MAJIPOOR

ROBERT SILVERBERG

LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE (1980)

MAJIPOOR CHRONICLES (1981)

VALENTINE PONTIFEX (1983)

THE MOUNTAINS OF MAJIPOOR (1995)

THE PRESTIMION TRILOGY:

SORCERERS OF MAJIPOOR (1997)

LORD PRESTIMION (1999)

THE KING OF DREAMS (2001)

The giant world of Majipoor, with a diameter at least ten times as great as that of our own planet's, was settled in the distant past by colonists from Earth, who made a place for themselves amidst the Piurivars, the intelligent native beings, known to the intruders from Earth as "Shapeshifters" or "Metamorphs" because of their ability to alter their bodily forms. Majipoor is an extraordinarily beautiful planet, with a largely benign climate, and is a place of astonishing zoological, botanical, and geographical wonders. Everything on Majipoor is large-scale—fantastic, marvelous.

Over the course of thousands of years, friction between the human colonists and the Metamorphs eventually led to a lengthy war and the defeat of the natives, who were penned up in huge reservations in remote regions of the planet. During those years, also, species from various other worlds came to settle on Majipoor—the tiny gnomish Vroons, the great shaggy four-armed Skandars, the two-headed Su-Suheris race, and several more. Some of these—notably the Vroons and the Su-Suheris—were gifted with extrasensory mental powers that permitted them to practice various forms of wizardry. But throughout the thousands of years of Majipoor history the humans remained the dominant species. They flourished and expanded, and eventually the human population of Majipoor came to number in the billions, mainly occupying huge and distinctive cities of ten to twenty million people.

The governmental system that evolved over those years was a kind of nonhereditary dual monarchy. Upon coming to power the senior ruler, known as the Pontifex, selects his own junior ruler, the Coronal. Technically the Coronal is regarded as the adoptive son of the Pontifex, and upon the death of the Pontifex takes his place on the senior throne, naming a new Coronal as his own successor. Both of these rulers make their homes on Alhanroel, the largest and most populous of Majipoor's three continents. The imperial residence of the Pontifex is in the lowest level of a vast subterranean city called the Labyrinth, from which he emerges only at rare intervals. The Coronal lives in an enormous castle at the summit of Castle Mount, a thirty-mile-high peak whose atmosphere is maintained in an eternal springtime by elaborate machinery. From time to time the Coronal descends from the opulence of the Castle to travel

across the face of the world in a Grand Processional, an event designed to remind Majipoor of the might and power of its rulers. Such a journey, which in Majipoor's vast distances could take several years, invariably brings the Coronal to Zimroel, the second continent, a place of gigantic cities interspersed among tremendous rivers and great unspoiled forests. More rarely he goes to the torrid third continent in the south, Suvrael, largely a wasteland of Sahara-like deserts.

Two other functionaries became part of the Majipoor governmental system later on. The development of a method of worldwide telepathic communication made possible nightly sendings of oracular advice and occasional therapeutic counsel, which became the responsibility of the mother of the incumbent Coronal, under the title of Lady of the Isle of Sleep. Her headquarters are situated on an island of continental size midway between Alhanroel and Zimroel. Later, a second telepathic authority, the King of Dreams, was set in place. He employs more powerful telepathic equipment in order to monitor and chastise criminals and other citizens whose behavior deviates from accepted Majipoor norms. This office is the hereditary property of the Barjazid family of Suvrael.

The first of the Majipoor novels,*Lord Valentine's Castle,* tells of a conspiracy that succeeds in overthrowing the legitimate Coronal, Lord Valentine, and replacing him with an impostor. Valentine, stripped of all his memories, is set loose in Zimroel to live the life of a wandering juggler, but gradually regains an awareness of his true role and launches a successful campaign to reclaim his throne. In the sequel,*Valentine Pontifex,* the now mature Valentine, a pacifist at heart, must deal with an uprising among the Metamorphs, who are determined to drive the hated human conquerors from their world at last. Valentine defeats them and restores peace with the help of the giant maritime beasts known as sea-dragons, whose intelligent powers were not previously suspected on Majipoor.

The story collection*Majipoor Chronicles* depicts scenes from many eras and social levels of Majipoor life, providing detailed insight into a number of aspects of the giant world not described in the novels. The short novel*The Mountains of Majipoor* , set five hundred years after Valentine's reign, carries the saga into the icy northlands, where a separate barbaric civilization has long endured. And the most recent of the Majipoor books,*The Prestimion Trilogy,* set a thousand years prior to Valentine's time, tells of an era in which the powers of sorcery and magic have become rife on Majipoor. The Coronal Lord Prestimion, after being displaced from his throne by the usurping son of the former Coronal with the assistance of mages and warlocks, leads his faction to victory in a civil war in which he too makes use of necromantic powers.

The story presented here offers an episode dating back to a time before any of the Majipoor novels published so far—a period more than four thousand years before Valentine's time, more than three thousand years before Prestimion. But its setting is ten thousand years after the time of the first human settlement, and the early history of Majipoor is already becoming legendary—

THE BOOK OF CHANGES

ROBERT SILVERBERG

Standing at the narrow window of his bedchamber early on the morning of the second day of his new life as a captive, looking out at the blood-red waters of the Sea of Barbirike far below, Aithin Furvain heard the bolt that sealed his apartment from the outside being thrown back. He glanced quickly around and saw the lithe catlike form of his captor, the bandit chief Kasinibon, come sidling in. Furvain turned toward

the window again.

“As I was saying last night, it truly is a beautiful view, isn’t it?” Kasinibon said. “There’s nothing like that scarlet lake anywhere else in all Majipoor.”

“Lovely, yes,” said Furvain, in a remote, affectless way.

With the same relentless good cheer Kasinibon went on, addressing himself to Furvain’s back, “I do hope you slept well, and that in general you’re finding your lodgings here comfortable, Prince Aithin.”

Out of some vestigial sense of courtesy—courtesy, even to a bandit!—Furvain turned to face the other man. “I don’t ordinarily use my title,” he said, stiffly, coolly.

“Of course. Neither do I, as a matter of fact. I come from a long line of east-country nobility, you know. Minor nobility, perhaps, yet nobility nevertheless. But they are such archaic things, titles!” Kasinibon grinned. It was a sly grin, almost conspiratorial, a mingling of mockery and charm. Despite everything Furvain found it impossible to dislike the man. —“You haven’t answered my question, though. Are you comfortable here, Furvain?”

“Oh, yes. Quite. It’s absolutely the most elegant of prisons.”

“I do wish to point out that this is not actually a prison but merely a private residence.”

“I suppose. Even so, I’m a prisoner here, is that not true?”

“I concede the point. You are indeed a prisoner, for the time being. My prisoner.”

“Thank you,” said Furvain. “I appreciate your straightforwardness.” He returned his attention to Barbirike Sea, which stretched, long and slender as a spear, for fifty miles or so through the valley below the gray cliff on which Kasinibon’s fortresslike retreat was perched. Long rows of tall sharp-tipped crescent dunes, soft as clouds from this distance, bordered its shores. They too were red. Even the air here had a red reflected shimmer. The sun itself seemed to have taken on a tinge of it. Kasinibon had explained yesterday, though Furvain had not been particularly interested in hearing it at the time, that the Sea of Barbirike was home to untold billions of tiny crustaceans whose fragile bright-colored shells, decomposing over the millennia, had imparted that bloody hue to the sea’s waters and given rise also to the red sands of the adjacent dunes. Furvain wondered whether his royal father, who had such an obsessive interest in intense color effects, had ever made the journey out here to see this place. Surely he had. Surely.

Kasinibon said, “I’ve brought you some pens and a supply of paper.” He laid them neatly out on the little table beside Furvain’s bed. “As I said earlier, this view is bound to inspire poetry in you, that I know.”

“No doubt it will,” said Furvain, still speaking in that same distant, uninflected tone.

“Shall we take a closer look at the lake this afternoon, you and I?”

“So you don’t intend to keep me penned up all the time in these three rooms?”

“Of course I don’t. Why would I be so cruel?”

“Well, then. I’ll be pleased to be taken on a tour of the lake,” Furvain said, as indifferently as before. “Its beauty may indeed stir a poem or two in me.”

Kasinibon gave the stack of paper an amiable tap. “You also may wish to use these sheets to begin

drafting your ransom request."

Furvain narrowed his eyes. "Tomorrow, perhaps, for that. Or the day after."

"As you wish. There's no hurry, you know. You are my guest here for as long as you care to stay."

"Your prisoner, actually."

"That too," Kasinibon said. "My guest, but also my prisoner, though I hope you will see yourself rather more as guest than prisoner. —You will excuse me now. I have my dreary administrative duties to deal with. Until this afternoon, then." And grinned once more, and bowed and took his leave.

Furvain was the fifth son of the former Coronal Lord Sangamor, whose best-known achievement had been the construction of the remarkable tunnels on Castle Mount that bore his name. Lord Sangamor was a man of a strong artistic bent, and the tunnels, whose walls were fashioned from a kind of artificial stone that blazed with inherent radiant color, were considered by connoisseurs to be a supreme work of art. Furvain had inherited his father's aestheticism but very little of his strength of character: in the eyes of many at the Mount he was nothing more than a wastrel, an idler, even a rogue. His own friends, and he had many of them, were hard pressed to find any great degree of significant merit in him. He was an unusually skillful writer of light verse, yes; and a genial companion on a journey or in a tavern, yes; and a clever hand with a quip or a riddle or a paradox, yes; and otherwise—otherwise—

A Coronal's son has no significant future in the administration of Majipoor, by ancient constitutional tradition. No function is set aside for him. He can never rise to the throne himself, for the crown is always adoptive, never hereditary. The Coronal's eldest son would usually establish himself on a fine estate in one of the Fifty Cities of the Mount and live the good life of a provincial duke. A second son, or even a third, might remain at the Castle and became a councilor of the realm, if he showed any aptitude for the intricacies of government. But a fifth son, born late in his father's reign and thereby shouldered out of the inner circle by all those who had arrived before him, would usually face no better destiny than a drifting existence of irresponsible pleasure and ease. There is no role in public life for him to play. He is his father's son, but he is nothing at all in his own right. No one is likely to think of him as qualified for any kind of serious duties, nor even to have any interest in such things. Such princes are entitled by birth to a permanent suite of rooms at the Castle and a generous and irrevocable pension, and it is assumed of them that they will contentedly devote themselves to idle amusements until the end of their days.

Furvain, unlike some princes of a more restless nature, had adapted very well to that prospect. Since no one expected very much of him, he demanded very little of himself. Nature had favored him with good looks: he was tall and slender, a graceful, elegant man with wavy golden hair and finely chiseled features. He was an admirable dancer, sang quite well in a clear, light tenor voice, excelled at most sports that did not require brute physical force, and was a capable hand at swordsmanship and chariot racing. But above all else he excelled at the making of verse. Poetry flowed from him in torrents, as rain falls from the sky. At any moment of the day or night, whether he had just been awakened after a long evening of drunken carousing or was in the midst of that carousing itself, he could take pen in hand and compose, almost extemporaneously, a ballad or a sonnet or a villanelle or a jolly rhyming epigram, or quick thumping short-legged doggerel, or even a long skein of heroic couplets, on any sort of theme. There was no profundity to such hastily dashed-off stuff, of course. It was not in his nature to probe the depths of the human soul, let alone to want to set out his findings in the form of poetry. But everyone knew that Aithin Furvain had no master when it came to the making of easy, playful verse, minor verse that celebrated the joys of the moment, the pleasures of the bed or of the bottle, verse that poked fun without ever edging into sour malicious satire, or that demonstrated a quick verbal interplay of rhythm and sound

without actually being about anything at all.

“Make a poem for us, Aithin,” someone of his circle would call out, as they sat at their wine in one of the brick-walled taverns of the Castle. “Yes!” the others would cry. “A poem, a poem!”

“Give me a word, someone,” Furvain would say.

And someone, his current lover, perhaps, would say at random, “Sausage.”

“Splendid. And you, give me another, now. The first that comes to mind.”

“Pontifex,” someone else would say.

“One more,” Furvain would beg. “You, back there.”

“Steetmoy,” the reply would come, from someone at the back of the group.

