hard into Vika's until her lips were cut by my teeth and I had pressed her back until only my arm kept her from falling to the stones of the floor, and I heard her cry of surprise and pain, and then I hurled her angrily from me to the straw slave mat which lay at the foot of the stone couch.

Now it seemed to me that I understood but they had come too soon! She had not had a chance to do

her work. It might go hard with her but I was not concerned.

Still I did not turn to that giant portal.

The scent was now strong.

Vika crouched terrified on the slave mat at the foot of the couch, in the very shadow of the slave ring.

'What is the matter?' she asked. 'What is wrong?'

'So you were to conquer me for them, were you?' I demanded.

'I don't understand,' she stammered.

'You are a poor tool for Priest-Kings,' I said.

'No,' she said, 'no!'

'How many men have you conquered for Priest-Kings?' I asked. I seized her by the hair and twisted her head to face me. 'How many?' I cried.

'Please!' she wept.

I found myself tempted to break her head against the foot of the stone couch, for she was worthless, treacherous, seductive, cruel, vicious, worthy only of the collar, irons and the whip!

She shook her head numbly as though denying charges I had not yet voiced.

'You don't understand,' she said. 'I love you!'

With loathing I cast her from me.

Yet still did I not turn to face that portal.

Vika lay at my feet, a streak of blood at the corner of those lips that bore still the marks of my fierce kiss. She looked up at me, tears welling in her eyes.

'Please,' she said.

The scent was strong. I knew that it was near. How was it that the girl was not aware of it? How was it that she did not know? Was it not part of her plan?

'Please,' she said, looking up at me, lifting her hand to me. Her face was tear-stained; her voice was a broken sob. 'I love you,' she said.

'Silence, Slave Girl,' I said.

She lowered her head to the stones and wept.

I knew now that it was here.

The scent was now overpowering, unmistakable.

I watched Vika and suddenly she seemed too to know and her head lifted and her eyes widened with horror and she crept to her knees, her hands before her face as though to shield herself and she shuddered and suddenly uttered a wild, long, terrible scream of abject fear.

I drew my sword and turned.

It stood framed in the doorway.

In its way it was very beautiful, golden and tall, looming over me, framed in that massive portal. It was not more than a yard wide but its head nearly touched the top of the portal and so I would judge that, standing as it did, it must have been nearly eighteen feet high.

It had six legs and a great head like a globe of gold with eyes like vast luminous disks. Its two forelegs, poised and alert, were lifted delicately in front of its body. Its jaws opened and closed once. They moved laterally.

From its head there extended two fragile, jointed appendages, long and covered with short quivering strands of golden hair. These two appendages, like eyes, swept the room once and then seemed to focus on me.

They curved toward me like delicate golden pincers and each of the countless golden strands on those appendages straightened and pointed toward me like a quivering golden needle.

I could not conjecture the nature of the creature's experience but I knew that I stood within the centre of its sensory field.

About its neck there hung a small circular device, a translator of some sort, similar to but more compact than those I had hitherto seen.

I sensed a new set of odours, secreted by what stood before me.

Almost simultaneously a mechanically reproduced voice began to emanate from the translator.

It spoke in Gorean.

I knew what it would say.

'Lo Sardar,' it said. 'I am a Priest-King.'

'I am Tarl Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' I said.

A moment after I spoke I sensed another set of odours, which emanated perhaps from the device which hung about the neck of what stood before me.

The two sensory appendages of the creature seemed to register this information.

A new scent came to my nostrils.

'Follow me,' said the mechanically reproduced voice, and the creature turned from the portal.

I went to the portal.

It was stalking in long, delicate steps down the passageway.

I looked once more at Vika, who lifted her hand to me. 'Don't go,' she said.

I turned scornfully from her and followed the creature.

Behind me I heard her weep.

Let her weep, I said to myself, for she has failed her masters the Priest-Kings, and undoubtedly her punishment will not be light.

Had I the time, had I not more urgent business, I might have punished her myself, teaching her without mercy what could be the meaning of her collar, using her as objectively and ruthlessly as she deserved, brutally administering the discipline of a Gorean master to a treacherous slave girl.

We would see then who would conquer.

I shook these thoughts from my head and continued down the passageway.

I must forget the treacherous, vicious wench. There were more important matters to attend to. The slave girl was nothing.

I hated Vika.

I followed a Priest-King.

Chapter Ten: MISK THE PRIEST-KING

The Priest-Kings have little or no scent of their own which is detectable by the human nostrils, though one gathers there is a nest odour by which they may identify one another, and that the variations in this nest odour permit identifications of individuals.

What in the passageways I had taken to be the scent of Priest-Kings had actually been the residue of odour-signals which Priest-Kings, like certain social insects of our world, use in communicating with one another.

The slightly acrid odour I had noticed tends to be a common property of all such signals, much as there is a common property to the sound of a human voice, whether it be that of an Englishman, a Bushman, a Chinese or a Gorean, which sets it apart from, say, the growling of animals, the hiss of snakes, the cry of birds.

The Priest-Kings have eyes, which are compound and many-faceted, but they do not much rely on these organs. They are, for them, something like our ears and nose, used as secondary sensors to be relied upon when the most pertinent information in the environment is not relayed by vision, or, in the case of the Priest-Kings, by scent. Accordingly the two golden-haired, jointed appendages protruding from their globelike heads, above the rounded, disklike eyes, are their primary sensory organs. I gather that these appendages are sensitive not only to odours but, due to modification of some of the sensory hairs, may also transform sound vibrations into something meaningful in their experience. Thus, if one wishes, one may speak of them not only as smelling but hearing through these appendages. Apparently hearing is not of great importance, however, to them, considering the small number of hairs modified for this purpose. Oddly enough few of the Priest-Kings whom I questioned on this matter seemed to draw the distinction clearly between hearing and smelling. I find this incredible, but I have no reason to believe they deceived me. They recognise that we have different sensory arrangements than they and I suspect that they are as unclear as to the nature of our experience as we are of theirs. In fact, though I speak of hearing and smelling, I am not sure that these expressions are altogether meaningful when applied to Priest-Kings. I speak of them smelling and hearing through the sensory appendages, but what the quality of their experience may be I am uncertain. For example, does a Priest-King have the same qualitative experience that I do when we are confronted by the same scent? I am inclined to doubt it, for their music, which consists of rhapsodies of odours produced by instruments constructed for this purpose, and often played by Priest-Kings, some of whom I am told are far more skillful than others, is intolerable to my ear, or I should say, nose.

Communication by odour-signals can in certain circumstances be extremely efficient, though it can be disadvantageous in others. For example, an odour can carry, to the sensory appendages of a Priest-King, much further than the shout or cry of a man to another man. Moreover, if not too much time is allowed to elapse, a Priest-King may leave a message in his chamber or in a corridor for another Priest-King, and the other may arrive later and interpret it. A disadvantage of this mode of communication, of course, is that the message may be understood by strangers or others for whom it is not intended. One must be careful of what one says in the tunnels of Priest-Kings for one's words may linger after one, until they sufficiently dissipate to be little more than a meaningless blur of scent.

For longer periods of time there are various devices for recording a message, without relying on complex mechanical devices. The simplest and one of the most fascinating is a chemically treated rope of clothlike material which the Priest-King, beginning at an end bearing a certain scent, saturates with the odours of his message. This coiled message-rope then retains the odours indefinitely and when another Priest-King wishes to read the message he unrolls it slowly scanning it serially with the jointed sensory appendages.

I am told that the phonemes of the language of Priest-Kings or, better, what in their language would correspond to phonemes in ours, since their 'phonemes' have to do with scent and not sound, number seventy-three. Their number is, of course, potentially infinite, as would be the number of possible phonemes in English, but just as we take a subset of sounds to be English sounds and form our utterances from them, so they take a subset of odours as similarly basic to their speech. The

number of English phonemes, incidentally, is in the neighbourhood of fifty.

The morphemes of the language of Priest-Kings, those smallest intelligible information bits, in particular roots and affixes, are, of course, like the morphemes of English, extremely numerous. The normal morpheme, in their language as in ours, consists of a sequence of phonemes. For example, in English 'bit' is one morpheme but three phonemes, as will appear clear if given some reflection. Similarly in the language of the Priest-Kings, the seventy-three 'phonemes' or basic scents are used to form the meaning units of the language, and a single morpheme of Priest-Kings may consist of a complex set of odours.

I do not know whether there are more morphemes in the language of Priest-Kings or in English, but both are apparently rich languages, and, of course, the strict morpheme count is not necessarily a reliable index to the complexity of the lexicon, because of combinations of morphemes wo form new words. German, for example, tends to rely somewhat more on morpheme combination than does English or French. I was told, incidentally, that the language of the Priest-Kings does possess more morphemes than English but I do not know if the report is truthful or not, for Priest-Kings tend to be somewhat touchy on the matter of any comparisons, particularly those to their disadvantage or putative disadvantage, with organisms of what they regard as the lower orders. On the other hand it may well be the case that, as a matter of fact, the morpheme set of the language of Priest-Kings is indeed larger than that of English. I simply do not know. The translator tapes, incidentally, are approximately the same size, but this is no help, since the tapes represent pairings of approximate equivelants, and there are several English morphemes not translatable into the language of Priest-Kings, and, as I learned, morphemes in their language for which no English equivelants exist. One English expression for which no natural 'word' in their language exists is, oddly enough, 'friendship', and certain of its cognates. There is an expression in their language which translates into English as 'Nest Trust', however, and seems to play something of the same role in their thinking. The notion of friendship, it seems to me, has to do with a reliance and affection between two or more individuals; the notion of Nest Trust, as clearly as I can understand it, is more of a communal notion, a sense of relying on the practices and traditions of an institution, accepting them and living in terms of them.

I followed the Priest-King for a long time through the passages.

For all its size it moved with a delicate, predatory grace. It was perhaps very light for its bulk, or very strong, perhaps both. It moved with a certain deliberate, stalking movement; its tread was regal and yet it seemed almost dainty, almost fastidious; it was almost as if the creature did not care to soil itself by contact with the floor of the passage.

It walked on four extremely long, slender, four-jointed stalks that were its supporting legs, and carried its far more muscular, four-jointed grasping legs, or appendages, extremely high, almost level with its jaw, and in front of its body. Each of these grasping appendages terminated in four much smaller, delicate hooklike prehensile appendages, the tips of which normally touched one another. I would learn later that in the ball at the end of its forelegs from which the smaller prehensile appendages extended, there was a curved, bladed, hornlike structure that could spring forward; this happens spontaneously when the leg's tip is inverted, a motion which at once exposes the hornlike blade and withdraws the four prehensile appendages into the protected area beneath it.

The Priest-King halted before what appeared to be a blind wall.

He lifted one foreleg high over his head and touched something high in the wall which I could not see.

A panel slid back and the Priest-King stepped into what seemed to be a closed room.

I followed him, and the panel closed.

The floor seemed to drop beneath me and my hand grasped my sword.

The Priest-King looked down at me and the antennae quivered as though in curiosity.

I resheathed my sword.

I was in an elevator.

After perhaps four or five minutes the elevator stopped and the Priest-King and I emerged.

The Priest-King rested back on the two posterior supporting appendages and with a small cleaning hook behind the third joint of one of his forelegs began to comb his antennae.

'These are the tunnels of Priest-Kings,' it said.