And Furvain, glancing for just a moment into his wine-bowl as though some poem might be lurking there, would draw a deep breath and instantaneously begin to recite a mock epic, in neatly balanced hexameter and the most elaborate of anapestic rhythms, about the desperate craving of a Pontifex for sausage made of steetmoy meat, and the sending of the laziest and most cowardly of the royal courtiers on a hunting expedition to the snowbound lair of that ferocious white-furred creature of northern Zimroel. Without pausing he would chant for eight or ten minutes, perhaps, until the task was done, and the tale, improvised though it was, would have a beginning and a middle and an uproariously funny end, bringing him a shower of enthusiastic applause and a fresh flask of wine.

The collected works of Aithin Furvain, had he ever bothered to collect them, would have filled many volumes; but it was his custom to toss his poems aside as quickly as he had scribbled them, nor were many of them ever written down in the first place, and it was only through the prudence of his friends that some of them had been saved and copied and circulated through the land. But that was of no importance to him. Making poetry was as easy for him as drawing breath, and he saw no reason why his quick improvisations should be saved and treasured. It was not, after all, as though they had been intended as enduring works of art, such as his royal father’s tunnels had been meant to be.

The Coronal Lord Sangamor had reigned long and generally successfully as Majipoor’s junior monarch for nearly thirty years under the Pontifex Pelxinai, until at last the venerable Pelxinai had been gathered to the Source by the Divine and Sangamor had ascended to the Pontificate himself. As Pontifex it was mandatory for him to leave Castle Mount and relocate himself in the subterranean Labyrinth, far to the south, that was the constitutional home of the elder ruler. For the remainder of his life he would rarely be seen in the outside world. Aithin Furvain had dutifully visited his father at the Labyrinth not long after his investiture as Pontifex, as he and his brothers were supposed to do now and then, but he doubted that he would ever make another such journey. The Labyrinth was a dark and gloomy place, very little to his liking. It could not be very pleasing for old Sangamor either, Furvain suspected; but, like all Coronals, Sangamor had known from the start that the Labyrinth was where he must finish his days. Furvain was under no such obligation to reside there, nor even to go there at all if he chose not to. And so Furvain, who had never known his father particularly well, did not see any reason why the two of them would ever meet again.

He had effectively separated himself from the Castle as well by then. Even while Lord Sangamor still reigned there, Furvain had set up a second residence for himself at Dundilmir, one of the Slope Cities far down toward the base of the gigantic upthrusting fang of rock that was Castle Mount. A schoolmate and close friend of his named Tanigel had now come into his inheritance as Duke of Dundilmir, and had offered Furvain some property there, a relatively modest estate overlooking the volcanic region known as

the Fiery Valley. Furvain would in essence be Duke Tanigel's court jester, a boon companion and maker of comic verse on demand. It was mildly irregular for a Coronal's son to accept a gift of land from a mere duke, but Tanigel understood that fifth sons of Coronals rarely were men of independent wealth, and he knew also that Furvain had grown weary of his listless life at the Castle and was looking to shift the scene of his idleness elsewhere. Furvain, who was not one to stand overmuch on dignity, had gladly acceded to Tanigel's suggestion, and spent most of the next few years at his Dundilmir estate, enjoying raucous times amongst Tanigel and his prosperous hard-drinking friends and going up to the great Castle at the summit of the Mount only on the most formal of occasions, such as his father's birthday, but scarcely returning to it at all after his father had become Pontifex and moved along to the Labyrinth.

Even the good life at Dundilmir had palled after a time, however. Furvain was entering his middle years, now, and he had begun to feel something that he had never experienced before, a vague gnawing dissatisfaction of some unspecifiable kind. Certainly he had nothing specific to complain about. He lived well, surrounded by amusing and enjoyable friends who admired him for the one minor skill that he practiced so well; his health was sound; he had sufficient funds to meet the ordinary expenses of his life, which were basically reasonable ones; he was rarely bored and never lacked for companions or lovers. And yet there was that odd ache in his soul from time to time, now, that inexplicable and unwarranted pang of malaise. It was a new kind of mood for him, disturbing, incomprehensible.

Perhaps the answer lay in travel, Furvain thought. He was a citizen of the largest and grandest and most beautiful world in all the universe, and yet he had seen very little of it: only Castle Mount, and no more than a dozen or so of the Mount's Fifty Cities at that, and the pleasant but not very interesting Glayge Valley, through which he had passed on his one journey to his father's new home in the Labyrinth. There was so much more out there to visit: the legendary cities of the south, places like Sippulgar and golden Arvyanda and many-spired Ketheron, and the stilt-legged villages around silvery Lake Roghoiz, and hundreds, even thousands of others spread like jewels across this enormous continent of Alhanroel, and then there was the other major continent, too, fabulous Zimroel, about which he knew practically nothing, far across the sea, abounding in marvelous attractions that sounded like places out of fable. It would be the task of several lifetimes to travel to all of those places.

But in the end he went in a different direction entirely. Duke Tanigel, who was fond of travel, had begun speaking of making a journey to the east-country, that empty and virtually unknown territory that lay between Castle Mount and the shores of the unexplored Great Sea. It was ten thousand years, now, since the first human settlers had come to dwell on Majipoor, which would have been time enough for filling up any world of normal size; but so large was Majipoor that even a hundred centuries of steady population growth had not been sufficient for the settlers to establish footholds in all its far-flung territories. The path of development had led steadily westward from the heart of Alhanroel, and then across the Inner Sea that separated Alhanroel from Zimroel to the other two continents. Scarcely anyone but a few inveterate wanderers had ever bothered to go east. There was a scruffy little farming town out there, Vrambikat, in a misty valley lying practically in the shadow of the Mount, and beyond Vrambikat there were, apparently, no settlements whatever, or at least none that could be found in the roster of the Pontifical tax collectors. Perhaps an occasional tiny settlement existed out there; perhaps not. In that sparsely populated region, though, lay an assortment of natural wonders known only from the memoirs of bold explorers. The scarlet Sea of Barbirike—the group of lakes known as the Thousand Eyes—the huge serpentine chasm called the Viper Rift, three thousand miles or more long and of immeasurable depth; and ever so much more—the Wall of Flame, the Web of Jewels, the Fountain of Wine, the Dancing Hills—much of it, perhaps, purely mythical, the inventions of imaginative but untrustworthy adventurers. Duke Tanigel proposed an expedition into these mysterious realms. "On and on, even to the Great Sea itself!" he cried. "We'll take the whole court with us. Who knows what we'll find? And you, Furvain—you'll write an account of everything we see, setting it all down in an unforgettable epic, a classic for the ages!"

But Duke Tanigel, though he was good at devising grand projects and planning them down to the finest detail, was less diligent in the matter of bringing them into the realm of actuality. For months the Duke and his courtiers pored over maps and explorers' narratives, hundreds and even thousands of years old, and laid out grandiose charts of their own intended route through what was, in fact, a trackless wilderness. Furvain found himself completely caught up in the enterprise, and in his dreams often imagined himself hovering like a great bird over some yet-to-be-discovered landscape of inconceivable beauty and strangeness. He yearned for the day of departure. The journey to the east-country, he came to realize, met some inner need of his that he had not previously known existed. The Duke continued planning endlessly for the trip, but never actually announced a date for setting forth, and finally Furvain came to see that no such expedition ever would take place. The Duke had no need actually to go, only to plan. And so one day Furvain, who had never gone any large distance by himself and usually found the whole idea of solitary travel a bit unpleasant, resolved to set out alone into the east-country.

Even so, he needed one last push, and it came to him from an unexpected quarter.

During the tense and bothersome period of hesitation and uncertainty that preceded his departure he paid a visit to the Castle, on the pretext of consulting certain explorers' charts said to be on deposit at the royal library. But once at the Castle he found himself unwilling to approach the library's unthinkable, almost infinite vastness, and instead paid a call on his father's famous tunnels, over on the western face of the Mount within a slim rocky spire that jutted hundreds of feet upward from the Mount's own bulk.

Lord Sangamor had caused his tunnels to be constructed in a long coiling ramp that wound upward through the interior of that elongated stony spire. In the forges of the secret chambers of the royal artisans, deep beneath the Castle of the Coronal, Sangamor's workmen had devised the radiant synthetic stone out of which the tunnels were to be built, and smelted it into big dazzling slabs; then, under the Coronal's personal direction, teams of masons had shaped those raw slabs of glowing matter into rectangular paving blocks of uniform size, which they fastidiously mortared into the walls and roofs of each chamber according to a carefully graded sequence of colors. As one walked along, one's eyes were bombarded with throbbing, pulsing emanations: sulphur yellow in this room, saffron in the next, topaz in the one after that, emerald, maroon, and then a sudden staggering burst of urgent red, with quieter tones beyond, mauve, aquamarine, a soft chartreuse. It was a symphony of colors, an unfailing outpouring of glowing light every moment of the day. Furvain spent two hours there, moving from room to room in mounting fascination and pleasure, until suddenly he could take no more. Some unexpected eruption was taking place within him. Sensations of vertigo and nausea swept through him. His mind felt numbed by the tremendous power and intensity of the display. He began to tremble, and there was a pounding in his chest. Obviously a quick retreat was necessary. He rushed toward the exit. Another half minute within those tunnels, Furvain realized, and he would have been forced to his knees.

Once outside, Furvain clung to a parapet, sweating, dazed, until in a little while something like calmness returned. The strength of his reaction perplexed him. The physical distress was over, but something else still remained, some sort of free-floating disquiet, at first hard to comprehend, but which he came quickly to understand for what it was: the splendor of the tunnels had kindled in him at first a sense of admiration verging on awe, but that had gone moving swiftly onward through his soul to become a crushing, devastating sensation of personal inadequacy.

He had always regarded this thing that the old man had built as nothing much other than a pleasant curiosity. But today, apparently having entered once more into that strangely oversensitized, almost neurasthenic state that had been typical of his recent moods, he had been overwhelmed by a new awareness of the greatness of his father's work. Through Furvain now was running a surge of something

he was forced to recognize as humility, an emotion with which he had never been particularly well acquainted. And why should he not feel humble? His father had achieved something rare and wonderful here. Amidst all the exhausting cares and distractions of state, Lord Sangamor had found the strength and inspiration to create a masterpiece of art.

Whereas he himself—whereas he—

The impact of the tunnels was still reverberating in him that evening. Rather than going on to the library afterward he arranged to dine with an old lover, the Lady Dolitha, in the airy restaurant that hung just above the Grand Melikand Court. She was a delicate-looking woman, very beautiful, dark-haired, olive-skinned, keen-witted. They had had a tempestuous affair for six months, ten years before. Eventually a certain unfettered sharpness about her, an excessive willingness to utter truths that one did not ordinarily utter, an overly sardonic way in which she sometimes chose to express her opinions, had cooled his desire for her. But Furvain had always prized the companionship of intelligent women, and the very quality of terrifying truthfulness that had driven him from her bed had made her appealing to him as a friend. So he had taken pains to preserve the friendship he had enjoyed with Dolitha even after the other sort of intimacy had been severed. She was as close as a sister to him now.

He told her of his experience in the tunnels. "Who would have expected such a thing?" he asked her. "A Coronal who's also a great artist!"

The Lady Dolitha's eyes sparkled with the ironic amusement that was her specialty. "Why do you think the one should exclude the other? The artistic gift's something an artist is born with. Later, perhaps, one can also choose the path that leads toward the throne. But the gift remains."

"I suppose."

"Your father sought power, and that can absorb one's entire energies. But he also chose to exercise his gift."

"The mark of his greatness, that he had breadth enough of soul to do both."

"Or confidence enough in himself. Of course, other people make different choices. Not always the right ones."

Furvain forced himself to meet her gaze directly, though he would rather have looked away. "What are you saying, Dolitha? That it was wrong of me not to go into the government?"

She put the back of her small hand to her lips to conceal, only partly, her wry smile.

"Hardly, Aithin."

"Then what? Come on. Spell it out! It isn't much of a secret, you know, even to me. I've fallen short somewhere, haven't I? You think I've misused my gift, is that it? That I've frittered away my talents drinking and gambling and amusing people with trivial little jingling rhymes, when I should have been closeted away somewhere writing some vast, profound philosophical masterpiece, something somber and heavy and pretentious that everybody would praise but no one would want to read?"

"Oh, Aithin, Aithin—"

"Am I wrong?"

"How can I tell you what you should have been writing? All I can tell you is that I see how unhappy you are, Aithin. I've seen it for a long time. Something's wrong within you—even you've finally come to

recognize that, haven't you?—and my guess is it must have something to do with your art, your poetry, since what else is there that's important to you, really?"

He stared at her. How very characteristic of her it was to say a thing like that.

"Go on."

"There's very little more to say."

"But there's something, eh? Say it, then."

"It's nothing that I haven't said before."

"Well, say it again. I can be very obtuse, Dolitha."

He saw the little quiver of her nostrils that he had been expecting, the tiny movement of the tip of her tongue between her closed lips. It was clear to him from that that he could expect no mercy from her now. But mercy was not the commodity for which he had come to her this evening.

Quietly she said, "The path you've taken isn't the right path. I don't know what the right path would be, but it's clear that you aren't on it. You need to reshape your life, Aithin. To make something new and different out of it for yourself. That's all. You've gone along this path as far as you can, and now you need to change. I knew ten years ago, even if you didn't, that something like this was going to come. Well, now it has. As you finally have come to realize yourself."

"I suppose I have, yes."

"It's time to stop hiding."

"Hiding?"

"From yourself. From your destiny, from whatever that may be. From your true essence. You can hide from all those, Aithin, but you can't hide from the Divine. So far as the Divine is concerned, there's no place where you can't be seen. —Change your life, Aithin. I can't tell you how."

He looked at her, stunned.

"No. Of course you can't." He was silent a moment. "I'll start by taking a trip," he said. "Alone. To some distant place where there'll be no one but myself, and I can meet myself face to face. And then we'll see."

In the morning, dismissing all thought of the royal library and whatever maps it might or might not contain—the time for planning was over; it was the time simply to go—he returned to Dundilmir and spent a week putting his house in order and arranging for the provisions he would need for his journey into the east-country. Then he set out, unaccompanied, saying nothing to anyone about where he was going. He had no idea what he would find, but he knew he would find something, and that he would be the better for it. This would be, he thought, a serious venture, a quest, even: a search for the interior life of Aithin Furvain, which somehow he had misplaced long ago. *You have to change your life,* Dolitha had said, and, yes, yes, that was what he would do. It would be a new thing for him. He had never embarked on anything serious before. He set out now in a strangely optimistic mood, alert to all vibrations of his consciousness. And was barely a week beyond the small dusty town of Vrambikat when he was captured by a party of roving outlaws and taken to Kasinibon's hilltop stronghold.

That there should be anarchy of this sort in an outlying district like the east-country was something that had never occurred to him, but it was no major surprise. Majipoor was, by and large, a peaceful place, where the rulers had for thousands of years ruled by the freely given consent of the governed; but the distances were so vast, the writ of the Pontifex and Coronal so tenuous in places, that quite probably there were many districts where the central government existed only in name. When it took months for news to travel between the centers of the administration and remote Zimroel or sun-blasted Suvrael in the south, was it proper to say that the arm of the government actually reached those places? Who could know, up there at the summit of Castle Mount, or in the depths of the Labyrinth, what really went on in those distant lands? Everyone generally obeyed the law, yes, because the alternative was chaos: but it was quite conceivable that in many districts the citizens did more or less as they pleased most of the time, while maintaining staunchly that they were faithful in their obedience to the commandments of the central government.

And out here, where no one dwelled anyway, or hardly anyone, and the government did not so much as attempt to maintain a presence—what need was there for a government at all, or even the pretense of one?

Since leaving Vrambikat Furvain had been riding quietly along through the quiet countryside, with titanic Castle Mount still a mighty landmark behind him in the west but now beginning to dwindle a little, and a dark range of hills starting to come into view ahead of him. Every prospect before him appeared to go on for a million miles. He had never seen open space such as this, with no hint anywhere that human life might be present on this world. The air was clear as glass here, the sky cloudless, the weather gentle, springlike. Broad rolling meadows of bright golden grass, short-leaved, fleshy-stemmed, dense as a tightly woven carpet, stretched off before him. Here and there some beast of a sort unknown to Furvain browsed on the grass, paying no heed to him. This was the ninth day of his journey. The solitude was refreshing. It cleansed the soul. The deeper he went into this silent land, the greater was his sense of inner healing, of purification.

He paused at noon at a place where little rocky hills jutted from the blunt-stalked yellow grass to rest his mount and allow it to graze. He had brought an elegant beast with him, high-spirited and beautiful, a racing-mount, really, not perfectly suited for long plodding marches. It was necessary to halt frequently while the animal gathered its strength.

Furvain did not mind that. With no special destination in mind, there was no reason to adopt a hurried pace.

His mind roved ahead into the emptiness and tried to envision the marvels that awaited him. The Viper Rift, for example: what would that be like, that colossal cleft in the bosom of the world? Vertical walls that gleamed like gold, so steep that one could not even think of descending to the rift floor, where a swift green river, a serpent that seemed to have neither head nor tail, flowed toward the sea. The Great Sickle, said to be a slender, curving mass of shining white marble, a sculpture fashioned by the hand of the Divine, rising in superb isolation to a height of hundreds of feet above a tawny expanse of flat desert, a fragile arc that sighed and twanged like a harp when strong winds blew across its edge: an account dating from Lord Stiamot's time, four thousand years before, said that the sight of it, limned against the night sky with a moon or two glistening near its tip, was so beautiful it would make a Skandar drayman weep. The Fountains of Embolain, where thunderous geysers of fragrant pink water smooth as silk went rushing upward every fifty minutes, day and night—and then, a year's journey away, or perhaps two or three, the towering cliffs of black stone, riven by dazzling veins of white quartz, that guarded the shore of the Great Sea, the unbroken and unnavigable expanse of water that covered nearly half of the giant planet—

"Stand," a harsh voice suddenly said. "You are trespassing here. Identify yourself."

Furvain had been alone in this silent wilderness for so long that the grating sound ripped across his awareness like a blazing meteor's jagged path across a starless sky. Turning, he saw two glowering men, stocky and roughly dressed, standing atop a low outcropping of rock just a few yards behind him. They were armed. A third and a fourth, farther away, guarded a string of a dozen or so mounts roped together with coarse yellow cord.

He remained calm. "A trespasser, you say? But this place belongs to no one, my friend! Or else to everyone."

"This place belongs to Master Kasinibon," said the shorter and surlier looking of the two, whose eyebrows formed a single straight black line across his furrowed forehead. He spoke in a coarse, thick-tongued way, with an unfamiliar accent that muffled all his consonants. "You'll need his permission to travel here. What is your name?"

"Aithin Furvain of Dundilmir," answered Furvain mildly. "I'll thank you to tell your master, whose name is unknown to me, that I mean no harm to his lands or property, that I'm a solitary traveler passing quickly through, who intends nothing more than—"

"Dundilmir?" the other man muttered. The thick eyebrow rose. "That's a city of the Mount, if I'm not mistaken. What's a man of Castle Mount doing wandering around in these parts? This is no place for you." And, with a guffaw: "Who are you, anyway, the Coronal's son?"

Furvain smiled. "As long as you ask," he said, "I might as well inform you that in point of fact I*am* the Coronal's son. Or I was, anyway, until the death of the Pontifex Pelxinai. My father's name is—"

A quick backhand blow across the face sent Furvain sprawling to the ground. He blinked in amazement. The blow had been a light one, merely a slap; it was the utter surprise of it that had cost him his balance. He could not remember any occasion in his life when someone had struck him, even when he was a boy.

"—Sangamor," he went on, more or less automatically, since the words were already in his mouth. "Who was Coronal under Pelxinai, and now is Pontifex himself—"

"Do you value your teeth, man? I'll hit you again if you keep on mocking me!"

In a wondering tone Furvain said, "I told you nothing but the simple truth, friend. I am Aithin of Dundilmir, the son of Sangamor. My papers will confirm it." It was beginning to dawn on him now that announcing his royal pedigree to these men like this might not have been the most intelligent possible course to take, but he had never given any thought before this to the possibility that there might be places in the world where revealing such a thing could be unwise. In any case it was too late now for him to take it back. He had no way of preventing them from examining his papers; they plainly stated who he was; it was best to assume that no one, even out here, would presume to interfere with the movements of a son of the Pontifex, mere fifth son though he might be. "I forgive you for that blow," he said to the one who had struck him. "You had no idea of my identity. I'll see that no harm comes to you for it. —And now, if you please, with all respect to your Master Kasinibon, the time has come for me to continue on my way."

"Your way, at the moment, leads you to Master Kasinibon," replied the man who had knocked him down. "You can pay your respects to him yourself."

They prodded him roughly to his feet and indicated with a gesture that he was to get astride his mount, which the other two—grooms, evidently—tied to the last of the string of mounts that they had been leading. Furvain saw now what he had not noticed earlier, that what he had taken for a small hummock at the highest ridge of the hill just before him was actually a low structure of some sort; and as they went upward, following a steep path that was hardly a path at all, a mere thin scuffing of hoofprints through the

grass, all but invisible at times, it became clear to him that the structure was in fact a substantial hilltop redoubt, virtually a fortress, fashioned from the same glossy gray stone as the hill itself. Though apparently only two stories high, it spread on and on for a surprising distance along the ridge, and, as the path they were following began to curve around to the side, giving Furvain a better view, he saw that the structure extended down the eastern front of the hill for several additional levels facing into the valley beyond. He saw, too, the red shimmer of the sky above the valley, and then, as they attained the crest, the startling red slash of a long narrow lake that could only be the famed Sea of Barbirike, flanked by parallel rows of dunes whose sand was of the same brilliant red hue. Master Kasinibon, whoever he might be, this outlaw chieftain, had seized for the site of his citadel one of the most spectacular vantage points in all of Majipoor, a site of almost unworldly splendor. One had to admire the audacity of that, Furvain thought. The man might be an outlaw, yes, a bandit, even, but he must also be something of an artist.

The building, when they finally came over the top of the hill and around to its front, turned out to be a massive thing, square-edged and heavyset, designed for solidity rather than elegance, but not without a certain rustic power and presence. It had two long wings, radiating from a squat central quadrangle, that bent forward to reach a considerable way down the Barbirike Valley side of the hill. Its designer must have had impregnability in mind more than anything else. There was no plausible way to penetrate its defenses. The building could not be approached at all from its western side, because the final stretch of the hillside up which Furvain and his captors had just come was wholly vertical, a bare rock face impossible to ascend, and the building itself showed only a forbidding windowless facade on that side. The path from below, once it had brought them to that point of no ascent, made a wide swing off to the right, taking them over the ridge at the hill's summit and around to the front of the building, where any wayfarer would be fully exposed to the weaponry of the fortress above. Here it was guarded by watchtowers. It was protected also by a stockade, a portcullis, a formidable rampart. The building had only one entrance, not a large one. All its windows were constricted vertical slits, invulnerable to attack but useful to the defenders in case attack should come.

Furvain was conducted unceremoniously within. There was no shoving or pushing; no one actually touched him at all; but the effect was one of being hustled along by Kasinibon's men, who doubtless would shove him quite unhesitatingly if he made it necessary for them to do so. He found himself being marched down a long corridor in the left-hand wing, and then up a single flight of stairs and into a small suite of rooms, a bedroom and a sitting room and a room containing a tub and a washstand. It was a stark place. The walls were of the same blank gray stone as the exterior of the fortress, without decoration of any kind. The windows of all three rooms, like all those in the rest of the building, were mere narrow slits, facing out toward the lake. The place was furnished simply, a couple of spare utilitarian tables and chairs and a small, uninviting bed, a cupboard, a set of empty shelves, a brick-lined fireplace. They deposited his baggage with him and left him alone, and when he tried the door he discovered that it was bolted from without. So, then, it was a suite maintained for the housing of unwilling guests, Furvain thought. And doubtless he was not the first.

Not for many hours did he have the pleasure of meeting the master of this place. Furvain spent the time pacing from room to room, surveying his new domain until he had seen it all, which did not take very long. Then he stared out at the lake for a while, but its loveliness, remarkable though it was, eventually began to pall. Then he constructed three quick verse epigrams that made ironic fun of his new predicament, but in all three instances he was oddly unable to find an adequate closing line, and he eradicated all three from his memory without completing them.