I looked about and found myself on a high, railed platform, overlooking a vast circular artificial canyon, lined with bridges and terraces. In the depths of this canyon and on the terraces that mounted its sides were innumerable structures, largely geometrical solids - cones, cylinders, lofty cubes, domes, spheres and such - of various sizes, colours and illuminations, many of which were windowed and possessed of numerous floors, some of which even towered to the level of the platform where I stood, some of which soared even higher into the lofty reaches of the vast dome that arched over the canyon like a stone sky.

I stood on the platform, my hands clenched on the railing, staggered by what I saw.

The light of energy bulbs set in the walls and in the dome like stars shed a brilliant light on the entire canyon.

'This,' said the Priest-King, still grooming the golden hairs of his antennae, 'is the vestibule of our dominion.'

From my position on the platform I could see numerous tunnels at many levels leading out of the canyon, perhaps to other such monstrous cavities, filled with more structures.

I wondered what would be the function of the structures, probably barracks, factories, storehouses.

'Notice the energy bulbs,' said the Priest-King. 'They are for the benefit of certain species such as yourself. Priest-Kings do not need them.'

'Then there are creatures other than Priest-Kings who live here,' I said.

'Of course,' it replied.

At that moment to my horror a large, perhaps eight feet long and a yard high, multilegged, segmented arthropod scuttled near, its eyes weaving on stalks.

'It's harmless,' said the Priest-King.

The arthropod stopped and the eyes leaned toward us and then its pincers clicked twice.

I reached for my sword.

Without turning it scuttled backwards away, its body plates rustling like plastic armour.

'See what you have done,' said the Priest-King. 'You have frightened it.'

My hand left the sword hilt and I wiped the sweat from my palm on my tunic.

'They are timid creatures,' said the Priest-King, 'and I am afraid they have never been able to accustom themselves to the sight of your kind.'

The Priest-King's antennae shuddered a bit as they regarded me.

'Your kind is terribly ugly,' it said. I laughed, not so much because I supposed what it said was absurd, but because I supposed that, from the viewpoint of a Priest-King, what it said might well be true.

'It is interesting,' said the Priest-King. 'What you have just said does not translate.'

'It was a laugh,' I said.

'What is a laugh?' asked the Priest-King.

'It is something men sometimes do when they are amused,' I said.

The creature seemed puzzled.

I wondered to myself. Perhaps men did not much laugh in the tunnels of the Priest-Kings and it was not accustomed to this human practice. Or perhaps a Priest-King simply could not understand the notion of amusement, it being perhaps genetically removed from his comprehension. Yet I said to myself the Priest-Kings are intelligent and I found it difficult to believe there could exist an intelligent race without humour.

'I think I understand,' said the Priest-King. 'It is like shaking and curling your antennae?'

'Perhaps,' I said, now more puzzled than the Priest-King.

'How stupid I am,' said the Priest-King.

And then to my amazement the creature, resting back on its posterior appendages, began to shake, beginning at its abdomen and continuing upward through its trunk to its thorax and head and at last its antennae began to tremble and, curling, they wrapped about one another.

Then the Priest-King ceased to rock and its antennae uncurled, almost reluctantly I thought, and it once again rested quietly back on its posterior appendages and regarded me.

Once again it addressed itself to the patient, meticulous combing of its antennae hairs.

Somehow I imagined it was thinking.

Suddenly it stopped grooming its antennae and the antennae looked down at me.

'Thank you,' it said, 'for not attacking me in the elevator.'

I was dumbfounded.

'You're welcome,' I said.

'I did not think anaesthesia would be necessary,' it said.

'It would have been foolish to attack you,' I said.

'Irrational, yes,' agreed the Priest-King, 'but the lower orders are often irrational.'

'Now,' it said, 'I may still look forward someday to the Pleasures of the Golden Beetle.'

I said nothing.

'Sarm thought the anaesthesia would be necessary,' it said.

'Is Sarm a Priest-King?' I asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Then a Priest-King may be mistaken,' I said. This seemed to me significant, far more significant than the mere fact that a Priest-King might not understand a human laugh.

'Of course,' said the creature.

'Could I have slain you?' I asked.

'Possibly,' said the creature.

I looked over the rail at the marvellous complexity which confronted me.

'But it would not have mattered,' said the Priest-King.

'No?' I asked.

'No,' it said. 'Only the Nest matters.'

My eyes still did not leave the dominion which lay below me. Its diameter might have been ten pasangs in width.

'This is the Nest?' I asked.

'It is the beginning of the Nest,' said the Priest-King.

'What is your name?' I asked.

'Misk,' it said.

Chapter Eleven: SARM THE PRIEST-KING

I turned from the railing to observe the great ramp which for pasangs in a great spiral approached the platform on which I stood.

Another Priest-King, mounted on a low, oval disk which seemed to slide up the ramp, was approaching.

The new Priest-King looked a great deal like Misk, save that he was larger. I wondered if men of my species would have difficulty telling Priest-Kings apart. I would later learn to do so easily but at first I was often confused. The Priest-Kings themselves distinguish one another by scent but I, of course, would do so by eye.

The oval disk glided to within some forty feet of us, and the golden creature which had ridden it stepped delicately to the ramp.

It approached me, its antennae scrutinising me carefully. Then it backed away perhaps some twenty feet.

It seemed to me much like Misk except in size.

Like Misk it wore no clothing and carried no weapons, and its only accoutrement was a translator which dangled from its neck.

I would learn later that in scent it wore its rank, caste and station as clearly on its body as an officer in one of the armies of Earth might wear his distinguishing braid and metal bars.

'Why has it not been anaesthetised?' asked the new creature, training its antennae on Misk.

'I did not think it would be necessary,' said Misk.

'It was my recommendation that it be anaesthetised,' said the newcomer.

'I know,' said Misk.

'This will be recorded,' said the newcomer.

Misk seemed to shrug. His head turned, his laterally opening jaws opened and closed slowly, his shoulders rustled and the two antennae twitched once as though in irritation, and then idly they began to examine the roof of the dome.

'The Nest was not jeopardised,' came from Misk's translator.

The newcomer's antennae were now trembling, perhaps with anger.

It turned a knob on its own translator and in a moment the air was filled with the sharp odours of what I take might have been a reprimand. I heard nothing for the creature had snapped off his

translator.

When Misk replied he too turned off his translator.

I observed their antennae and the general posturing and carriage of their long, graceful bodies.

They stalked about one another and some of their motions were almost whiplike. Upon occasion, undoubtedly as a sign of irritation, the tips of the forelegs were inverted, and I caught my first glimpse of the bladed, hornlike structures therein concealed.

I would learn to interpret the emotions and states of Priest-Kings by such signs. Many of these signs would be far less obvious than the ones now displayed in the throes of anger. Impatience, for example, is often indicated by a trembling in the tactile hair on the supporting appendages, as though the creature could not wait to be off; a wandering of attention can be shown by the unconscious movement of the cleaning hooks from behind the third joints of the forelegs, suggesting perhaps the creature is thinking of grooming, an occupation in which Priest-Kings, to my mind, spend an inordinate amount of time; I might note, however, in deference to them, that they consider humans a particularly unclean animal and in the tunnels normally confine them for sanitary purposes to carefully restricted areas; the subtlety of these signs might well be illuminated if the indications for a wandering of attention, mentioned above, are contrasted with the superficially similar signs which give evidence that a Priest-King is well or favourably disposed toward another Priest-King, or other creature of any type. In this case there is again the unconscious movement of the cleaning hooks but there is in addition an incipient, but restrained, extension of the forelegs in the direction of the object toward which the Priest-King is well disposed; this suggests to me that the Priest-King is willing to put its cleaning hooks at the disposal of the other, that he is willing to groom it. This may become more comprehensible when it is mentioned that Priest-Kings, with their cleaning hooks, their jaws and their tongues, often groom one another as well as themselves. Hunger, incidentally, is indicated by an acidic exudate which forms at the edges of the jaws giving them a certain moist appearance; thirst, interestingly enough, is indicated by a certain stiffness in the appendages, evident in their movements, and by a certain brownish tarnish that seems to infect the gold of the thorax and abdomen. The most sensitive indicators of mood and attention, of course, as you would probably gather, are the motions and tensility of the antennae.

The translator, incidentally, supposing it to be turned on, would provide only the translation of what was said, and the words, unless the volume control was manipulated during the message, would always occur at the same sound level. An analogue to listening to a translator would be to imagine words as pictures which, in the same type face and size, flash serially on a screen. There would be no clue in the individual pictures, per se, of the rhythm of the language or the mood of the speaker. The translator can tell you that the speaker is angry but it cannot show you that he is angry.

After a minute or two the Priest-Kings stopped circling one another and turned to face me. As one creature, they turned on their translators.

'You are Tarl Cabot of the City of Ko-ro-ba,' said the larger.

'Yes,' I said.

'I am Sarm,' it said, 'beloved of the Mother and First Born.'

'Are you the leader of the Priest-Kings?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Sarm.

'No,' said Misk.

Sarm's antennae darted in Misk's direction.

'Greatest in the Nest is the Mother,' said Misk.

Sarm's antennae relaxed. 'True,' said Sarm.

'I have much to speak of with Priest-Kings,' I said. 'If the one whom you call the Mother is chief among you, I wish to see her.'

Sarm rested back on his posterior appendages. His antennae touched one another in a slightly curling movement. 'None may see the Mother save her caste attendants and the High Priest-Kings,' said Sarm, 'the First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Born.'

'Except on the three great holidays,' said Misk.

Sarm's antennae twitched angrily.

'What are the three great holidays?' I asked.

'The Nest Feast Cycle,' said Misk, 'Tola, Tolam and Tolama.'

'What are these feasts?' I asked.

'They are the Anniversary of the Nuptial Flight,' said Misk, 'the Feast of the Deposition of the First Egg and the Celebration of the Hatching of the First Egg.'

'Are these holidays near?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Misk.

'But,' said Sarm, 'even on such feasts none of the lower orders may view the Mother - only Priest-Kings.'

'True,' said Misk.

Anger suffused my countenance. Sarm seemed not to notice this change but Misk's antennae perked up immediately. Perhaps it had had experience with human anger.

'Do not think badly of us, Tarl Cabot,' said Misk, 'for on the holidays those of the lower orders who labour for us - be it even in the pastures or fungus trays - are given surcease from their labours.'

'The Priest-Kings are generous,' I said.

'Do the men below the mountains do as much for their animals?' asked Misk.

'No,' I said. 'But men are not animals.'

'Are men Priest-Kings?' asked Sarm.

'No,' I said.

'Then they are animals,' said Sarm.

I drew my sword and faced Sarm. The motion was extremely rapid and must have startled him.

At any rate Sarm leaped backward on his jointed, stalklike legs with almost incredible speed.

He now stood almost forty feet from me.

'If I cannot speak to the one you call the Mother,' I said, 'perhaps I can speak to you.'

I took a step towards Sarm.

Sarm pranced angrily backward, his antennae twitching with agitation.

We faced one another.

I noticed the tips of his forelegs were inverted, unsheathing the two curved, hornlike blades which reposed there.

We watched one another carefully.

From behind me I heard the mechanical voice of Misk's translator: 'But she is the Mother,' it said, 'and we of the Nest are all her children.'

I smiled.

Sarm saw that I did not intend to advance further and his agitation decreased, although his general attitude of awareness was not relaxed.

It was at this time that I first saw how Priest-Kings breathed, probably because Sarm's respiratory movements were now more pronounced than they had been hitherto. Muscular contractions in the abdomen take place with the result that air is sucked into the system through four small holes on each side of the abdomen, the same holes serving also as exhalation vents. Usually the breathing cycle, unless one is quite close and listens carefully, cannot be heard, but in the present case I could hear quite clearly from a distance of several feet the quick intake of air through the eight tiny, tubular mouths in Sarm's abdomen, and its almost immediate expellation through the same apertures.

Now the muscular contractions in Sarm's abdomen became almost unnoticeable and I could no longer hear the evidence of his respiratory cycle. The tips of his forelegs were no longer inverted, with the result that the bladed structures had disappeared and the small, four-jointed, hooklike prehensile appendages were again fully visible. Their tips delicately touched one another. Sarm's antennae were calm.

He regarded me.

He did not move.

I would never find myself fully able to adjust to the incredible stillness with which a Priest-King can stand.

He reminded me vaguely of the blade of a golden knife.

Suddenly Sarm's antennae pointed at Misk. 'You should have anaesthetised it,' he said.

'Perhaps,' said Misk.

For some reason this hurt me. I felt that I had betrayed Misk's trust in me, that I had behaved as a not fully rational creature, that I had behaved as Sarm had expected me to.

'I'm sorry,' I said to Sarm, resheathing my sword.

'You see,' said Misk.

'It's dangerous,' said Sarm.

I laughed.

'What is that?' asked Sarm, lifting his antennae.

'It is shaking and curling its antennae,' said Misk.

On the receipt of this information Sarm did not shake nor did his antennae curl; rather the bladelike structures snapped out and back, and his antennae twitched in irritation. I gathered one did not shake and curl one's antennae at Priest-Kings.

'Mount the disk, Tarl Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' said Misk, gesturing with his foreleg to the flat oval disk which had brought Sarm to our level.

I hesitated.

'He is afraid,' said Sarm.

'He has much to fear,' said Misk.

'I am not afraid,' I said.

'Then mount the disk,' said Misk.

I did so, and the two Priest-Kings stepped delicately onto the disk to join me, in such a way that one stood on each side and slightly behind me. Scarcely had they placed their weight on the disk when it began to smoothly and silently accelerate down the long ramp which led toward the bottom of the canyon.

The disk moved with great swiftness and it was with some difficulty that I managed to stand on my feet, leaning into the blast of air which rushed past me. To my annoyance both of the Priest-Kings seemed immobile, leaning alertly forward into the wind, their forelegs lifted high, their antennae lying flat, streaming backwards.

Chapter Twelve: THE TWO MULS

On a marble circle of some half pasang in width, in the bottom of that vast, brilliantly lit, many-coloured artificial canyon the oval disk diminished its speed and drew to a stop.

I found myself in some sort of plaza, surrounded by the fantastic architecture of the Nest of Priest-Kings. The plaza was crowded, not only with Priest-Kings but even more with various creatures of other forms and natures. Among them I saw men and women, barefoot with shaven heads, clad in short purple tunics that reflected the various lights of the plaza as though they might have been formed of some reflective plastic.

I stepped aside as a flat, sluglike creature, clinging with several legs to a small transportation disk, swept by.

'We must hurry,' said Sarm.

'I see human beings here,' I said to Misk. 'Are they slaves?'

'Yes,' said Misk.

'They wear no collars,' I pointed out.

'It is not necessary to mark a distinction between slave and free within the Nest,' said Misk, 'for in the Nest all humans are slaves.'

'Why are they shaven and clad as they are?' I asked.

'It is more sanitary,' said Misk.

'Let us leave the plaza,' said Sarm.

I would learn later that his agitation was principally due to his fear of contracting filth in this public place. Humans walked here.

'Why do the slaves wear purple?' I asked Misk. 'That is the colour of the robes of a Ubar.'

'Because it is a great honour to be the slave of Priest-Kings,' said Misk.

'Is it your intention,' I asked, 'that I should be so shaved and clad?'

My hand was on my sword hilt.

'Perhaps not,' said Sarm. 'It may be that you are to be destroyed immediately. I must check the scent-tapes.'

'He is not to be destroyed immediately,' said Misk, 'nor is he to be shaved and clad as a slave.'

'Why not?' asked Sarm.

'It is the wish of the Mother,' said Misk.

'What has she to do with it?' asked Sarm.

'Much,' said Misk.

Sarm seemed puzzled. He stopped. His antennae twitched nervously. 'Was he brought to the tunnels for some purpose?'

'I came of my own accord,' I avowed.

'Don't be foolish,' said Misk to me.

'For what purpose was he brought to the tunnels?' asked Sarm.

'The purpose is known to the Mother,' said Misk.

'I am the First Born,' said Sarm.

'She is the Mother,' said Misk.

'Very well,' said Sarm, and turned away. I sensed he was not much pleased.

At that moment a human girl walked near and wide-eyed circled us, looking at me. Although her head was shaved she was pretty and the brief plastic sheath she wore did not conceal her charms.

A shudder of repulsion seemed to course through Sarm.

'Hurry,' he said, and we followed him as he scurried from the plaza.

'Your sword,' said Misk, extending one foreleg down to me.

'Never,' I said, backing away.

'Please,' said Misk.

For some reason I unbuckled the sword belt and reluctantly handed the weapon to Misk.

Sarm, who stood in the long room on an oval dais, seemed satisfied with this transaction. He turned to the walls behind him which were covered with thousands of tiny illuminated knobs. He pulled certain of these out from the wall and they seemed to be attached to slender cords which he passed between his antennae. He spent perhaps an Ahn in this activity and then, exasperated, turned to face me.

I had been pacing back and forth in the long room, nervous without the feel of the sword steel at my thigh.

Misk during all this time had not moved but had remained standing in that incredible fixity perhaps unique to Priest-Kings.

'The scent-tapes are silent,' said Sarm.

'Of course,' said Misk.

'What is to be the disposition of this creature?' asked Sarm.

'For the time,' said Misk, 'it is the wish of the Mother that it be permitted to live as a Matok.'

'What is that?' I asked.

'You speak much for one of the lower orders,' said Sarm.

'What is a Matok?' I asked.

'A creature that is in the Nest but is not of the Nest,' said Misk.

'Like the arthropod?' I asked.

'Precisely,' said Misk.

'If I had my wish,' said Sarm, 'he would be sent to the vivarium or the dissection chambers.'

'But that is not the wish of the Mother,' said Misk.

'I see,' said Sarm.

'Thus,' said Misk, 'it is not the wish of the Nest.'

'Of course,' said Sarm, 'for the wish of the Mother is the wish of the Nest.'

'The Mother is the Nest and the Nest is the Mother,' said Misk.

'Yes,' said Sarm, and the two Priest-Kings approached one another, bowed and gently locked their antennae.

When they disengaged themselves, Sarm turned to face me. 'Nonetheless,' he said, 'I shall speak to the Mother about this matter.'

'Of course,' said Misk.

'I should have been consulted,' said Sarm, 'for I am First Born.'

'Perhaps,' said Misk.

Sarm looked down at me. I think he had not forgiven me the start I had given him on the platform high above the canyon, near the elevator.

'It is dangerous,' he said. 'It should be destroyed.'

'Perhaps,' said Misk.

'And it curled its antennae at me,' said Sarm.

Misk was silent.

'Yes,' said Sarm. 'It should be destroyed.'

Sarm then turned from me and with his left, forward supporting appendage depressed a recessed button in the dais on which he stood.

Hardly had his delicate foot touched the button than a panel slid aside and two handsome men, of the most symmetrical form and features with shaven heads and clad in the purple, plastic tunics of slaves, entered the room and prostrated themselves before the dais.

At a signal from Sarm they leaped to their feet and stood alertly beside the dais, their feet spread, their heads high, their arms folded.

'Behold these two,' said Sarm.

Neither of the two men who had entered the room had seemed to notice me.

I now approached them.

'I am Tarl Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' I said to them, extending my hand.

If they saw my hand they made no effort to accept it.

I assumed they must be identical twins. They had wide, fine heads, strong, broad bodies, and a carriage that suggested calmness and strength.

Both were a bit shorter than I but were somewhat more squarely built.

'You may speak,' said Sarm.

'I am Mul-Al-Ka,' said one, 'honoured slave of the glorious Priest-Kings.'

'I am Mul-Ba-Ta,' said the other, 'honoured slave of the glorious Priest-Kings.'

'In the Nest,' said Misk, 'the expression "Mul" is used to designate a human slave.'

I nodded. The rest of it I did not need to be told. The expressions 'Al-Ka' and 'Ba-Ta' are the two first letters of the Gorean alphabet. In effect these men had no names, but were simply known as Slave A and Slave B.

I turned to Sarm.

'I assume,' I said, 'you have more than twenty-eight human slaves.' There were twenty-eight characters in the Gorean alphabet. I had intended my remark to be rather vicious but Sarm took no offense.

'Others are numbered,' he said. 'When one dies or is destroyed, his number is assigned to another.'

'Some of the low numbers,' volunteered Misk, 'have been assigned as many as a thousand times.'

'Why do these slaves not have numbers?' I asked.

'They are special,' said Misk.

I regarded them closely. They seemed splendid specimens of mankind. Perhaps Misk had meant merely that they were unusually excellent representatives of the human type.

'Can you guess,' asked Sarm, 'which one has been synthesised?'

I must have given quite a start.

Sarm's antennae giggled.

'Yes,' said Sarm, 'one was synthesised, beginning with the synthesis of the protein molecules, and was formed molecule by molecule. It is artificially constructed human being. It is not of much scientific interest but it has considerable curiosity value. It was built over a period of two centuries by Kusk, the Priest-King, as a way of escaping in his leisure hours from the burdens of his serious biological investigations.'

I shuddered.

'What of the other?' I asked.

'It too,' said Sarm, 'is not without interest and is also bestowed upon us by the avocational whims of Kusk, one of the greatest of our Nest.'

'Is the other also synthesised?' I asked.

'No,' said Sarm, 'it is the product of genetic manipulation, artificial control and alteration of the hereditary coils in gametes.'

I was sweating.

'Not the least interesting aspect of this matter,' said Sarm, 'is the match.'

To be sure I could not tell the two men, if they were men, apart.

'That is the evidence of real skill,' said Sarm.

'Kusk,' said Misk, 'is one of the greatest of the Nest.'

'Which of these slaves,' I asked, 'is the one who was synthesised?'

'Can't you tell?' asked Sarm.

'No,' I said.

Sarm's antennae shivered and wrapped themselves about one another. He was shaking with the signs I knew now to be associated with amusement.

'I will not tell you,' he said.

'It is growing late,' said Misk, 'and the Matok, if he is to remain in the Nest, must be processed.'

'Yes,' said Sarm, but he seemed in no hurry to conclude his gloating. He pointed one long, jointed foreleg at the Muls. 'Gaze upon them with awe, Matok,' said he, 'for they are the product of Priest-Kings and the most perfect specimens of your race ever to exist.'

I wondered about what Misk meant by 'processing' but Sarm's words irritated me, as did the two grave, handsome fellows who had so spontaneously groveled before his dais. 'How is that?' I asked.

'Is it not obvious?' asked Sarm.

'No,' I said.