He felt no particular annoyance at having been captured like this. At this point he saw it as nothing more

than an interesting novelty, a curious incident of his journey into the east-country, an episode with which to amuse his friends after his return. There was no reason to feel apprehensive. This Master Kasinibon was, most likely, some petty lordling of the Mount who had grown tired of his coddled, stable life in Banglecode or Stee or Bibiroon, or wherever it was he came from, and had struck out for himself into this wild region to carve out a little principality of his own. Or perhaps he had been guilty of some minor infraction of the law, or had given offense to a powerful kinsman, and had chosen to remove himself from the world of conventional society. Either way, Furvain saw no reason why he should come to harm at Kasinibon's hands. No doubt Kasinibon wanted merely to impress him with his own authority as master of this territory, and to storm and bluster a bit at Furvain's temerity in entering the district without the permission of its self-appointed overlord, and then he would be released.

The shadows over the red lake were lengthening now as the sun proceeded on in its journey toward Zimroel. Restlessness began to grow in Furvain with the coming of the day's end. Eventually a servant appeared, an expressionless puffy-faced Hjort with great staring batrachian eyes, who set before him a tray of food and departed without saying a word. Furvain inspected his meal: a flask of pink wine, a plate of some pallid soft meat, a bowl filled with what looked like unopened flower buds. Simple fare for rustic folk, he thought. But the wine was supple and pleasant, the meat was tender and bathed in a subtle aromatic sauce, and the flower buds, if that was what they were, released an agreeable sweetness when he bit into them, and left an interesting subtaste of sharp spiciness behind.

Not long after he was done, the door opened again and a small, almost elfin man of about fifty, gray-eyed and thin-lipped, garbed in a green leather jerkin and yellow tights, came in. From his swagger and stance it was plain that he was a person of consequence. He affected a clipped mustache and a short, pointed beard and wore his long hair, which was a deep black liberally streaked with strands of white, pulled tightly back and knotted behind. There was a look of slyness about him, of a playful slipperiness, that Furvain found pleasing and appealing.

"I am Kasinibon," he announced. His voice was soft and light but had the ring of authority to it nevertheless. "I apologize for any deficiencies in our hospitality thus far."

"I have noticed none," said Furvain coolly. "Thus far."

"But surely you must be accustomed to finer fare than I'm able to offer here. My men tell me you are the son of Lord Sangamor." Kasinibon offered Furvain a quick cool flicker of a smile, but nothing that could be interpreted as any sort of gesture of respect, let alone obeisance. "Or did they misunderstand something you said?"

"There was no misunderstanding. I'm indeed one of Sangamor's sons. The youngest one. I am called Aithin Furvain. If you'd like to see my papers—"

"That's scarcely necessary. Your bearing alone reveals you for whom and what you are."

"And if I may ask—" Furvain began.

But Kasinibon spoke right over Furvain's words, doing it so smoothly that it seemed almost not to be discourteous. "Do you, then, have an important role in His Majesty's government?"

"I have no role at all. You are aware, I think, that high office is never awarded on the basis of one's ancestry. A Coronal's sons do the best they can for themselves, but nothing is guaranteed to them. As I was growing up I discovered that my brothers had already taken advantage of most of the available opportunities. I live on my pension. A modest one," Furvain added, because it was beginning to occur to him that Kasinibon might have a ransom in mind.

"You hold no official post whatever, is that what you're saying?"

"None."

"What is it that you do, then? Nothing?"

"Nothing that could be considered work, I suppose. I spend my days as companion to my friend, the Duke of Dundilmir. My role is to provide amusement for the Duke and his court circle. I have a certain minor gift for poetry."

"Poetry!" Kasinibon exclaimed. "You are a poet? How splendid!" A new light came into his eyes, a look of eager interest that had the unexpected effect of transforming his features in such a way as to strip him of all his slyness for a moment, leaving him looking strangely youthful and vulnerable. "Poetry is my great passion," Kasinibon said, in an almost confessional tone. "My comfort and my joy, living out here as I do on the edge of nowhere, so far from civilized pursuits. Tuminok Laskil! Vornifon! Dammiunde! Do you know how much of their work I've committed to memory?" And he struck a schoolboy pose and began to recite something of Dammiunde's, one of his most turgid pieces, a deadly earnest piece of romantic fustian about star-crossed lovers that Furvain, even as a boy, had always found wildly ludicrous. He struggled now to maintain a straight face as Kasinibon quoted an extract from one of its most preposterous sequences, the wild chase through the swamps of Kajith Kabulon. Perhaps Kasinibon came to suspect, in time, that his guest did not have the highest respect for Dammiunde's famous work, because a glow of embarrassment spread across his cheeks, and he broke the recitation off abruptly, saying, "A little old-fashioned, perhaps. But I've loved it since my boyhood."

"It's not one of my favorites," Furvain conceded. "But Tuminok Laskil, now—"

"Ah, yes. Tuminok Laskil!" At once Kasinibon treated Furvain to one of Laskil's soppiest lyrics, a work of the Ni-moyan poet's extreme youth for which Furvain could not even pretend to hide his contempt, and then, reddening once again and again leaving the poem unfinished, switched hastily to a much later verse, the third of the dark*Sonnets of Reconciliation* , which he spoke with surprising eloquence and depth of emotion. Furvain knew the poem well and cherished it, and recited it silently along with Kasinibon to the finish, and found himself unexpectedly moved at the end, not only by the poem itself but by the force of Kasinibon's admiration for it and the deftness of his reading.

"That one is much more to my taste than the first two," said Furvain after a moment, feeling that something had to be said to break the awkward stillness that the poem's beauty had created in the room.

Kasinibon seemed pleased. "I see: You prefer the deeper, more somber work, is that it? Perhaps those first two misled you, then. Let me not do that: please understand that for me as it is for you, late Laskil is much to be preferred. I won't deny that I have a hearty appreciation for plenty of simple stuff, but I hope you'll believe me when I say that I turn to poetry for wisdom, for consolation, for instruction, even, far more often than I do for light entertainment. —Your own work, I take it, is of the serious kind? A man of your obvious intelligence must be well worth reading. How strange that I don't know your name."

"I said I had a minor gift," Furvain replied, "and minor is what it is, and my verse as well. Light entertainment is the best I can do. And I've published none of it. My friends think that I should, but such trifling pieces as I produce hardly seem worth the trouble."

"Would you favor me by quoting one?"

This seemed entirely absurd, to be standing here discussing the art of poetry with a bandit chieftain whose minions had seized him without warrant and who now had locked him up in this grim frontier fortress, for what Furvain just now was beginning to suspect might be an extended imprisonment. And at the moment

nothing would come to mind, anyway, except some of his silliest piffle, the trivial lyrics of a trivial-minded courtier. He could not bear, suddenly, to reveal himself to this strange man as the empty, dissolute spinner of idle verse that he knew he was. And so he begged off, claiming that the fatigue of his day's adventures had left him too weary to be able to do a proper recitation.

"Tomorrow, then, I hope," Kasinibon said. "And it would give me much pleasure not only if you would allow me to hear some of your finest work, but also for you to compose some memorable new poems during your stay under my roof."

"Ah," said Furvain. He gave Kasinibon a long, piercing look. "And just how long, do you think, is that stay likely to be?"

"That will depend," Kasinibon said, and the slippery glint of slyness, not so pleasing now, was back in his eyes, "on the generosity of your family and friends. But we can talk more about that tomorrow, Prince Aithin." Then he gestured toward the window. Moonlight now glittered on the breast of the scarlet lake, carving a long ruby track running off toward the east. "That view, Prince Aithin: it certainly must be inspiring to a man of your poetic nature." Furvain did not reply. Kasinibon, undeterred, spoke briefly of the origin of the lake, the multitude of small organisms whose decaying shells had given it its extraordinary color, like any proud host explaining a famed local wonder to an interested guest. But Furvain had little interest, just now, in the beauty of the lake or the role its inhabitants had played in its appearance. Kasinibon seemed to perceive that, after a bit. "Well," he said, finally. "I bid you goodnight, and a good night's rest."

So he was indeed a prisoner, being held here for ransom. What a lovely, farcical touch! And how appropriate that a man who could in his middle years still love that childish, idiotic romantic epic of Dammiunde's would come up with the fanciful idea, straight out of Dammiunde, of demanding a ransom for his release!

But for the first time since being brought here Furvain felt some uneasiness. This was a serious business. Kasinibon might be a romantic, but he was no fool. His impregnable stone fortress alone testified to that. Somehow he had managed to set himself up as the independent ruler of a private domain, less than two weeks' journey from Castle Mount itself, and very probably he ruled that domain as its absolute master, beholden to no one in the world, a law unto himself. Obviously his men had had no idea that they would be kidnapping a Coronal's son when they had come upon a lone wayfarer in that meadow of golden grass, but all the same they had not hesitated to take him to Kasinibon after Furvain had revealed his identity to them, and Kasinibon himself did not seem to regard himself as running any serious risk by making Lord Sangamor's youngest son his prisoner.

A prisoner held for ransom, then.

And who was going to pay that ransom? Furvain had no significant assets himself. Duke Tanigel did, of course. But Tanigel, most likely, would think the ransom note was one of Furvain's pleasant jests, and would chuckle and throw it away. A second, more urgent request would in all probability meet the same fate, especially if Kasinibon asked some ridiculous sum as the price of Furvain's freedom. The Duke was a wealthy man, but would he deem it worth, say, ten thousand royals to have Furvain back at his court again? That was a very high price to pay for a spinner of idle verse.

To whom, then, could Furvain turn? His brothers? Hardly. They were, all four of them, mean-souled, purse-pinching men who clutched tight at every coin. And in their eyes he was only a useless, frivolous nullity. They'd leave him to gather dust here forever rather than put up half a crown to rescue him. And

his father the Pontifex? Money would not be an issue for him. But Furvain could easily imagine his father shrugging and saying, "This will do Aithin some good, I think. He'd had an easy ride through life: let him endure a little hardship, now."

On the other hand, the Pontifex could scarcely condone Kasinibon's lawlessness. Seizing innocent travelers and holding them for ransom? It was a deed that struck at the very core of the social contract that allowed a civilization so far-flung as Majipoor's to hold together. But a military scout would come out and see that the citadel was unassailable, and they would decide not to waste lives in the attempt. A stern decree would be issued, ordering Kasinibon to release his captive and desist from taking others, but nothing would be done by way of enforcing it. I will stay here the rest of my life, Furvain concluded gloomily. I will finish my days as a prisoner in this stone fortress, endlessly pacing these echoing halls. Master Kasinibon will award me the post of court poet and we will recite the collected works of Tuminok Laskil to each other until I lose my mind.

A bleak prospect. But there was no point in fretting further over it tonight, at any rate. Furvain forced himself to push all these dark thoughts aside and made himself ready for bed.

The bed, meager and unresilient, was less comfortable than the one he had left behind in Dundilmir, but was, at least, to be preferred to the simple bedroll laid out on the ground under a canopy of stars that he had used these past ten days of his journey through the east-country. As he dropped toward sleep, Furvain felt a sensation he knew well, that of a poem knocking at the gates of his mind, beckoning to him to allow it to be born. He saw it only dimly, a vague thing without form, but even in that dimness he was aware that it would be something unusual, at least for him. More than unusual, in fact: something unique. It would be, he sensed, a prodigious work, unprecedented, a poem that would somehow be of far greater scope and depth than anything he had ever produced, though what its subject was was something he could not yet tell. Something magnificent, of that he felt certain, as the knocking continued and became more insistent. Something mighty. Something to touch the soul and heart and mind: something that would transform all who approached it. He was a little frightened of the size of it. He scarcely knew what to make of it, that something like this had come into his mind. There was great power to it, and soaring music, somber and jubilant all at once. But of course the poem had*not* come into his mind—only its dimensions, not the thing itself. The actual poem would not come into clear view at all, at least not of its own accord, and when he reached through to seize it, it eluded him with the swiftness of a skittish bilantoon, dancing back beyond his reach, vanishing finally into the well of darkness that lay beneath his consciousness, nor would it return even though he lay awake a long while awaiting it.