'They are symmetrically formed,' said Sarm. 'Moreover they are intelligent, strong and in good health.' Sarm seemed to wait for my reply but there was none. 'And,' said Sarm, 'they live on fungus and water, and wash themselves twelve times a day.'

I laughed. 'By the Priest-Kings!' I roared, the rather blasphemous Gorean oath slipping out, somehow incongruously considering my present location and predicament. Neither Priest-King however seemed in the least disturbed by this oath which might have brought tears to the eyes of a member of the Caste of Initiates.

'Why do you curl your antennae?' asked Sarm.

'You call these perfect human beings?' I asked, waving my arms toward the two slaves.

'Of course,' said Sarm.

'Of course,' said Misk.

'Perfect slaves!' I said.

'The most perfect human being is of course the most perfect slave,' said Sarm.

'The most perfect human being,' I said, 'is free.'

A look of puzzlement seemed to appear in the eyes of the two slaves.

'They have no wish to be set free,' said Misk. He then addressed the slaves. 'What is your greatest joy, Muls?' he asked.

'To be slaves of Priest-Kings,' they said.

'You see?' asked Misk.

'Yes,' I said. 'I see now that they are not men.'

Sarm's antennae twitched angrily.

'Why do you not,' I challenged, 'have your Kusk, or whoever he is, synthesise a Priest-King?'

Sarm seemed to shiver with rage. The bladed hornlike projections snapped into view on his forelegs.

Misk had not moved. 'It would be immoral,' he said.

Sarm turned to Misk. 'Would the Mother object if the Matok's arms and legs were broken?'

'Yes,' said Misk.

'Would the Mother object if its organs were damaged?' asked Sarm.

'Undoubtedly,' said Misk.

'But surely,' said Sarm, 'it can be punished.'

'Yes,' said Misk, 'undoubtedly it will have to be disciplined sometime.'

'Very well,' said Sarm and directed his antennae at the two shaven-headed, plastic-clad slaves.

'Punish the Matok,' said Sarm, 'but do not break its bones nor injure its organs.'

No sooner had these words been emitted from Sarm's translator than the two slaves leaped toward me to seize me.

In that same instant I leaped toward them, taking them by surprise and compounding the momentum of my blow. I thrust one aside with my left arm and crushed my fist into the face of the second. His head snapped to the side and his knees buckled. He crumpled to the floor. Before the other could regain his balance, I had leaped to him and seized him in my hands and lifted him high over my head and hurled him on his back to the stone flooring of the long chamber. Had it been combat to the death in that brief instant I would have finished him leaping over him and gouging my heels into his stomach rupturing the diaphragm. But I had no wish to kill him, nor a matter of fact to injure him severely. He managed to roll over on his stomach. I could have snapped his neck then with my heel. The thought occurred to me that these slaves had not been well trained to administer discipline. They seemed to know almost nothing. Now the man was on his knees, gasping, supporting himself on the palm of his right hand. If he was right-handed, that seemed foolish. Also he made no effort to cover his throat.

I looked up at Sarm and Misk, who, observing, stood in that slightly inclined, infuriatingly still posture.

'Do not injure them further,' said Misk.

'I will not,' I said.

'Perhaps the Matok is right,' said Misk to Sarm. 'Perhaps they are not perfect human beings.'

'Perhaps,' admitted Sarm.

Now the slave who was conscious lifted his hand piteously to the Priest-Kings. His eyes were filled with tears.

'Please,' he begged, 'let us go to the dissection chambers.'

I was dumbfounded.

Now the other had regained consciousness and, on his knees, joined his fellow. 'Please,' he cried, 'let us go to the dissection chambers.'

My astonishment could not be concealed.

'They feel that they have failed the Priest-Kings and wish to die,' said Misk.

Sarm regarded the two slaves. 'I am kind,' he said, 'and it is near the Feast of Tola.' He lifted his foreleg with a gentle, permissive gesture, almost a benediction. 'You may go to the dissection chambers.'

To my amazement, gratitude transfigured the features of the two slaves and, helping one another, they prepared to leave the room.

'Stop!' I cried.

The two slaves stopped and looked at me.

My eyes were fixed however on Sarm and Misk. 'You can't send them to their deaths,' I said.

Sarm seemed puzzled.

Misk's antennae shrugged.

Frantically I groped for a plausible objection. 'Kusk would surely be displeased if his creatures were to be destroyed,' I said. I hoped it would do.

Sarm and Misk touched antennae.

'The Matok is right,' said Misk.

'True,' said Sarm.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Sarm then turned to the two slaves. 'You may not go to the dissection chambers,' he said.

Once more the two slaves, this time apparently without emotion, folded their arms and stood, legs apart, beside the dais. Nothing might have happened in the last few moments save that one was breathing heavily and the other's face was splattered with his own blood.

Neither of them showed any gratitude at being reprieved nor did either evince any resentment at my having interfered with their executions.

I was, as you might suppose, puzzled. The responses and behaviour of the two slaves seemed to be incomprehensible.

'You must understand, Tarl Cabot of Ko-ro-ba,' said Misk, apparently sensing my puzzlement, 'that it is the greatest joy of Muls to love and serve Priest-Kings. If it is the wish of a Priest-King that they die they do so with great joy; if it is the wish of a Priest-King that they live, they are similarly delighted.'

I noted that neither of the two slaves looked particularly delighted.

'You see,' continued Misk, 'these Muls have been formed to love and serve Priest-Kings.'

'They have been made that way,' I said.

'Precisely,' said Misk.

'And yet you say they are human,' I said.

'Of course,' said Sarm.

And then to my surprise one of the slaves, though which one I could not have told, looked at me and spoke. 'We are human,' it said very simply.

I approached him and held out my hand. 'I hope I did not hurt you,' I said.

It took my hand and awkwardly held it, not knowing how to shake hands apparently.

'I too am human,' said the other, looking at me rather directly.

He held his hand out with the back of his hand up. I took the hand and turned it and shook it.

'I have feelings,' said the first man.

'I, too, have feelings,' said the second man.

'We all do,' I said.

'Of course,' said the first man, 'for we are human.'

I looked at him very carefully. 'Which of you,' I asked, 'has been synthesised?'

'We do not know,' said the first man.

'No,' said the second man. 'We have never been told.'

The two Priest-Kings had watched this small concourse with some interest, but now the voice of Sarm's translator was heard: 'It is growing late,' it said, 'let the Matok be processed.'

'Follow me,' said the first man and turned, and I followed him, leaving the room, the second man falling into stride beside me.

Chapter Thirteen: THE SLIME WORM

I followed Mul-Al-Ka and Mul-Ba-Ta through several rooms and down a long corridor.

'This is the Hall of Processing,' said one of them.

We passed several high steel portals in the hallway and on each of these, about twenty feet high, at the antennae level of a Priest-King, were certain dots, which I was later to learn were scent dots.

If the scent-dots were themselves not scented one might be tempted to think of them as graphemes in the language of the Priest-Kings, but since they themselves are scented they are best construed as analogous to uttered phonemes or phoneme combinations, direct expressions of the oral syllabary of the Priest-Kings.

When surrounded by scent-dots one might suppose the Priest-King to be subjected to a cacophony of stimulation, much as we might be if environed by dozens of blaring radios and television sets, but this is apparently not the case; the better analogy would seem to be our experience of walking down a quiet city street surrounded by printed signs which we might notice but to which we do not pay much attention.

In our sense there is no distinction between a spoken and written language for the Priest-Kings, though there is an analogous distinction between linguistic patterns that are actually sensed and those which are potentially to be sensed, an example of the latter being the scents of a yet uncoiled scent-tape.

'You will not much care for the processing,' said one of my guides.

'But it will be good for you,' said the other.

'Why must I be processed?' I asked.

'To protect the Nest from contamination,' said the first.

Scents, of course, will fade in time, but the specially prepared synthetic products or the Priest-Kings can last for thousands of years and, in the long run, will surely outlast the fading print of human books, the disintegrating celluloid of our films, perhaps even the carved, weathering stones so imperishably attesting the incomparable glories of our numerous kings, conquerors and potentates.

Scent-dots, incidentally, are arranged in rows constituting a geometrical square, and are read beginning with the top row from left to right, then right to left, and then left to right and so on again.

Gorean, I might note, is somewhat similar, and though I speak Gorean fluently, I find it very difficult to write, largely because of the even-numbered lines which, from my point of view, must be written backwards. Torm, my friend of the Caste of Scribes, never forgave me this and to this day, if he lives, he undoubtedly considers me partly illiterate. As he said, I would never make a Scribe. 'It is simple,' he said. 'You just write it forward but in the other direction.'

The syllabary of the Priest-Kings, not to be confused with their set of seventy-three 'phonemes', consists of what seems to me to be a somewhat unwieldy four hundred and eleven characters, each of which stands of course for a phoneme or phoneme combination, normally a combination. Certain juxtapositions of these phonemes and phoneme combinations, naturally, form words. I would have supposed a simpler syllabary, or even an experimentation with a nonscented perhaps alphabetic graphic script, would have been desirable linguistic ventures for the Priest-Kings, but as far as I know they were never made.

With respect to the rather complex syllabary, I originally supposed that it had never been simplified because the Priest-King, with his intelligence, would absorb the four hundred and eleven characters of his syllabary more rapidly than would a human child his alphabet of less than thirty letters, and thus that the difference to him between more than four hundred signs and less than thirty would be negligible.

As far as it goes this was not bad guesswork on my part, but deeper reasons underlay the matter. First, I did not know then how Priest-Kings learned. They do not learn as we do. Second, they tend in many matters to have a penchant for complexity, regarding it as more elegant than simplicity. One practical result of this seems to be that they have never been tempted to oversimplify physical reality, biological processes or the operations of a functioning mind. It would never occur to them that nature is ultimately simple, and if they found it so they would be rather disappointed. They view nature as a set of interrelated continua rather than as a visually oriented organism is tempted to do, as a network of discrete objects which must be somehow, mysteriously, related to one another. Their basic mathematics, incidentally, begins with ordinal and not cardinal numbers, and the mathematics of cardinal numbers is regarded as a limiting case imposed on more intuitively accepted ordinalities. Most significantly however I suspect that the syllabary of Priest-Kings remains complex, and that experiments with unscented graphemes were never conducted, because, except for lexical additions, they wish to keep their language much as it was in the ancient past. The Priest-King, for all his intelligence, tends to be fond of established patterns, at least in basic cultural matters such as Nest mores and language, subscribing to them however not because of genetic necessity but rather a certain undoubtedly genetically based preference for that which is comfortable and familiar. The Priest-King, somewhat like men, can change its ways but seldom cares to do so.

And yet there is probably more to these matters than the above considerations would suggest.

I once asked Misk why the syllabary of Priest-Kings was not simplified, and he responded, 'If this were done we would have to give up certain signs, and we could not bear to do so, for they are all very beautiful.'

Beneath the scent-dots on each high portal which Mul-Al-Ka and Mul-Ba-Ta and I passed there was, perhaps for the benefit of humans or others, a stylised outline picture of a form of creature.

On none of the doors that we had passed thus far was the stylised outline picture of a human.

Down the hall running towards us, not frantically but rather deliberately, at a steady pace, came a young human female, of perhaps eighteen years of age, with shaved head and clad in the brief plastic tunic of a Mul.

'Do not obstruct her,' said one of my guides.

I stepped aside.