At last he abandoned the effort and tried to compose himself for sleep once again. Poems must never be seized, he knew; they came only when they were willing to come, and it was futile to try to coerce them. Furvain could not help wondering, though, about its theme. He had no idea of what the poem had been about, nor, he suspected, had he been aware of it even in the instant of the dream. There was no specificity to it, no tangible substance. All he could say was that the poem had been some kind of mighty thing, a work of significant breadth and meaning, and a kind of majesty. Of that he was sure, or reasonably sure, anyway: it had been the major poem of which everyone but he himself was certain he was capable, offering itself to his mind at last. Teasing him, tempting him. But never showing anything more of itself to him than its aura, its outward gleam, and then dancing away, as though to mock him for the laziness of all his past years. An ironic tragedy: the great lost poem of Aithin Furvain. The world would never know, and he would mourn its loss forever.

Then he decided that he was simply being foolish. What had he lost? His drowsy mind had been playing with him. A poem that is only a shadow of a shadow is no poem at all. To think that he had lost a masterpiece was pure idiocy. How did he know how good the poem, had he been granted any clear sight of it, would have been? What means did he have to judge the quality of a poem that had refused to

come into being? He was flattering himself to think that there had been any substance there. The Divine, he knew, had not chosen to give him the equipment that was necessary for the forging of major poems. He was a shallow, idle man, meant to be the maker of little jingling rhymes, of lighthearted playful verse, not of masterpieces. That beckoning poem had been a mere phantom, he thought, the delusion of a weary mind at the edge of sleep, the phantasmagoric aftermath of his bizarre conversation with Master Kasinibon. Furvain let himself drift downward again into slumber, and slipped away quickly this time.

When he woke, with vague fugitive memories of the lost poem still troubling his mind like a dream that will not let go, he had no idea at first where he was. Bare stone walls, a hard narrow bed, a mere slit of a window through which the morning sun was pouring with merciless power? Then he remembered. He was a prisoner in the fortress of Master Kasinibon. He was angry, at first, that what he had intended as a journey of private discovery, the purifying voyage of a troubled soul, had been interrupted by a band of marauding ruffians; then he was once more amused at the novelty of having been seized in such a fashion; and then he became angry again over the intrusion on his life. But anger, Furvain knew, would serve no useful purpose. He must remain calm, and look upon this purely as an adventure, the raw material for anecdotes and poems with which to regale his friends when he was home at last in Dundilmir.

He bathed and dressed and spent some time studying the effects of morning light on the still surface of the lake, which at this early hour seemed crimson rather than scarlet, and then grew irritable again, and was pacing from room to room once more when the Hjort appeared with his breakfast. In midmorning Kasinibon paid his second visit to him, but only for a few minutes, and then the morning stretched on interminably until the Hjort came by to bring him lunch. For a time he plumbed his consciousness for some vestige of that lost poem, but the attempt was hopeless, and only instilled in him pangs of regret for he knew not what. Which left him with nothing to do but stare at the lake; and though the lake was indeed exquisite, and of the sort of beauty that changed from hour to hour with the changing angles of the sunlight, Furvain could study those changes only so long before even such beauty as this ceased to stir a response in him.

He had brought some books with him on this journey, but he found that he had no interest in reading now. The words seemed mere meaningless marks on the page. Nor was he able to find distraction in poetry of his own making. It was as if the vanishing of that imaginary masterpiece of the night had taken the ability even to write light verse from him. The fountain that had flowed in a copious gush all his life had gone mysteriously dry: just now he was as empty of poetry as the walls of these rooms were of ornament. So there he was without solace for his solitude. Solitude had never been this much of a problem for him before. Not that he had ever had to put up with any great deal of it, but he had always been able to divert himself with versifying or word games when he did, and that, for some reason he failed to comprehend, was cut off from him now. While he was still traveling on his own through the east-country he had found being alone to be no burden at all, in fact an interesting and stimulating and instructive new experience; but out there he had had the strangeness of the landscape to appreciate, the unusual new flora and fauna that each day brought, and also he had been much absorbed by the whole challenge of solitary travel, the need to manage his own meals, to find an adequate place to make camp at night, a suitable source of water, and all that. Here, though, locked up in these barren little rooms, he was thrown back on his own resources, and the only resource he had, really, was the boundless fertility of his poetic imagination; and, although he had no idea why, he seemed no longer to have any access to that.

Kasinibon returned for him not long after lunch.

“To the lake, then?” he asked.

“To the lake, yes.”

The outlaw chieftain led him grandly through the clattering stone hallways of the fortress, down and down and down, and ultimately to a corridor on the lowest level, through which they emerged onto a little winding path covered with tawny gravel that curved off in a series of gentle switchbacks to the red lake far below. To Furvain's surprise Kasinibon was unaccompanied by any of his men: the party consisted only of the two of them. Kasinibon walked in front, completely untroubled, apparently, by the possibility that Furvain might choose to attack him.

I could snatch his knife from its scabbard and put it to his throat, Furvain thought, and make him swear to release me. Or I could simply knock him down and club his head against the ground a few times, and run off into the wilderness. Or I could—

It was all too inane to contemplate. Kasinibon was a man of small stature but he looked quick and strong. Doubtless he would instantly make Furvain regret any sort of physical attack. Probably he had bodyguards lurking in the bushes, besides. And even if Furvain did somehow succeed in overpowering him and getting away, what good would it do? Kasinibon's men would hunt him down and take him prisoner again within an hour.

I am his guest, Furvain told himself. He is my host. Let us leave it at that, at least for now.

Two mounts were waiting for them at the edge of the lake. One was the fine, high-spirited creature, with fiery red eyes and flanks of a deep maroon, that Furvain had brought with him from Dundilmir; the other, a short-legged, yellowish beast, looked like a peasant's dray-mount. Kasinibon vaulted up into its saddle and gestured to Furvain to follow suit.

"Barbirike Sea," said Kasinibon, in a tour guide's mechanical voice, as they started forward, "is close to three hundred miles long, but no more than two thousand feet across at its widest point. It is closed at each end by virtually unscalable cliffs. We have never been able to find any spring that flows into it: it replenishes itself entirely through rainfall." Seen at close range, the lake seemed more than ever like a great pool of blood. So dense was the red hue that the water had no transparency whatever. From shore to shore it presented itself as an impenetrable sheet of redness, with no features visible below the surface. The reflected face of the sun burned like a sphere of flame on the still waters.

"Can anything live in it?" Furvain asked. "Other than the crustaceans that give it its color?"

"Oh, yes," said Kasinibon. "It's only water, you know. We fish it every day. The yield is quite heavy."

A path barely wide enough for their two mounts side by side separated the lake's edge from the towering dunes of red sand that ran alongside it. As they rode eastward along the lake, Kasinibon, still playing the guide, pointed out tidbits of natural history to Furvain: a plant with short, purplish, plumply succulent finger-shaped leaves that was capable of flourishing in the nearly sterile sand of the dunes and dangled down over the crescent slopes in long ropy strands, and a yellow-necked beady-eyed predatory bird that hovered overhead, now and again plunging with frightful force to snatch some denizen of the water out of the lake, and furry little round-bodied crabs that scuttered around like mice along the shore, digging in the scarlet mud for hidden worms. He told Furvain the scientific name of each one, but the names went out of his mind almost at once. Furvain had never troubled to learn very much about the creatures of the wild, although he found these creatures interesting enough, in their way. But Kasinibon, who seemed to be in love with this place, evidently knew everything there was to know about each one. Furvain, though he listened politely enough to his disquisitions, found them distracting and bothersome.

For Furvain the overwhelming redness of the Barbirike Valley was the thing that affected him most deeply. This was beauty of an astounding sort. It seemed to him that all the world had turned scarlet: there was no way to see over the tops of the dunes, so that the view to his left consisted entirely of the

red lake itself and the red dunes beyond it, with nothing else visible, and on his right side everything was walled in by the lofty red barrier of the dunes that rose just beside their riding track, and the sky overhead, drawing reflected color from what lay below it, was a shimmering dome of a slightly paler red. Red, red, and red: Furvain felt cloaked in it, contained in it, sealed tight in a realm of redness. He gave himself up to it entirely. He let it engulf and possess him.

Kasinibon seemed to take notice of Furvain's long silence, his air of deepening concentration. "What we see here is the pure stuff of poetry, is it not?" Kasinibon said proudly, making a sweeping gesture that encompassed both shore and sky and the distant dark hulk of his own fortress, looming at the top of the cliff that lay at their backs. They had come to a halt half a league up the valley. It looked much the same here as at the place where they had begun their ride: red everywhere, before and behind, an unchanging scarlet world. "I draw constant inspiration from it, and surely you will as well. You will write your masterpiece here. That much I know."

The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable. He wants that poem very much, Furvain realized. But he resented the little man's jarring invasion of his thoughts and he winced at that reference to a "masterpiece." Furvain had no wish to hear anything further about masterpieces, not after last night's painful quasi-dream, in which his own mind seemed to have been mocking him for the deficiencies of his ambitions, pretending to lead him toward some noble work that was not within his soul to create.

Curtly he said, "Poetry seems to have deserted me for the moment, I'm afraid."

"It will return. From what you've told me, I know that making poems is something that's innate to your nature. Have you ever gone very long without producing something? As much as a week, say?"

"Probably not. I couldn't really say. The poems happen when they happen, according to some rhythm of their own. It's not something I've paid much conscious attention to."

"A week, ten days, two weeks—the words will come," said Kasinibon. "I know they will." He seemed strangely excited. "Aithin Furvain's great poem, written while he is the guest of Master Kasinibon of Barbirike! I might even dare to hope for a dedication, perhaps. Or is that too bold of me?"

This was becoming intolerable. Would it never end, the world's insistence that he must pull some major enterprise from his unwilling mind?

Furvain said, "Shall I correct you yet again? I am your prisoner, Kasinibon, not your guest."

"At least you say that, I think, without rancor."

"What good is rancor, eh? But when one is being held for ransom—"

"*Ransom* is such an ugly word, Furvain. All that I require is that your family pay the fee I charge for crossing my territory, since you appear to be unable to pay it yourself. Call it ransom, if you like. But the term does offend me."

"Then I withdraw it," said Furvain, still concealing his irritation as well as he could beneath a forced lightness of tone. "I am a man of breeding, Kasinibon. Far be it from me to offend my host."

In the evening they dined together, just the two of them, in a great echoing candlelit hall where a platoon of silent Hjorts in gaudy livery did the serving, stalking in and out with the absurd grandeur that the people of that unattractive race liked to affect. The banquet was a rich one, first a compote of fruits of some kind unknown to Furvain, then a poached fish of the most delicate flavor, nestling in a dark sauce that must

have been based in honey, and then several sorts of grilled meats on a bed of stewed vegetables. The wines for each course were impeccably chosen. Occasionally Furvain caught sight of some of the other outlaws moving about in the corridor at the lower end of the hall, shadowy figures far away, but none entered the room.

Flushed with drink, Kasinibon spoke freely of himself. He seemed very eager, almost pathetically so, to win his captive's friendship. He was, he said, a younger son himself, third son of the Count of Kekkinork. Kekkinork was not a place known to Furvain. "It lies two hours' march from the shores of the Great Sea," Kasinibon explained. "My ancestors came there to mine the handsome blue stone known as seaspar, which the Coronal Lord Pinitor of ancient times used in decorating the walls of the city of Bombifale. When the work was done some of the miners chose not to return to Castle Mount. And there at Kekkinork they have lived ever since, in a village at the edge of the Great Sea, a free people, beyond the ken of Pontifex and Coronal. My father, the Count, was the sixteenth holder of that title in the direct line of succession."

"A title conferred by Lord Pinitor?"

"A title conferred by the first Count upon himself," said Kasinibon. "We are the descendants of humble miners and stonemasons, Furvain. But, of course, if one only goes back far enough, which of the lords of Castle Mount would be seen to be free of the blood of commoners?"

"Indeed," Furvain said. That part was unimportant. What he was struggling to assimilate was the knowledge that this small bearded man sitting elbow to elbow with him had beheld the Great Sea with his own eyes, had grown to manhood in a remote part of Majipoor that was widely looked upon as the next thing to mythical. The notion of the existence of an actual town of some sort out there, a town unknown to geographers and census-keepers, situated in an obscure location at Alhanroel's easternmost point many thousands of miles from Castle Mount, strained credibility. And that this place had a separate aristocracy of its own creation, counts and marquises and ladies and all the rest, which had endured for sixteen generations there—that, too, was hard to believe.

Kasinibon refilled their wine-bowls. Furvain had been drinking as sparingly as he could all evening, but Kasinibon was merciless in his generosity, and Furvain felt flushed, now, and a little dizzy. Kasinibon had taken on the glossy-eyed look of full drunkenness.

He had begun to speak, in a rambling, circuitous way that Furvain found difficult to follow, of some bitter family quarrel, a dispute with one of his older brothers over a woman, the great love of his life, perhaps, and an appeal laid before their father in which the father had taken the brother's side. It sounded familiar enough to Furvain: the grasping brother, the distant and indifferent noble father, the younger son treated with offhand disdain. But Furvain, perhaps because he had never been a man of much ambition or drive, had not allowed the disappointments of his early life ever to stir much umbrage in his mind. He had always felt that he was more or less invisible to his dynamic father and his rapacious, aggressive brothers. He expected indifference from them, at best, and was not surprised when that was what he got, and had gone on to construct a reasonably satisfactory life for himself even so, founded on the belief that the less one expected out of life, the less one was likely to feel dissatisfied with what came one's way.

Kasinibon, though, was of another kind, hot-blooded and determined, and his dispute with his brother had mounted to something of shattering acrimony, leading finally to an actual violent assault by Kasinibon on—whom?—his brother?—his father?—Furvain was not entirely sure which. It finally came to pass that Kasinibon had found it advisable to flee from Kekkinork, or perhaps had been exiled from it—again, Furvain did not know which—and had gone roaming for many years from one sector of the east-country to another until, here at Barbirike, he had found a place where he could fortify himself against anyone who might attempt to offer a challenge to his truculent independence. "And here I am to this day," he

concluded. “I have no dealings with my family, nor any with Pontifex or Coronal, either. I am my own master, and the master of my little kingdom. And those who wander across my territory must pay the price. —More wine, Furvain?”

“Thank you, no.”

He poured, as though he had not heard. Furvain began to brush his hand aside, then halted and let Kasinibon fill the bowl.

“I like you, you know, Furvain. I hardly know you, but I’m as good a judge of men as you’ll ever find, and I see the depth of you, the greatness in you.”

And I see the drunkenness in you, Furvain thought, but he said nothing.

“If they pay the fee, I’ll have to let you go, I suppose. I’m an honorable man. But I’d regret it. I’ve had very little intelligent company here. Very little company of any sort, as a matter of fact. It’s the life I chose, of course. But still—”

“You must be very lonely.”

It occurred to Furvain that he had not seen any women at the fortress, nor even any sign of a female presence: only the Hjort servants, and the occasional glimpse of some of Kasinibon’s followers, all of them men. Was Kasinibon that rarity, the one-woman man? And had that woman of Kekkinork, the one his brother had taken from him, been that woman? It must be a grim existence for him, then, in this desolate keep. No wonder he sought the consolations of poetry; no wonder he was still capable, at this advanced age, of finding so much to admire in the nonsensical puerile effusions of Dammiunde or Tuminok Laskil.

“Lonely, yes. I can’t deny that. Lonely—lonely—” Kasinibon turned a bloodshot gaze on Furvain. His eyes had taken on a glint as red as the waters of the Barbirike Sea. “But one learns to live with loneliness. One makes one’s choices in life, does one not, and although they are never perfect choices, they are, after all, one’s own, eh? Ultimately, we choose what we choose because—we choose—because—because—”

Kasinibon’s voice grew less distinct and trailed off into incoherence. Furvain thought he might have fallen asleep; but no, no, Kasinibon’s eyes were open, his lips were slowly moving, he was searching still for the precise phrase to explain whatever it was he was trying to explain. Furvain waited until it became clear that the bandit chieftain was never going to find that phrase. Then he touched Kasinibon lightly on the arm. “You must forgive me,” he said. “The hour is very late.” Kasinibon nodded vaguely. A Hjort in livery showed Furvain to his rooms.

In the night Furvain dreamed a dream of such power and lucidity that he thought, even as he was experiencing it, that it must be a sending of the Lady of the Isle, who visits millions of the sleepers of Majipoor each night to bring them guidance and comfort. If indeed it was a sending, it would be his first: the Lady did not often visit the minds of the princes of the Castle, and in any case she would not have been likely to visit that of Furvain, for it was the ancient custom for the mother of the current Coronal to be chosen as Lady of the Isle, and thus, for most of Furvain’s life, the reigning Lady had been his own grandmother. She would not enter the mind of a member of her own family except at some moment of high urgency. Now, of course, with Lord Sangamor having moved on to become Sangamor Pontifex, there was a new Coronal at the Castle and a new Lady at the helm of the Isle of Sleep. But even so—a sending? For *him* ? Here? Why?

As he was drifting back into sleep once the dream had left him, he decided that it had not been a sending at all, but merely the workings of his own agitated mind, stirred to frantic excitation by his evening with Master Kasinibon. It had been too personal, too intimate a vision to have been the work of the stranger who now was Lady of the Isle. Yet Furvain knew it to have been no ordinary dream, but rather one of those strange dreams by which one's whole future life is determined.

For in it his sleeping mind had been lifted up out of Kasinibon's stark sanctuary and carried from it over the night-shrouded plains of the east-country, off to the other side of the blue cliffs of Kekkinork where the Great Sea began, stretching forth into the immeasurable and incomprehensible distances that separated Alhanroel from the continent of Zimroel half a world away. Here, far to the east of any place he had ever known, he could see the light of the dawning day gleaming on the breast of the ocean, which was a gentle pink in color at the sandy shore, then pale green, and a deeper green farther out, and then deepening by steady gradation to the azure gray of the unfathomable depths.

The Spirit of the Divine lingered high above that mighty ocean, Furvain perceived: impersonal, unknowable, infinite, all-seeing. Though the Spirit was without form or feature, Furvain recognized it for what it was, and the Spirit recognized him, touching his mind, gathering it in, linking it, for one stunning moment, to the vastness that was itself. And in that infinitely long moment the greatest of all poems was dictated to him, poured into him in one tremendous cascade, a poem that only a god could create, the poem that encompassed the meaning of life and of death, of the destiny of all worlds and all the creatures that dwelled upon them. Or so Furvain thought, later, when he had awakened and lay shivering, feverish with bewilderment, contemplating the vision that had been thrust upon him.

No shard of that vision remained, not a single detail by which he could try to reconstruct it. It had shattered like a soap bubble and vanished into the darkness. Once again he had been brought to the presence of a sublime poem of the greatest beauty and profundity and then it had been snatched away again.

Tonight's dream, though, was different in its deepest essence from the one of the night before. That other dream had been a sad cruel joke, a bit of mere harsh mockery. It had flaunted a poem before him but had given him no access to it, only the humiliating awareness that a major poem of some sort lurked somewhere within him but would be kept forever beyond his reach. This time he had had the poem itself. He had lived it, line by line, stanza by stanza, canto by canto, through all its grand immensity. Although he had lost it upon waking, perhaps it could be found again. The first dream had told him,*Your gift is an empty one and you are capable of nothing but the making of trivialities* . The second dream had told him,*You contain godlike greatness within you and you must now strive to find a way to draw it forth* .

Though the content of that great vision was gone, Furvain realized in the morning that one aspect of it still remained, as though burned into his mind: its framework, the container for the mighty poem itself: the metric pattern, the rhyme scheme, the method of building verses into stanzas and the grouping of stanzas into cantos. A mere empty vessel, yes. But if the container, at least, was left to him, there might be hope of rediscovering the awesome thing that it had contained.

The structural pattern was such a distinctive one that he knew he was unlikely to forget it, but even so he would not take the risk. He reached hastily for his pen and a blank sheet of paper and scribbled it down. Rather than attempting at this point to recapture even a fragment of what would be no small task to retrieve, Furvain used mere nonsense syllables to provide a shape for the vessel, meaningless dum-de-dum sounds that provided the basic rhythmic outline of one extended passage. When he was done he stared in wonder at it, murmuring it to himself over and over again, analyzing consciously now what he had set down as a sort of automatic transcription of his dream-memory. It was a remarkable

structure, yes, but almost comically extreme. As he counted out its numbers he asked himself whether anything so intricate had ever been devised by a poet's mind before, and whether any poet in the long history of the universe would ever have been able to carry off a long work using prosody of such an extravagant kind.

It was a marvel of complexity. It made no use of the traditional stress-patterned metrics he knew so well, the iambs and trochees and dactyls, the spondees and anapests, out of which Furvain had always built his poems with such swiftness and ease. Those traditional patterns were so deeply ingrained in him that it seemed to others that he wrote without thinking, that he simply exhaled his poems rather than creating them by conscious act. But this pattern—he chanted it over and over to himself, struggling to crack its secret—was alien to all that he understood of the craft of poetry.

At first he could see no sort of regularity to the rhythms whatever, and was at a loss to explain the strangely compelling power of them. But then he realized that the metric of his dream-poem must be a quantitative one, based not on where the accents fell but on the length of syllables, a system that struck Furvain at first as disconcertingly arbitrary and irregular but which, he saw after a while, could yield a wondrously versatile line in the hands of anyone gifted enough to manipulate its intricacies properly. It would have the force almost of an incantation; those caught up in its sonorous spell would be held as if by sorcery. The rhyme scheme, too, was a formidable one, with stanzas of seventeen lines that allowed of only three different rhymes, arranged in a pattern of five internal couplets split by a triolet and balanced by four seemingly unrhymed lines that actually were reaching into adjacent stanzas.

Could a poem actually be written according to such a structure? Of course, Furvain thought. But what poet could possibly have the patience to stay with it long enough to produce a work of any real scope? The Divine could, of course. By definition the Divine could do anything: what difficulties would a mere arrangement of syllables and rhymes offer to the omnipotent force that had brought into being the stars and worlds? But it was not just blasphemous for a mere mortal to set himself up in competition with the Divine, he thought, it was contemptible folly. Furvain knew he could write three or four stanzas in this kind of scheme, if he turned himself properly to the task, or perhaps seven, that made some kind of poetic sense. But a whole canto? And a series of cantos that would constitute a coherent work of epic magnitude? No, he thought. No. No. That would drive him out of his mind. No doubt of it, to undertake a task of such grandeur would be to invite madness.

Still, it had been an extraordinary dream. The other one had left him with nothing but the taste of ashes in his mouth. This one showed him that he—not the Divine, but *he* , for Furvain was not a very religious man and felt sure that it was his own dreaming mind that had invented it, without supernatural assistance—was able to conceive a stanzaic system of almost impossible difficulty. It must have been in him all along, he thought, gestating quietly, finally erupting from him as he slept. The tensions and pressures of his captivity, he decided, must have aided in the birth. No longer was he as amused as he once had been about spending his days in Kasinibon's custody. It was becoming harder to take a comic view of the affair. The rising anger he felt at being held prisoner here, the frustrations, his growing restlessness: all that must be altering the chemistry of his brain, forcing his thoughts into new channels, his inner torment bringing out new aspects of his poetic skill.

Not that he had the slightest idea of trying to make actual use of such a system as the night just past had brought him; but it was pleasing enough to know that he was capable of devising such a thing. Perhaps that portended a return of his ability to write light verse, at least. Furvain knew that he was never going to give the world the deathless masterpiece that Kasinibon was so eager to have from him, but it would be good at least to regain the pleasant minor skill that had been his until a few days before.

But the days went by and Furvain remained unaccountably unproductive. Neither Kasinibon's urgings nor Furvain's own attempts at inducing the presence of the muse were in any way helpful, and his old spontaneous facility was so far from being in evidence that he could almost persuade himself that it had never existed.

His captivity, now, was weighing on him with increasing discomfort. Accustomed as he was to a life of idleness, this kind of forced inactivity was nothing he had ever had to endure before, and he longed to be on his way. Kasinibon tried his best, of course, to play the part of the charming host. He took Furvain on daily rides through the scarlet valley, he brought forth the finest wines from his surprisingly well-stocked cellar for their nightly dinners, he provided him with whatever book he might fancy—his library was well stocked, also—and he lost no opportunity to engage him in serious discussion of the literary arts.