Scarcely noticing us and clutching two scent-tapes in her hands the girl passed.

She had brown eyes and, I thought, in spite of her shaved head, was attractive.

Neither of my companions showed, or seemed to show, the least interest in her.

For some reason this annoyed me.

I watched her continue on down the passageway, listened to the slap of her bare feet on the floor.

'Who is she?' I asked.

'A Mul,' said one of the slaves.

'Of course she is a Mul,' I said.

'Then why do you ask?' he asked.

I found myself nastily hoping that he was the one who had been synthesised.

'She is a Messenger,' said the other, 'who carries scent-tapes between portals in the Hall of Processing.'

'Oh,' said the first slave. 'He is interested in things like that.'

'He is new in the tunnels,' said the second slave.

I was curious. I looked directly at the first slave. 'She had good legs, didn't she?' I said.

He seemed puzzled. 'Yes,' he said, 'very strong.'

'She was attractive,' I said to the second.

'Attractive?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Yes,' he said, 'she is healthy.'

'Perhaps she is someone's mate?' I asked.

'No,' said the first slave.

'How do you know?' I asked.

'She is not in the breeding cases,' said the man.

Somehow these laconic responses and the unquestioning acceptance of the apparent barbarities of the rule of Priest-Kings infuriated me.

'I wonder how she would feel in one's arms,' I said.

The two men looked at me and at one another.

'One must not wonder about that,' said one.

'Why not?' I asked.

'It is forbidden,' said the other.

'But surely,' I said, 'you must have wondered about that?'

One of the men smiled at me. 'Yes,' he said, 'I have sometimes wondered about that.'

'So have I,' said the other.

Then all three of us turned to watch the girl, who was now no more than a bluish speck under the energy bulbs far down the hall.

'Why is she running?' I asked.

'The journeys between portals are timed,' said the first slave, 'and if she dallies she will be given a record-scar.'

'Yes,' said the other, 'five record-scars and she will be destroyed.'

'A record-scar,' I said, 'is some sort of mark on your records?'

'Yes,' said the first slave, 'it is entered on your scent-tape and also, in odour, inscribed on your tunic.'

'The tunic,' said the other, 'is inscribed with much information, and it is by means of the tunic that Priest-Kings can recognise us.'

'Yes,' said the first slave, 'otherwise I am afraid we would appear much alike to them.'

I stored this information away, hoping that someday it might prove useful.

'Well,' I said, still looking down the hall, 'I would have supposed that the mighty Priest-Kings could have devised a quicker way of transporting scent-tapes.'

'Of course,' said the first slave, 'but there is no better way, for Muls are extremely inexpensive and are easily replaced.'

'Speed in such matters,' said one, 'is of little interest to Priest-Kings.'

'Yes,' said the other, 'they are very patient.'

'Why have they not given her a transportation device?' I asked.

'She is only a Mul,' said the first slave.

All three of us stared down the hall after the girl, but she had now disappeared in the distance.

'But she is a healthy Mul,' said one.

'Yes,' said the other, 'and she has strong legs.'

I laughed and clapped both of the slaves on the shoulders, and the three of us, arm in arm, walked down the hall.

We had not walked far when we passed a long, wormlike animal, eyeless, with a small red mouth, that inched its way along the corridor, hugging the angle between the wall and floor.

Neither of my guides paid the animal any attention.

Indeed, even I myself, after my experience with the arthropod on the platform and the flat, sluglike beast on its transportation disk in the plaza, was growing accustomed to finding strange creatures in the Nest of the Priest-Kings.

'What is that?' I asked.

'A Matok,' said one of the slaves.

'Yes,' said the other, 'it is in the Nest but not of the Nest.'

'But I thought I was a Matok,' I said.

'You are,' said one of the slaves.

We continued on.

'What do you call it?' I asked.

'Oh,' said one of the slaves. 'It is a Slime Worm.'

'What does it do?' I asked.

'Long ago it functioned in the Nest,' said one of the slaves, 'as a sewerage device, but it has not served that function in many thousands of years.'

'But yet it remains in the Nest.'

'Of course,' said one of the slaves, 'the Priest-Kings are tolerant.'

'Yes,' said the other, 'and they are fond of it, and are themselves creatures of great reverence for tradition.'

'The Slime Worm has earned its place in the Nest,' said the other.

'How does it live?' I asked.

'It scavenges on the kills of the Golden Beetle,' said the first slave.

'What does the Golden Beetle kill?' I asked.

'Priest-Kings,' said the second slave.

I would surely have pressed forward this inquiry but at that very moment we arrived at a tall steel portal in the hallway.

Looking up I saw beneath the square of scent-dots fixed high on the steel door the stylised outline picture of what was unmistakably a human being.

'This is the place,' said one of my companions. 'It is here that you will be processed.'

'We will wait for you,' said the other.

Chapter Fourteen: THE SECRET CHAMBER OF MISK

The arms of the metal device seized me and I found myself held helplessly by the arms suspended some feet above the floor.

Behind me the panel had slid shut.

The room was rather large, clean and coated with plastic. It seemed to be bare except that at one end there were several metal disks in the wall and, high in the wall, there was a transparent shield. Viewing me antiseptically through this shield was the face of a Priest-King.

'May you bathe in the dung of Slime Worms,' I called to him cheerfully. I hoped he had a translator.

Two circular metal plates in the wall beneath the shield had slid upward and suddenly long metal arms had telescoped outwards and reached for me.

For an instant I had considered scrambling out of their reach but then I had sensed that there would be no escape in the smooth, closed, carefully prepared room in which I found myself.

The metal arms had locked on me and lifted me from the floor.

The Priest-King behind the shield did not seem to notice my remark. I supposed he did not have a translator.

As I dangled there to my irritation further devices manipulated by the Priest-King emerged from the wall and extended towards me.

One of these with maddening delicacy snipped the clothing from my body, even cutting the thongs of my sandals. Another deftly forced a large, ugly pellet down my throat.

Considering the size of a Priest-King and the comparatively small scale of these operations I gathered that the reduction gearing on the mechanical appendages must be considerable. Moreover the accuracy with which the operations were performed suggested a magnification of some sort. I would learn later that practically the entire wall which faced me was such a device, being in effect a very large scent-reinforcer. But at the time I was in no mood to admire the engineering talents of my captors.

'May you antennae be soaked in grease!' I called to my tormentor.

His antennae stiffened and then curled a bit at the tips.

I was pleased. Apparently he did have a translator.

I was considering my next insult when the two arms which held me swung me over a metal cage with a double floor, the higher consisting of narrow bars set in a wide mesh and the lower consisting simply of a white plastic tray.

The metal appendages which held me suddenly sprang open and I was dropped into the cage.

I sprang to my feet but the top of the cage had clicked shut.

I wanted to try the bars but already I felt sick and I sank to the bottom of the cage.

I was no longer interested in insulting Priest-Kings.

I remember looking up and seeing its antennae curling.

It took only two or three minutes for the pellet to do its work and it is not with pleasure that I recall those minutes.

Finally the plastic tray neatly slid out from beneath the cage and swiftly disappeared through a low, wide panel in the left wall.

I gratefully noted its departure.

Then the entire cage, on a track of some sort, began to move through an opening which appeared in the right wall.

In the following journey the cage was successively submerged in various solutions of various temperatures and densities, some of which, perhaps because I was still ill, I found exceedingly noxious.

Had I been less ill I would undoubtedly have been more offended.

At last after I, sputtering and choking, had been duly cleansed and rinsed several times, and then it seemed several times again, the cage began to move slowly, mercifully, between vents from which blasts of hot air issued, and, eventually, it passed slowly between an assortment of humming projection points for wide-beam rays, some of which were visible to my eye, being yellow, red and a refulgent green.

I would later learn that these rays, which passed through my body as easily and harmlessly as sunlight through glass, were indexed to the metabolic physiology of various organisms which can infect Priest-Kings. I would also learn that the last known free instance of such an organism had occurred more than four thousand years before. In the next few weeks in the Nest I would occasionally come upon diseased Muls. The organisms which afflict them are apparently harmless to Priest-Kings and thus allowed to survive. Indeed, they are regarded as Matoks, in the Nest, but not of the Nest, and are thus to be tolerated with equanimity.

I was still quite ill when, clad in a red plastic tunic, I rejoined the two slaves in the hall outside the door.

'You look much better,' said one of them.

'They left the threadlike growths on your head,' said the other.

'Hair,' I said, leaning against the portal.

'Strange,' said one of the slaves. 'The only fibrous body growths permitted Muls are the lashes of the eyes.'

This, I supposed, would have to do with protecting the eyes from particles. Idly, not feeling well, I wondered if there were any particles.

'But he is a Matok,' said one.

'That is true,' said the other.

I was glad that the tunic I wore was not of the Ubar's purple which would proclaim me as a slave of Priest-Kings.

'Perhaps if you are very zealous,' said one, 'you can become a Mul.'

'Yes,' said the other, 'then you would be not only in the Nest but of the Nest.'

I did not respond.

'That is best,' said one.

'Yes,' said the other.

I leaned back against the portal of the Hall of Processing, my eyes closed, and took several slow, deep breaths.

'You have been assigned quarters,' said one of the two slaves, 'a case in the chamber of Misk.'

I opened my eyes.

'We will take you there,' said the other.

I looked at them blankly. 'A case?' I asked.

'He is not well,' said one of the slaves.

'It is quite comfortable,' said the other, 'with fungus and water.'

I closed my eyes again and shook my head. I could feel them gently take my arms and I accompanied them slowly down the hall.

'You will feel much better,' said one of them, 'when you have had a bit of fungus.'

'Yes,' said the other.

It is not hard to get used to Mul-Fungus, for it has almost no taste, being an extremely bland, pale, whitish, fibrous vegetablelike matter. I know of no one who is moved much in one direction or the other by its taste. Even the Muls, many of whom have been bred in the Nest, do not particularly like it, nor despise it. It is eaten with much the same lack of attention that we normally breathe air.

Muls feed four times a day. In the first meal, Mul-Fungus is ground and mixed with water, forming a porridge of sorts; for the second meal it is chopped into rough two-inch cubes; for the third meal it is minced with Mul-Pellets and served as a sort of cold hash; the Mul-Pellets are undoubtedly some type of dietary supplement; at the final meal Mul-Fungus is pressed into a large, flat cake and sprinkled with a few grains of salt.

Misk told me, and I believe him, that Muls had occasionally slain one another for a handful of salt.

The Mul-Fungus, as far as I can tell, is not much different from the fungus, raised under ideal conditions from specially selected spores, which graces the feed troughs of the Priest-Kings themselves, a tiny sample of which was once given me by Misk. It was perhaps a bit less coarse than Mul-Fungus. Misk was much annoyed that I could not detect the difference. I was much annoyed when I found out later that the major difference between high-quality fungus and the lower-grade Mul-Fungus was simply the smell. I was in the Nest, incidentally, for more than five weeks before I could even vaguely detect the odour difference which seemed so significant to Misk. And then it did not strike me as being better or worse than that of the low-grade Mul-Fungus.

The longer I stayed in the Nest the more acute became my sense of smell, and it was an embarrassing revelation to me to discover how unaware I had become of these varied, rich sensory cues so abundantly available in my environment. I was given a translator by Misk and I would utter Gorean expressions into it and then wait for the translation into the language of the Priest-Kings, and in this way, after a timw, I became capable of recognising numerous meaningful odours. The first odour I came to recognise was Misk's name, and it was delightful to discover, as I became more practiced and sensitive, that the odour was the same as his own.

One of the things I did was run the translator over the red plastic tunic I had been issued and listen to the information which had been recorded on it. There was not much save my name and city, that I was a Matok under the supervision of Misk, that I had no record-scars and that I might be dangerous.

I smiled at the latter caution.

I did not even have a sword, and I was sure that, in any battle with Priest-Kings, I would constitute but a moment's work for their fierce mandibles and the bladed, hornlike projections on their forelegs.

The case which I was to occupy in Misk's chamber was not as bad as I had anticipated.

Indeed, it seemed to me far more luxurious than the appointments in Misk's own chamber, which seemed utterly bare except for the feed trough and numerous compartments, dials, switches and plugs mounted in one wall. The Priest-Kings eat and sleep standing and never lie down, except perhaps it be to die.

The bareness of Misk's chambers was, however, as it turned out, only an apparent bareness to a visually oriented organism such as myself. Actually the walls, ceilings and floor were covered with what, to a Priest-King, were excruciatingly beautiful scent-patterns. Indeed, Misk informed me that the patterns in his chamber had been laid down by some of the greatest artists in the Nest.

My case was a transparent plastic cube of perhaps eight feet square, with ventilation holes and a sliding plastic door. There was no lock on the door and thus I could come and go as I pleased.

Inside the cube there were canisters of Mul-Fungus, a bowl, a ladle, a wooden-bladed Fungus-Knife; a wooden-headed Fungus-Mallet; a convenient tube of Mul-Pellets, which discharged its contents one at a time following my depressing a lever in the bottom of the tube; and a large, inverted jar of water, by means of which an attached, somewhat shallow, watering pan was kept filled.

In one corner of the case there was a large, circular padding a few inches deep of soft, rough-cut, reddish moss which was not uncomfortable and was changed daily.

Adjoining the cube, reached from the cube by sliding plastic panels, were a lavatory facility and a washing-booth.

The washing-booth was remarkably like the showers with which we are familiar except that one may not regulate the flow of fluid. One turns on the fluid by stepping into the booth and its amount and temperature are controlled automatically. I had naturally supposed the fluid to be simply water which it closely resembled in appearance, and once had tried to fill my bowl for the morning meal there, rather than ladling the water out of the water pan. Choking, my mouth burning, I spat it out in the booth.

'It is fortunate,' said Misk, 'that you did not swallow it for the washing fluid contains a

cleansing additive that is highly toxic to human physiology.'

Misk and I got on rather well together after a few small initial frictions, particularly having to do with the salt ration and the number of times a day the washing-booth was to be used. If I had been a Mul I would have received a record-scar for each day on which I had not washed completely twelve times. Washing-booths, incidentally, are found in all Mul-cases and often, for convenience, along the tunnels and in public places, such as plazas, shaving-parlours, pellet-dispensaries, and fungus commissaries. Since I was a Matok I insisted that I should be exempted from the Duty of the Twelve Joys, as it is known. In the beginning I held out for one shower a day as quite sufficient but poor Misk seemed so upset that I agreed to up my proposal to two. He would still hear nothing of this and seemed firm that I should not fall below ten. At last, feeling that I perhaps owed something to Misk's acceptance of me in his chamber, I suggested a compromise at five, and, for an extra salt packet, six on alternate days. At last Misk threw in two extra salt packets a day and I agreed to six washings. He himself, of course, did not use a washing-booth but groomed and cleaned himself in the age-old fashion of Priest-Kings, with his cleaning hooks and mouth. Occasionally after we got to know one another better, he would even allow me to groom him, and the first time he allowed me, with the small grooming fork used by favoured Muls, to comb his antennae I knew that he trusted me, and liked me, though for what reason I could not tell.

I myself grew rather fond of Misk.

'Did you know,' said Misk once to me, 'that humans are among the most intelligent of the lower orders?'

'I'm glad to hear it,' I said.

Misk was quiet and his antennae waved nostalgically.

'I once had a pet Mul,' he said.

I looked at my case.

'No,' said Misk, 'when a pet Mul dies the case is always destroyed, lest there be contamination.'

'What happened to him?' I asked.

'It was a small female,' said Misk. 'It was slain by Sarm.'

I felt a tension in the foreleg of Misk which I was grooming as though it were involuntarily prepared to invert, bringing out the bladelike projection.

'Why?' I asked.

Misk said nothing for a long time, and then he dejectedly lowered his head, delicately extending his antennae to me for grooming. After I had combed them for a bit, I sensed he was ready to speak.

'It was my fault,' said Misk. 'She wanted to let the threadlike growths on her head emerge, for she was not bred in the Nest.' Misk's voice came from the translator as consecutively and mechanically as ever, but his whole body trembled. I removed the grooming fork from his antennae in order that the sensory hairs not be injured. 'I was indulgent,' said Misk, straightening up so that his long body now loomed over me, inclined forward slightly from the vertical in the characteristic stance of Priest-Kings. 'So that it was actually I who killed her.'

'I think not,' I said. 'You tried to be kind.'

'And it occurred on the day on which she saved my life,' said Misk.

'Tell me about it,' I said.

'I was on an errand for Sarm,' said Misk, 'which took me to unfrequented tunnels and for company I took the girl with me. We came upon a Golden Beetle though none had ever been seen in that place and I wanted to go to the Beetle and I put my head down and approached it but the girl seized my

antennae and dragged me away, thus saving my life.'

Misk lowered his head again and extended his antennae for grooming.

'The pain was excruciating,' said Misk, 'and I could not but follow her in spite of the fact that I wanted to go to the Golden Beetle. In an Ahn of course I no longer wanted to go to the Beetle and I knew then she had saved my life. It was the same day that Sarm ordered her given five record-scars for the growths on her head and had her destroyed.'

'Is it always five record-scars for such an offense?' I asked.

'No,' said Misk. 'I do not know why Sarm acted as he did.'

'It seems to me,' I said, 'that you should not blame yourself for the girl's death, but Sarm.'

'No,' said Misk. 'I was too indulgent.'

'Is it not possible,' I asked, 'that Sarm wished you to die by the Golden Beetle?'

'Of course,' said Misk. 'It was undoubtedly his intention.'

I puzzled to myself why Sarm might want Misk to be killed. Undoubtedly there was some type of rivalry or political division between them. To my human mind, used to the cruelties with which selfish men can implement their schemes, I saw nothing incomprehensible in the fact that Sarm would have attempted to engineer Misk's death. I would learn later however that this simple fact was indeed almost incomprehensible to Priest-Kings, and that Misk, though he readily accepted it as a fact in his mind, could not bring himself, so to speak, in the furthest reaches of his heart to acknowledge it as true, for were not both he and Sarm of the Nest, and would not such an action be a violation of Nest Trust?

'Sarm is the First Born,' said Misk, 'whereas I am the Fifth Born. The first five born of the Mother are the High Council of the Nest. The Second, Third and Fourth Born, in the long ages, have, one by one, succumbed to the Pleasures of the Golden Beetle. Only Sarm and I are left of the Five.'

'Then,' I suggested, 'he wants you to die so that he will be the only remaining member of the Council and thus have absolute power.'

'The Mother is greater than he,' said Misk.

'Still,' I suggested, 'his power would be considerably augmented.'

Misk looked at me and his antennae had a certain lack of resilience and the golden hairs had seemed to lose some of their sheen.

'You are sad,' I said.

Misk bent down until his long body was horizontal and then inclined downward yet more towards me. He laid his antennae gently on my shoulders, almost as though a man might have put his hands on them.

'You must not understand these things,' said Misk, 'in terms of what you know of men. It is different.'

'It seems no different to me,' I said.

'These things,' said Misk, 'are deeper and greater than you know, than you can now understand.'

'They seem simple enough to me,' I remarked.

'No,' said Misk. 'You do not understand.' Misk's antennae pressed a bit on my shoulders. 'But you will understand,' he said.

The Priest-King then straightened and stalked to my case. With his two forelegs he gently lifted

it and moved it aside. The ease with which he did this astonished me for I am sure its weight must have been several pounds. Beneath the case I saw a flat stone with a recessed ring. Misk bent down and lifted this ring.

'I dug this chamber myself,' he said, 'and day by day over the lifetimes of many Muls I took a bit of rock dust away and scattered it here and there unobserved in the tunnels.'

I looked down into the cavern which was now revealed.

'I requisitioned as little as possible,' you see,' said Misk. 'Even the portal must be moved by mechanical force.'

He then went to a compartment in the wall and withdrew a slender black rod. He broke the end of the rod off and it began to burn with a bluish flame.

'This is a Mul-Torch,' said Misk, 'used by Muls who raise fungus in darkened chambers. You will need it to see.'

I knew that the Priest-King had no need of the torch.

'Please,' said Misk, gesturing toward the opening.

Chapter Fifteen: IN THE SECRET CHAMBER

Holding the slender Mul-Torch over my head I peered into the cavern now revealed in the floor of Misk's chamber. From a ring on the underside of the floor, the ceiling of the chamber, there dangled a knotted rope.

There seemed to be very little heat from the bluish flame of the Mul-Torch but, considering the size of the flame, a surprising amount of light.

'The workers of the Fungus-Trays,' said Misk, 'break off both ends of the torch and climb about on the trays with the torch in their teeth.' I had no mind to do this, but I did grasp the torch in my teeth with one end lit and, hand over hand, lower myself down the knotted rope.

One side of my face began to sweat. I closed my right eye.

A circle of eerie, blue, descending light flickered on the walls of the passage down which I lowered myself. The walls a few feet below the level of Misk's compartment became damp. The temperature fell several degrees. I could see the discolourations of slime molds, probably white, but seeming blue in the light, on the walls. I sensed a film of moisture forming on the plastic of my tunic. Here and there a trickle of water traced its dark pattern downward to the floor where it crept along the wall and, continuing its journey, disappeared into one crevice or another.

When I arrived at the bottom of the rope, some forty feet below, I held the torch over my head and found myself in a bare, simple chamber.

Looking up I saw Misk, disdainful of the rope, bend himself backwards through the aperture in the ceiling and, step by dainty step, walk across the ceiling upside down and then back himself nimbly down the side of the wall.

In a moment he stood beside me.

'You must never speak of what I am going to show you,' said Misk.

I said nothing.

Misk hesitated.

'Let there be Nest Trust between us,' I said.

'But you are not of the Nest,' said Misk.

'Nonetheless,' I said, 'let there be Nest Trust between us.'

'Very well,' said Misk, and he bent forward, extending his antennae towards me.

I wondered for a moment what was to be done but then it seemed I sensed what he wanted. I thrust the torch I carried into a crevice in the wall and, standing before Misk, I raised my arms over my head, extending them towards him.

With extreme gentleness, almost tenderness, the Priest-King touched the palms of my hands with his antennae.

'Let there be Nest Trust between us.'

It was the nearest I could come to locking antennae.

Briskly Misk straightened up.

'Somewhere here,' he said, 'but unscented and toward the floor, where a Priest-King would not be likely to find it, is a small knob which will look much like a pebble. Find this knob and twist it.'

It was but a moment's work to locate the knob of which he spoke though I gathered from what he said that it might have been well concealed from the typical sensory awareness of a Priest-King.

I turned the knob and a portion of the wall swung back.