But the fact remained that Furvain was here unwillingly, penned up in this dour, forbidding mausoleum of a place, snared midway through a crisis of his own and compelled, before he had reached any resolution of that, to live as the prisoner of another man, and a limited man at that. Kasinibon now allowed him to roam freely through the building and its grounds—if he tried to escape, where could he hope to go, after all?—but the long echoing halls and mainly empty rooms were far from congenial. There was nothing really congenial about Kasinibon's company, either, however much Furvain pretended that there was, and there was no one else here to keep company with Furvain than Kasinibon. The outlaw chieftain, walled about by his hatred for his own family and stunted by his long isolation here, was as much a prisoner at Barbirike as Furvain himself, and behind his superficial amiability, that elfin playfulness of his, some hidden fury lurked and seethed. Furvain saw that fury and feared it.

He had still done nothing about sending out a ransom request. It seemed utterly futile, and embarrassing as well: what if he asked, and no one complied? But the growing probability that he was going to remain here forever was starting to engender a sense of deep desperation in him.

What was particularly hard to bear was Kasinibon's fondness for poetry. Kasinibon seemed to want to talk about nothing else. Furvain had never cared much for conversation about poetry. He was content to leave that to the academic folk, who had no creative spark themselves but found some sort of fulfillment in endless discussions of the thing that they were themselves unable to produce, and to those persons of culture who felt that it was incumbent on them to be seen carrying some slim volume of poetry about, and even to dip into it from time to time, and to utter praise for some currently acclaimed poet's work. Furvain, from whom poems by the ream had always emerged with only the slightest of efforts and who had had no lofty view of what he had achieved, had no interest in such talk. For him poetry was something to make, not something to discuss. What a horror it was, then, to be trapped like this in the presence of the most talkative of amateur connoisseurs of the art, and an ignorant one at that!

Like most self-educated men, Kasinibon had no taste in poetry at all—he gobbled everything omnivorously, indiscriminately, and was uncritically entranced by it all. Stale images, leaden rhymes, bungled metaphors, ridiculous similes—he had no difficulty overlooking such things, perhaps did not even notice them. The one thing he demanded was a bit of emotional power in a poem, and if he could find it there, he forgave all else.

And so Furvain spent most nights in the first weeks of his stay at the outlaw's keep listening to Kasinibon's readings of his favorite poems. His extensive library, hundreds and hundreds of well-thumbed volumes, some of them practically falling apart after years of constant use, seemed to contain the work of every poet Furvain had ever heard of, and a good many that he had not. It was such a wide-ranging collection that its very range argued for its owner's lack of discernment. Kasinibon's passionate love of poetry struck Furvain as mere promiscuity. "Let me read you this!" Kasinibon would cry, eyes aglow with enthusiasm, and he would intone some incontestibly great work of Gancislad or

Emmengild; but then, even as the final glorious lines still were echoing in Furvain's mind, Kasinibon would say, "Do you know what it reminds me of, that poem?" And he would reach for his beloved volume of Vortrailin, and with equal enthusiasm declaim one of the tawdriest bits of sentimental trash Furvain had ever heard. He seemed unable to tell the difference.

Often he asked Furvain to choose poems that he would like to read, also, wanting to hear how a practitioner of the art handled the ebb and flow of poetic rhythms. Furvain's own tastes in poetry had always run heavily to the sort of light verse at which he excelled himself, but, like any cultivated man, he appreciated more serious work as well, and on these occasions he took a deliberate malicious pleasure in selecting for Kasinibon the knottiest, most abstruse modern works he could find on Kasinibon's shelves, poems that he himself barely understood and should have been mysteries to Kasinibon also. These, too, Kasinibon loved. "Beautiful," he would murmur, enraptured. "Sheer music, is it not?"

I am going to go mad, Furvain thought.

At some point during nearly every one of these nightly sessions of poetic discourse Kasinibon would press Furvain to recite some of his own work. Furvain could no longer claim, as he had on the first day, that he was too tired to comply. Nor could he pretend very plausibly that he had forgotten every poem he had ever written. So in the end he yielded and offered a few. Kasinibon's applause was hearty in the extreme, and seemed unfeigned. And he spoke at great length in praise not just of Furvain's elegance of phrasing but also of his insight into human nature. Which was all the more embarrassing; Furvain himself was abashed by the triviality of his themes and the glibness of his technique; it took every ounce of his aristocratic breeding to hold himself back from crying out,*But don't you see, Kasinibon, what hollow word-spinning that is!* That would have been cruel, and discourteous besides. Both men now had entered into a pretense of friendship, which might not even have been a pretense on Kasinibon's part. One may not call one's friend a fool to his face, Furvain thought, and expect him to go on being one's friend.

The worst part of all was Kasinibon's unfeigned eagerness to have Furvain write something new, and important, while a guest under his roof. There had been nothing playful about that wistfully expressed hope of his that Furvain would bring into being here some masterpiece that would forever link his name and Kasinibon's in the archives of poetry. Behind that wistfulness, Furvain sensed, lay ferocious need. He suspected that matters would not always remain so amiable here: that indirection would turn to blunt insistence, that Kasinibon would squeeze him and squeeze him until Furvain brought forth the major work that Kasinibon so hungrily yearned to usher into existence. Furvain replied evasively to each of Kasinibon's inquiries about new work, explaining, truthfully enough, that inspiration was still denied to him. But there was a mounting intensity to Kasinibon's demands.

The question of ransom, which Furvain had continued to push aside, needed to be squarely faced. Furvain saw that he could not remain here much longer without undergoing some kind of inner explosion. But the only way he was going to get out of this place, he knew, was with the help of someone else's money. Was there anyone in the world willing to put up money to rescue him? He suspected he knew the answer to that, but shied away from confirming his fears. Still, if he never so much as asked, he would spend the remaining days of his life listening to Master Kasinibon's solemn, worshipful readings of the worst poetry human mind had ever conceived, and fending off Kasinibon's insistence that Furvain write for him some poem of a grandeur and majesty that was not within Furvain's abilities to produce.

"How much, would you say, should I ask as the price of my freedom?" Furvain asked one day, as they rode together beside the shore of the scarlet sea.

Kasinibon told him. It was a stupendous sum, more than twice Furvain's own highest guess. But he had asked, and Kasinibon had answered, and he was in no position to haggle with the bandit over the

amount.

Duke Tanigel, he supposed, was the first one he should try. Furvain knew that his brothers were unlikely to care much whether he stayed here forever or not. His father might take a gentler position, but his father was far away in the Labyrinth, and appealing to the Pontifex carried other risks, too, for if it came to pass that a Pontifical army were dispatched to Barbirike to rescue the captive prince, Kasinibon might react in some unpleasant and possibly fatal way. The same risk would apply if Furvain were to turn to the new Coronal, Lord Hunzimar. Strictly speaking, it was the Coronal's responsibility to deal with such matters as banditry in the outback. But that was exactly what Furvain was afraid of, that Hunzimar would send troops out here to teach Kasinibon a lesson, a lesson that might have ugly consequences for Kasinibon's prisoner. Even more probably, Hunzimar, who had never shown much affection for any of his predecessor's sons, would do nothing at all. No, Tanigel was his only hope, faint though that hope might be.

Furvain did have some notion of the extent of Duke Tanigel's immense wealth, and suspected that the whole gigantic amount of his ransom would be no more than the cost of one week's feasting and revelry at the court in Dundilmir. Perhaps Tanigel would deign to help, out of fond memories of happy times together. Furvain spent half a day writing and revising his note to the Duke, working hard to strike the proper tone of amused, even waggish chagrin over his plight, while at the same time letting Tanigel know that he really did have to come through with the money if ever he hoped to see his friend Furvain again. He turned the letter over to Kasinibon, who sent one of his men off to Dundilmir to deliver it.

"And now," said Kasinibon, "I propose we turn our attention this evening to the ballads of Garthain Hagavon—"

At the beginning of the fourth week of his captivity Furvain made the dream-journey to the Great Sea once again, and again took dictation from the Divine, who appeared to him in the guise of a tall, broad-shouldered, golden-haired man of cheerful mien, wearing a Coronal's silver band about his head. And when he woke it was all still in his mind, every syllable of every verse, every verse of every stanza, every stanza of what appeared to be a third of a canto, as well as he could judge the proportions of such things. But it began to fade almost at once. Out of fear that he might lose it all he set about the work of transcribing as much of it as he could, and as the lines emerged onto the paper he saw that they followed the inordinately intricate metrical pattern and rhyming scheme of the poem that had been given to him by the hand of the Divine that other time weeks before: appeared to be, indeed, a fragment of that very poem.

A fragment was all that it was. What Furvain had managed to get down began in the middle of a stanza, and ended, pages later, in the middle of another one. The subject was warfare, the campaign of the great Lord Stiamot of thousands of years before against the rebellious aboriginal people of Majipoor, the shapeshifting Metamorph race. The segment that lay before him dealt with Stiamot's famous march through the foothills of Zygnor Peak in northern Alhanroel, the climactic enterprise of that long agonizing struggle, when he had set fire to the whole district, parched by the heat of the long dry summer, in order to drive the final bands of Metamorph guerrillas from their hiding places. It broke off at the point where Lord Stiamot found himself confronting a recalcitrant landholder, a man of the ancient northern gentry who refused to pay heed to Stiamot's warning that all this territory was going to be put to the torch and that it behooved every settler to flee at once.

When it became impossible for Furvain to go any farther with his transcription he read it all back, astounded, even bemused. The style and general approach, the bizarre schemes of rhyme and metric apart, were beyond any doubt his own. He recognized familiar turns of phrase, similes of a kind that had

always come readily to him, choices of rhyme that declared themselves plainly as the work of Aithin Furvain. But how, if not by direct intervention of the Divine, had anything so complicated and deep sprung from his own shallow mind? This was majestic poetry. There was no other word for it. He read it aloud to himself, reveling in the sonorities, the internal assonances, the sinewy strength of the line, the inevitability of each stanza's form. He had never written anything remotely like this before. He had had the technique for it, very likely, but he could not imagine ever making so formidable a demand on that technique.

And also there were things in here about Stiamot's campaign that Furvain did not in fact believe he had ever known. He had learned about Lord Stiamot from his tutors, of course. Everyone did; Stiamot was one of the great figures of Majipoor's history. But Furvain's schooling had taken place decades ago. Had he ever really heard the names of all these places—Milimorn, Hamifieu, Bizfern, Kattikawn? Were they genuine place-names, or his own inventions?

His inventions? Well, yes, anyone could make up names, he supposed. But there was too much here about military procedure, lines of supply and chains of command and order of march and such, that read like the work of some other hand, someone far more knowledgeable about such things than he had ever been. How, then, could he possibly claim this poem as his own? Yet where had it come from, if not from him? Was he truly the vehicle through which the Divine had chosen to bring this fragment into existence? Furvain found his slender fund of religious feeling seriously taxed by such a notion. And yet—and yet—

Kasinibon saw at once that something out of the ordinary had happened. "You've begun to write, haven't you?"

"I've begun a poem, yes," said Furvain uneasily.

"Wonderful! When can I see it?"

The blaze of excitement in Kasinibon's eyes was so fierce that Furvain had to back away a few steps. "Not just yet, I think. This is much too soon to be showing it to anyone. At this point it would be extremely easy for me to lose my way. A casual word from someone else might be just the one that would deflect me from my path."

"I swear that I'll offer no comment at all. I simply would like to—"

"No. Please." Furvain was surprised by the steely edge he heard in his own voice. "I'm not sure yet what this is a part of. I need to examine, to evaluate, to ponder. And that has to be done on my own. I tell you, Kasinibon, I'm afraid that I'll lose it altogether if I reveal anything of it now. Please: let me be."

Kasinibon seemed to understand that. He grew instantly solicitous. Almost unctuously he said, "Yes. Yes, of course, it would be tragic if my blundering interference harmed the flow of your creation. I withdraw my request. But you will, I hope, grant me a look at it just as soon as you feel that the time has come when you—"

"Yes. Just as soon as the time has come," said Furvain.