'Enter,' said Misk, and I did so.

Scarcely were we inside when Misk touched a button I could not see several feet over my head and the door swung smoothly closed.

The only light in the chamber was from my bluish torch.

I gazed about myself with wonder.

The room was apparently large, for portions of it were lost in the shadows from the torch. What I could see suggested paneling and instrumentation, banks of scent-needles and gauges, numerous tiered decks of wiring and copper plating. There were on one side of the room, racks of scent-tapes, some of which were spinning slowly, unwinding their tapes through slowly rotating translucent, glowing spheres. These spheres in turn were connected by slender, woven cables of wire to a large, heavy boxlike assembly, made of steel and rather squarish, which was set on wheels. In front of this assembly, one by one, thin metal disks would snap into place, a light would flash as some energy transaction occurred, and then the disk would snap aside, immediately to be replaced by another. Eight wires led from this box into the body of a Priest-King which lay on its back, inert, in the centre of the room on a moss-softened stone table.

I held the torch high and looked at the Priest-King, who was rather small for a Priest-King, being only about twelve feet long.

What most astonished me was that he had wings, long, slender, beautiful, golden, translucent wings, folded against his back.

He was not strapped down.

He seemed to be completely unconscious.

I bent my ears to the air tubes in his abdomen and I could hear the slight whispers of respiration.

'I had to design this equipment myself,' said Misk, and for that reason it is inexcusably primitive, but there was no possibility to apply for standard instrumentation in this case.'

I didn't understand.

'No,' said Misk, 'and observe I had to make my own mnemonic disks, devising a transducer to read the scent-tapes, which fortunately are easily available, and record their signals on blank receptor-plating, from there to be transformed into impulses for generating and regulating the appropriate neural alignments.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'Of course,' said Misk, 'for you are a human.'

I looked at the long, golden wings of the creature. 'Is it a mutation?' I asked.

'Of course not,' said Misk.

'Then what is it?' I asked.

'A male,' said Misk. He paused for a long time and the antennae regarded the inert figure on the stone table. 'It is the first male born in the Nest in eight thousand years.'

'Aren't you a male?' I asked.

'No,' said Misk, 'nor are the others.'

'Then you are a female,' I said.

'No,' said Misk, 'in the Nest only the Mother is female.'

'But surely,' I said, 'there must be other females.'

'Occasionally,' said Misk, 'an egg occurred which was female but these were ordered destroyed by Sarm. I myself know of no female egg in the Nest, and I know of only one which has occurred in the last six thousand years.'

'How long,' I asked, 'does a Priest-King live?'

'Long ago,' said Misk, 'Priest-Kings discovered the secrets of cell replacement without pattern deterioration, and accordingly, unless we meet with injury or accident, we will live until we are found by the Golden Beetle.'

'How old are you?' I asked.

'I myself was hatched,' said Misk, 'before we brought our world into your solar system.' He looked down at me. 'That was more than two million years ago,' he said.

'Then,' I said, 'the Nest will never die.'

'It is dying now,' said Misk. 'One by one we succumb to the

Pleasures of the Golden Beetle. We grow old and there is little left for us. At one time we were rich and filled with life and in that time our great patterns were formed and in another time our arts flourished and then for a very long time our only passion was scientific curiosity, but now even that lessens, even that lessens.'

'Why do you not slay the Golden Beetles?' I asked.

'It would be wrong,' said Misk.

'But they kill you,' I said.

'It is well for us to die,' said Misk, 'for otherwise the Nest would be eternal and the Nest must not be eternal for how could we love it if it were so?'

I could not follow all of what Misk was saying, and I found it hard to take my eyes from the inert figure of the young male Priest-King which lay on the stone table.

'There must be a new Nest,' said Misk. 'And there must be a new Mother, and there must be the new First Born. I myself am willing to die but the race of Priest-Kings must not die.'

'Would Sarm have this male killed if he knew he were here?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Misk.

'Why?' I asked.

'He does not wish to pass,' said Misk simply.

I puzzled on the machine in the room, the wiring that seemed to feed into the young Priest-King's body at eight points.

'What are you doing to him?' I asked.

'I am teaching him,' said Misk.

'I don't understand,' I said.

'What you know - even a creature such as yourself -' said Misk, 'depends on the charges and microstates of your neural tissue, and, customarily, you obtain these charges and microstates in the process of registering and assimilating sensory stimuli from your environment, as for example when you directly experience something, or perhaps as when you are given information by others or you peruse a scent-tape. This device you see then is merely a contrivance for producing these charges and microstates without the necessity for the time-consuming external stimulation.'

My torch lifted, I regarded with awe the inert body of the young Priest-King on the stone table.

I watched the tiny flashes of light, the rapid, efficient placement of disks and their almost immediate withdrawal.

The instrumentation and the paneling of the room seemed to loom about me.

I considered the impulses that must be transmitted by those eight wires into the body of the creature that lay before us.

'Then you are literally altering his brain,' I whispered.

'He is a Priest-King,' said Misk, 'and has eight brains, modifications of the ganglionic net, whereas a creature such as yourself, limited by vertebrae, is likely to develop only one brain.'

'It is very strange to me,' I said.

'Of course,' said Misk, 'for the lower orders instruct their young differently, accomplishing only an infinitesimal fraction of this in a lifetime of study.'

'Who decides what he learns?' I asked.

'Customarily,' said Misk, 'the mnemonic plates are standardised by the Keepers of the Tradition, chief of whom is Sarm.' Misk straightened and his antennae curled a bit. 'As you might suppose I could not obtain a set of standardised plates and so I have inscribed my own, using my own judgement.'

'I don't like the idea of altering its brain,' I said.

'Brains,' said Misk.

'I don't like it,' I said.

'Do not be foolish,' said Misk. His antennae curled. 'All creatures who instruct their young alter their brains. How else could learning take place? This device is merely a comparatively considerate, swift and efficient means to an end that is universally regarded as desirable by rational creatures.'

'I am uneasy,' I said.

'I see,' said Misk, 'you fear he is becoming a kind of machine.'

'Yes,' I said.

'You must remember,' said Misk, 'that he is a Priest-King and thus a rational creature and that we could not turn him into a machine without neutralising certain critical and perceptive areas, without which he would no longer be a Priest-King.'

'But he would be a self-governing machine,' I said.

'We are all such machines,' said Misk, 'with fewer or a greater number of random elements.' His antennae touched me. 'We do what we must,' he said, 'and the ultimate control is never in the mnemonic disk.'

'I do not know if these things are true,' I said.

'Nor do I,' said Misk. 'It is a difficult and obscure matter.'

'And what do you do in the meantime?' I asked.

'Once,' said Misk, 'we rejoiced and lived, but now though we

remain young in body we are old in mind, and one wonders more often, from time to time, on the Pleasures of the Golden Beetle.'

'Do Priest-Kings believe in life after death?' I asked.

'Of course,' said Misk, 'for after one dies the Nest continues.'

'No,' I said, 'I mean individual life.'

'Consciousness,' said Misk, 'seems to be a function of the ganglionic net.'

'I see,' I said. 'And yet you say you are willing to, as you said, pass.'

'Of course,' said Misk. 'I have lived. Now there must be others.'

I looked again at the young Priest-King lying on the stone table.

'Will he remember learning these things?' I asked.

'No,' said Misk, 'for his external sensors are now being bypassed, but he will understand that he has learned things in this fashion for a mnemonic disk has been inscribed to that effect.'

'What is he being taught?' I asked.

'Basic information, as you might expect, pertains to language, mathematics, and the sciences, but he is also being taught the history and literature of Priest-Kings, Nest mores, social customs; mechanical, agricultural and husbanding procedures, and other types of information.'

'But will he continue to learn later?'

'Of course,' said Misk, 'but he will build on a rather complete knowledge of what his ancestors have learned in the past. No time is wasted in consciously absorbing old information, and one's time is thus released for the discovery of new information. When new information is discovered it is also included on mnemonic disks.'

'But what if the mnemonic disks contain some false information?' I asked.

'Undoubtedly they do,' said Misk, 'but the disks are continually in the process of revision and are kept as current as possible.'

Chapter Sixteen

THE PLOT OF MISK

I took my eyes from the young Priest-King and looked up at Misk. I could see the disklike eyes in that golden head

above me and see the flicker of the blue torch on their myriad surfaces.

'I must tell you, Misk,' I said slowly, 'that I came to the Sardar to slay Priest-Kings, to take vengeance for the destruction of my city and its people.'

I thought it only fair to let Misk know that I was no ally of his, that he should learn of my hatred for Priest-Kings and my determination to punish them, to the extent that it lay within my abilities, for the evil which they had done.

'No,' said Misk. 'You have come to the Sardar to save the race of Priest-Kings.'

I looked at him dumbfounded.

'It is for that purpose that you were brought here,' said Misk.

'I came of my own free will!' I cried. 'Because my city was destroyed!'

'That is why your city was destroyed,' said Misk, 'that you would come to the Sardar.'

I turned away. Tears burned in my eyes and my body trembled. I turned in rage on the tall, gentle creature who stood, unmoving, behind that strange table and that still form of the young Priest-King.

'If I had my sword,' I said, pointing to the young Priest-King, 'I would kill it!'

'No, you would not,' said Misk, 'and that is why you and not another were chosen to come to the Sardar.'

I rushed to the figure on the table, the torch held as though to strike it.

But I could not.

'You will not hurt it because it is innocent,' said Misk. 'I know that.'

'How can you know that?'

'Because you are of the Cabots and we know them. For more than four hundred years we have known them, and since your birth we have watched you.'

'You killed my father!' I cried.

'No,' said Misk, 'he is alive and so are others of your city, but they are scattered to the ends of Gor.'

'And Talena?'

'As far as we know she is still alive,' said Misk, 'but we cannot scan her, or for others of Ko-ro-ba, without raising suspicion that we are solicitous for you - or are bargaining with you.'

'Why not simply bring me here?' I challenged. 'Why destroy a

city?'

'To conceal our motivation from Sarm,' said Misk.

'I don't understand,' I said.

'Occasionally on Gor we destroy a city, selecting it by means of a random selection device. This teaches the lower orders the might of Priest-Kings and encourages them to keep our laws.'

'But what if the city has done no wrong?' I asked.

'So much the better,' said Misk, 'for the Men below the Mountains are then confused and fear us even more - but the members of the Caste of Initiates, we have found, will produce an explanation of why the city was destroyed. They invent one and if it seems plausible they soon believe it. For example, we allowed them to suppose that it was through some fault of yours - disrespect for Priest-Kings as I recall - that your city was destroyed.'

'Why when first I came to Gor, more than seven years ago, did you not do this?' I asked.

'It was necessary to test you.'

'And the siege of Ar,' I asked, 'and the Empire of Marlenus?'

'They provided a suitable test,' said Misk. 'From Sarm's point of view of course your utilisation there was simply to curtail the spread of the Empire of Ar, for we prefer humans to dwell in isolated communities. It is better for observing their variations, from the scientific point of view, and it is safer for us if they remain disunited, for being rational they might develop a science, and being subrational it might be dangerous for us and for themselves if they did so.'

'That is the reason then for your limitations of their weaponry and technology?'

'Of course,' said Misk, 'but we have allowed them to develop in many areas - in medicine, for example, where something approximating the Stabilisation Serums has been independently developed.'

'What is that?' I asked.

'You have surely not failed to notice,' said Misk, 'that though you came to the Counter-Earth more than seven years ago you have undergone no significant physical alteration in that time.'

'I have noticed,' I said, 'and I wondered on this.'

'Of course,' said Misk, 'their serums are not as effective as ours and sometimes do not function, and sometimes the effect wears off after only a few hundred years.'

'This was kind of you,' I said.

'Perhaps,' said Misk. 'There is dispute on the matter.' He peered intently down at me. 'On the whole,' he said, 'we Priest-Kings do not interfere with the affairs of men. We

leave them free to love and slay one another, which seems to be what they enjoy doing most.'

'But the Voyages of Acquisition?' I said.

'We keep in touch with the earth,' said Misk, 'for it might, in time, become a threat to us and then we would have to limit it, or destroy it or leave the solar system.'

'Which will you do?' I asked.

'None, I suspect,' said Misk. 'According to our calculations, which may of course be mistaken, life as you know it on the earth will destroy itself within the next thousand years.'

I shook my head sadly.

'As I said,' went on Misk, 'man is subrational. Consider what would happen if we allowed him free technological development on our world.'

I nodded. I could see that from the Priest-Kings' point of view it would be more dangerous than handing out automatic weapons to chimpanzees and gorillas. Man had not proved himself worthy of a superior technology to the Priest-Kings. I mused that man had not proved himself worthy of such a technology even to himself.

'Indeed,' said Misk, 'it was partly because of this tendency that we brought man to the Counter-Earth, for he is an interesting species and it would be sad to us if he disappeared from the universe.'

'I suppose we are to be grateful,' I said.

'No,' said Misk, 'we have similarly brought various species to the Counter-Earth, from other locations.'

'I have seen few of these 'other species', ' I said.

Misk shrugged his antennae.

'I do remember,' I said, 'a Spider in the Swamp Forests of Ar.'

'The Spider People are a gentle race,' said Misk, 'except the female at the time of mating.'

'His name was Nar,' I said, 'and he would rather have died than injure a rational creature.'

'The Spider People are soft,' said Misk. 'They are not Priest-Kings.'

'I see,' I said.

'The Voyages of Acquisition,' said Misk, 'take place normally when we need fresh material from Earth, for our purposes.'

'I was the object of one such voyage,' I said.

'Obviously,' said Misk.

'It is said below the mountains that Priest-Kings know all that occurs on Gor.'

'Nonsense,' said Misk. 'But perhaps I shall show you the Scanning Room someday. We have four hundred Priest-Kings who operate the scanners, and we are accordingly well informed. For example, if there is a violation of our weapons laws we usually, sooner or later, discover it and after determining the coordinates put into effect the Flame Death Mechanism.'

I had once seen a man die the Flame Death, the High Initiate of Ar, on the roof of Ar's Cylinder of Justice. I shivered involuntarily.

'Yes,' I said simply, 'sometime I would like to see the Scanning Room.'

'But much of our knowledge comes from our implants,' said Misk. 'We implant humans with a control web and transmitting device. The lenses of their eyes are altered in such a way that what they see is registered by means of transducers on scent-screens in the scanning room. We can also speak and act by means of them, when the control web is activated in the Sardar.'

'The eyes look different?' I asked.

'Sometimes not,' said Misk, 'sometimes yes.'

'Was the creature Parp so implanted?' I asked, remembering his eyes.

'Yes,' said Misk, 'as was the man from Ar whom you met on the road long ago near Ko-ro-ba.'

'But he threw off the control web,' I said, 'and spoke as he wished.'

'Perhaps the webbing was faulty,' said Misk.

'But if it was not?' I asked.

'Then he was most remarkable,' said Misk. 'Most remarkable.'

'You spoke of knowing the Cabots for four hundred years,' I said.

'Yes,' said Misk, 'and your father, who is a brave and noble man, has served us upon occasion, though he dealt only, unknowingly, with Implanted Ones. He first came to Gor more than six hundred years ago.'

'Impossible!' I cried.

'Not with the stabilisation serums,' remarked Misk.

I was shaken by this information. I was sweating. The torch seemed to tremble in my hand.

'I have been working against Sarm and the others for millenia,' said Misk, 'and at last - more than three hundred years ago - I managed to obtain the egg from which this male emerged.' Misk looked down at the young Priest-King on the stone table. 'I then, by means of an Implanted Agent,

unconscious of the message being read through him, instructed your father to write the letter which you found in the mountains of your native world.'

My head was spinning.

'But I was not even born then!' I exclaimed.

'Your father was instructed to call you Tarl, and lest he might speak to you of the Counter-Earth or attempt to dissuade you from our purpose, he was returned to Gor before you were of an age to understand.'

'I thought he deserted my mother,' I said.

'She knew,' said Misk, 'for though she was a woman of Earth she had been to Gor.'

'Never did she speak to me of these things,' I said.

'Matthew Cabot on Gor,' said Misk, 'was a hostage for her silence.'

'My mother,' I said, 'died when I was very young...'

'Yes,' said Misk, 'because of a petty bacillus in your contaminated atmosphere, a victim to the inadequacies of your infantile bacteriology.'

I was silent. My eyes smarted, I suppose, from some heat or fume of the Mul-Torch.

'It was difficult to foresee,' said Misk. 'I am truly sorry.'

'Yes,' I said. I shook my head and wiped my eyes. I still held the memory of the lonely, beautiful woman whom I had known so briefly in my childhood, who in those short years had so loved me. Inwardly I cursed the Mul-Torch that had brought tears to the eyes of a Warrior of Ko-ro-ba.

'Why did she not remain on Gor?' I asked.

'It frightened her,' said Misk, 'and your father asked that she be allowed to return to Earth, for loving her he wished her to be happy and also perhaps he wanted you to know something of his old world.'

'But I found the letter in the mountains, where I had made camp by accident,' I said.

'When it was clear where you would camp the letter was placed there,' said Misk.

'Then it did not lie there for more than three hundred years?'

'Of course not,' said Misk, 'the risk of discovery would have been too great.'

'The letter itself was destroyed, and nearly took me with it,' I said.

'You were warned to discard the letter,' said Misk. 'It was saturated with Flame Lock, and its combustion index was set for twenty Ehn following opening.'

'When I opened the letter it was like switching on a bomb,' I said.

'You were warned to discard the letter,' said Misk.

'And the compass needle?' I asked, remembering its erratic behaviour which had so unnerved me.

'It is a simple matter,' said Misk, 'to disrupt a magnetic field.'

'But I returned to the same place I had fled from,' I said.

'The frightened human, when fleeing and disoriented, tends to circle,' said Misk. 'But it would not have mattered, I could have picked you up had you not returned. I think that you may have sensed there was no escape and thus, perhaps as an act of pride, returned to the scene of the letter.'

'I was simply frightened,' I said.

'No one is ever simply frightened,' said Misk.

'When I entered the ship I fell unconscious,' I said.

'You were anaesthetised,' said Misk.

'Was the ship operated from the Sardar?' I asked.

'It could have been,' said Misk, 'but I could not risk that.'

'Then it was manned,' I said.

'Yes,' said Misk.

I looked at him.

'Yes,' said Misk. 'It was I who manned it.' He looked down at me. 'Now it is late, past the sleeping time. You are tired.'

I shook my head. 'There is little,' I said, 'which was left to chance.'

'Chance does not exist,' said Misk, 'ignorance exists.'

'You cannot know that,' I said.

'No,' said Misk, 'I cannot know it.' The tips of Misk's antennae gently dipped towards me. 'You must rest now,' he said.

'No,' I said. 'Was the fact that I was placed in the chamber of the girl Vika of Treve considered?'

'Sarm suspects,' said Misk, 'and it was he who arranged your quarters, in order that you might succumb to her charms, that she might enthrall you, that she might bend you helplessly, pliantly to her will and whim as she had a hundred men before you, turning them - brave, proud warriors all - into the slaves of a slave, into the slaves of a mere girl, herself only a slave.'

'Can this be true?' I asked.

'A hundred men,' said Misk, 'allowed themselves to be chained to the foot of her couch where she would upon occasion, that they might not die, cast them scraps of food as though they might have been pet sleen.'

My old hatred of Vika now began once again to enfuse my blood, and my hands ached to grip her and shake her until her bones might break and then throw her to my feet.

'What became of them?' I asked.

'They were used as Muls,' said Misk.

My fists clenched.

'I am glad that such a creature,' said Misk, 'is not of my species.'

'I am sorry,' I said, 'that she is of mine.'

'When you broke the surveillance device in the chamber,' said Misk, 'I felt I had to act quickly.'

I laughed. 'Then,' I said, 'you actually thought you were saving me?'

'I did,' said Misk.

'I wonder,' I said.

'At any rate,' said Misk, 'it was not a risk we cared to take.'

'You speak of 'we'?'

'Yes,' said Misk.

'And who is the other?' I asked.

'The greatest in the Nest,' said Misk.

'The Mother?'

'Of course.'

Misk touched me lightly on the shoulder with his antennae.

'Come now,' he said. 'Let us return to the chamber above.'

'Why,' I asked, 'was I returned to Earth after the siege of Ar?'

'To fill you with hatred for Priest-Kings,' said Misk. 'Thus you would be more willing to come to the Sardar to find us.'

'But why seven years?' I asked. They had been long, cruel, lonely years.

'We were waiting,' said Misk.

'But for what?' I demanded.

'For there to be a female egg,' said Misk.

'Is there now such an egg?'

'Yes,' said Misk, 'but I do not know where it is.'

'Then who knows?' I asked.

'The Mother,' said Misk.

'But what have I to do with all this?' I demanded.

'You are not of the Nest,' said Misk, 'and thus you can do what is necessary.'

'What is necessary?' I asked.

'Sarm must die,' said Misk.

'I have no wish to kill Sarm,' I said.

'Very well,' said Misk.

I puzzled on the many things which Misk had told me, and then I looked up at him, lifting my torch that I might better see that great head with its rich, disklike, luminous eyes.

'Why is this one egg so important?' I asked. 'You have the stabilisation serums. Surely there will be many eggs, and others will be female.'

'It is the last egg,' said Misk.

'Why is that?' I demanded.

'The Mother was hatched and flew her Nuptial Flight long before the discovery of the stabilisation serums,' said Misk. 'We have managed to retard her aging considerably but eon by eon it has been apparent that our efforts have been less and less successful, and now there are no more eggs.'

'I don't understand,' I said.

'The Mother is dying,' said Misk.

I was silent and Misk did not speak and the only noise in that paneled metallic laboratory that was the cradle of a Priest-King was the soft crackle of the blue torch I held.

'Yes,' said Misk, 'it is the end of the Nest.'

I shook my head. 'This is no business of mine,' I said.

'That is true,' said Misk.

We faced one another. 'Well,' I said, 'are you not going to threaten me?'

'No,' said Misk.

'Are you not going to hunt down my father or my Free Companion and kill them if I do not serve you?'

'No,' said Misk. 'No.'

'Why not?' I demanded. 'Are you not a Priest-King?'

'Because I am a Priest-King,' said Misk.

I was thunderstruck.

'All Priest-Kings are not as Sarm,' said Misk. He looked down at me. 'Come,' he said, 'it is late and you will be tired. Let us retire to the chamber above.'

Misk left the room and I, bearing the torch, followed him.

To be continued.....<p>