He retreated to his quarters and returned to work, not without trepidation. This was new to him, this business of settling down formally to work. In the past poems had always found *him* —taking a direct and immediate line from his mind to his fingertips. He had never needed to go searching for *them* . Now, though, Furvain self-consciously sat himself at his little bare table, he laid out two or three pens at his side, he tapped the edges of his stack of blank paper until every sheet was perfectly aligned, he closed

his eyes and waited for the heat of inspiration.

Quickly he discovered that inspiration could not simply be invited to arrive, at least not when one was embarked on an enterprise such as this. His old methods no longer applied. For what he had to do now, one had to go out in quest of the material; one had to fix it in one's gaze and seize it firmly; one had to compel it to do one's bidding. He was writing, it seemed, a poem about Lord Stiamot. Very well: he must focus every atom of his being on that long-ago monarch, must reach out across the ages and enter into a communion of a sort with him, must touch his soul and follow his path.

That was easy enough to say, not so easy to accomplish. The inadequacies of his historical knowledge troubled him. With nothing more than a schoolboy's grasp of Stiamot's life and career, and that knowledge, such as it ever had been, now blurred by so many years of forgetfulness, how could he presume to tell the tale of the epochal conflict that had ended for all time the aboriginal threat to the expansion of the human settlements on Majipoor?

Abashed at his own lack of learning, he prowled Kasinibon's library, hoping to come upon some works of historical scholarship. But history, it seemed, was not a subject that held any great interest for his captor. Furvain found no texts of any consequence, just a brief history of the world, which seemed to be nothing more than a child's book. From an inscription on its back cover he saw that it was in fact a relic of Kasinibon's own childhood in Kekkinork. It contained very little that was useful: just a brief, highly simplified recapitulation of Lord Stiamot's attempts to seek a negotiated peace with the Metamorphs, the failure of those attempts, and the Coronal's ultimate decision to put an end once and for all to Metamorph depredations against the cities of the human settlers by defeating them in battle, expelling them from human-occupied territories, and confining them for all time in the rain forests of southern Zimroel. Which had, of course, entangled the world in a generation-long struggle that ended ultimately in success and made possible the explosive growth of civilization on Majipoor and prosperity everywhere on the giant world. Stiamot was one of the key figures of Majipoor's history. But Kasinibon's little history book told only the bare outlines of the story, the politics and the battles, not a word about Stiamot as a man, his inner thoughts and emotions, his physical appearance, anything of that sort.

Then Furvain realized that he had no real need to know those things. He was writing a poem, not an historical text or a work of biography. He was free to imagine any detail he liked, so long as he remained faithful to the broad outline of the tale. Whether the actual Lord Stiamot had been short or tall, plump or thin, cheerful of nature or a dyspeptic brooder, would make no serious difference to a poet intent only on recreating the Stiamot legend. Lord Stiamot, by now, had become a mythical figure. And myth, Furvain knew, has a power that transcends mere history. History could be as arbitrary as poetry, he told himself: what is history, other than a matter of choice, the picking and choosing of certain facts out of a multitude to elicit a meaningful pattern, which was not necessarily the true one? The act of selecting facts, by definition, inherently involved discarding facts as well, often the ones most inconvenient to the pattern that the historian was trying to reveal. Truth thus became an abstract concept: three different historians, working with the same set of data, might easily come up with three different "truths." Whereas myth digs deep into the fundamental reality of the spirit, into that infinite well that is the shared consciousness of the entire race, reaching the levels where truth is not an optional matter, but the inescapable foundation of all else. In that sense myth could be truer than history; by creating imaginative episodes that clove to the essence of the Stiamot story, a poet could reveal the truth of that story in a way that no historian could claim to do. And so Furvain resolved that his poem would deal with the myth of Stiamot, not with the historical man. He was free to invent as he pleased, so long as what he invented was faithful to the inner truth of the story.

After that everything became easier, although there was never anything simple about it for him. He developed a technique of meditation that left him hovering on the border of sleep, from which he could

slip readily into a kind of trance. Then—more rapidly with each passing day—Furvain's guide would come to him, the golden-haired man wearing a Coronal's silver diadem, and lead him through the scenes and events of his day's work.

His guide's name, he discovered, was Valentine: a charming man, patient, affable, sweet-tempered, always ready with an easy smile, the absolute best of guides. Furvain could not remember any Coronal named Valentine, nor did Kasinibon's boyhood history text mention one. Evidently no such person had ever existed. But that made no difference. For Furvain's purposes, it was all the same whether this Lord Valentine had been a real historical figure or was just a figment of Furvain's imagination: what he needed was someone to take him by the hand and lead him through the shadowy realms of antiquity, and that was what his golden-haired guide was doing. It was almost as though he were the manifestation in a readily perceptible form of the will of the Divine, whose vehicle Furvain had become. It is through the voice of this imaginary Lord Valentine, Furvain told himself, that the shaping spirit of the cosmos is inscribing this poem on my soul.

Under Valentine's guidance Furvain's dreaming mind traversed the deeds of Lord Stiamot, beginning with his first realization that the long poisonous struggle with the Metamorphs must be brought to a conclusive end and going on through the sequence of increasingly bloody battles that had culminated in the burning of the northlands, the surrender of the last aboriginal rebels, and the establishment of the province of Piurifayne in Zimroel as the permanent home and place of eternal confinement of the Shapeshifters of Majipoor. When Furvain emerged from his trance each day the details of what he had learned would still be with him, and had the balance and shape and the tragic rhythm that great poetry requires. He saw not only the events but also the inexorable and inescapable conflicts out of which they arose, driving even a man of good will such as Stiamot into the harsh necessity of making war. The pattern of the story was there; Furvain had merely to set it all down on paper: and here his innate technical skill was fully at his command, as much so as it had ever been in the old days, so that the intricate stanza and complex rhythmic scheme that he had carried back from his first dreaming encounters with the Divine soon became second nature to him, and the poem grew by a swift process of accretion.

Sometimes it came a little*too* easily. Now that Furvain had mastered that strange stanza he was able to reel off page after page with such effortless fluency that he would on occasion wander into unexpected digressions that concealed and muddled the main thrust of his narrative. When that happened he would halt, rip the offending sections out, and go on from the point where he had begun to diverge from his proper track. He had never revised before. At first it seemed wasteful to him, since the discarded lines were every bit as eloquent, as sonorous, as the ones he kept. But then he came to see that eloquence and sonorousness were mere accessories to the main task, which was the telling of a particular tale in a way that most directly illuminated its inner meaning.

And then, when he had brought the tale of Lord Stiamot to its conclusion, Furvain was startled to find that the Divine was not yet done with him. Without pausing even to question what he was doing, he drew a line beneath the last of the Stiamot stanzas and began to inscribe a new verse—beginning, he saw, right in the middle of a stanza, with the triple-rhyme passage—that dealt with an earlier event entirely, the project of Lord Melikand to import beings of species other than human to help with the task of settling the greatly underpopulated world that was Majipoor.

He continued on that project for another few days. But then, while the Melikand canto was yet unfinished, Furvain discovered himself at work on a passage that told still another story, that of the grand assembly at Stangard Falls, on the River Glayge, where Dvorn had been hailed as Majipoor's first Pontifex. At that moment Furvain realized that he was writing not simply an account of the deeds of Lord Stiamot, but an epic poem embracing nothing less than the whole of Majipoor's history.

It was a frightening thought. He could not believe that he was the man for such a task. It was too much for a man of his limitations. He thought he saw the shape that such a poem must take, as it traversed the many thousands of years from the coming of the first settlers to the present day, and it was a mighty one. Not a single great arc, no, but a series of soaring curves and dizzying swoops, a tale of flux and transformation, of the constant synthesis of opposites, as the early idealistic colonists tumbled into the violent chaos of anarchy, were rescued from it by Dvorn the lawgiver, the first Pontifex, spread out in centrifugal expansion across the huge world under the guidance of Lord Melikand, built the great cities of Castle Mount, reached across into the continents of Zimroel and Suvrael, came inevitably and tragically into collision with the Shapeshifter aboriginals, fought the necessary though appalling war against them under the leadership of Lord Stiamot, that man of peace transformed into a warrior, that defeated and contained them, and so onward to this present day, when billions of people lived in peace on the most beautiful of all worlds.

There was no more splendid story in all the universe. But was he, Aithin Furvain, such a small-souled man, a man flawed in so many ways, going to be able to encompass it? He had no illusions about himself. He saw himself as glib, lazy, dissolute, a weakling, an evader of responsibility, a man who throughout his whole life had sought the path of least resistance. How could he, of all people, having no other resource than a certain degree of cleverness and technical skill, hope to contain such a gigantic theme within the bounds of a single poem? It was too much for him. He could never do it. He doubted that anyone could. But certainly Aithin Furvain was not the one to attempt it.

And yet he seemed somehow to be writing it. Or was it writing him? No matter: the thing was taking shape, line by line, day by day. Call it divine inspiration, call it the overflowing of something that he had kept penned unknowingly within him for many years, call it whatever one wished, there was no denying that he had already written one full canto and fragments of two others, and that each day brought new verses. And there was greatness in the poem: of that he was certain. He would read through it over and over again, shaking his head in amazement at the power of his own work, the mighty music of the poetry, the irresistible sweep of the narrative. It was all so splendid that it humbled and bewildered him. He had no idea how it had been possible to achieve what he had done, and he shivered with dread at the thought that his miraculous fount of inspiration would dry up, as suddenly as it had opened, before the great task had reached its end.

The manuscript, unfinished though it was, became terribly precious to him. He came to see it now as his claim on immortality. It troubled him that only one copy of it existed, and that one kept in a room that could only be locked from outside. Fearful now that something might happen to it, that it might be blotted into illegibility by the accidental overturning of his inkstand, or stolen by some prying malicious denizen of the fortress jealous of the attention paid to Furvain by Master Kasinibon, or even taken out of his room as trash by some illiterate servant and destroyed, he copied it out several times over, carefully hiding the copies in different rooms of his little suite. The main draft he buried each night in the lowest drawer of the cupboard in which he kept his clothing; and, a few days later, without really knowing why, he fell into the habit of painstakingly arranging three of his pens in a star-shaped pattern on top of the pile of finished sheets so that he would know at once if anyone had been prowling in that drawer.

Three days after that he saw that the pens had been disturbed. Furvain had taken care to lay them out with meticulous care, the central pen aligned each time at the same precise angle to the other two. This day he saw that the angle was slightly off, as though someone had understood that the purpose of the arrangement was the detection of an intrusion and had replaced the pens after examining the manuscript, but had not employed the greatest possible degree of accuracy in attempting to mimic Furvain's own grouping of the pens. That night he chose a new pattern for the pens, and the next afternoon he saw that

once again they had been put back almost as he had left them, but not quite. The same thing happened over the succeeding two days.

It could only have been the doing of Kasinibon himself, Furvain decided. No member of Kasinibon's outlaw band, and certainly not any servant, would have taken half so much trouble over the pens. He is sneaking in while I am elsewhere, Furvain thought. He is secretly reading my poem.

Furious, Furvain sought Kasinibon out and assailed him for violating the privacy of his quarters.

To his surprise, Kasinibon made no attempt to deny the accusation. "Ah, so you know? Well, of course. I couldn't resist." His eyes were shining with excitement. "It's marvelous, Furvain. Magnificent. I was so profoundly moved by it I can hardly begin to tell you. The episode of Lord Stiamot and the Metamorph priestess—when she comes before him, when she weeps for her people, and Stiamot weeps also—"

"You had no right to go rummaging around in my cupboard," said Furvain icily.

"Why not? I'm the master here. I do as I please. All you said was that you didn't want to have a discussion of an unfinished work. I respected that, didn't I? Did I say a word? A single word? For days, now, I've been reading what you were writing, almost since the beginning, following your daily progress, practically participating in the creation of a great poem myself, and tears came to my eyes over the beauty of it, and yet not ever once did I give you a hint—never once—"

Furvain felt mounting outrage. "You've been going into my room all along?" he sputtered, astounded.

"Every day. Since long before you started the thing with the pens. —Look, Furvain, a classic poem, one of the great masterpieces of literature, is being born under my own roof by a man I feed and shelter. Am I to be denied the pleasure of watching it grow and evolve?"

"I'll burn it," Furvain said. "Rather than let you spy on me any more."

"Don't talk idiocy. Just go on writing. I'll leave it alone from now on. But you mustn't stop, if that's what you have in mind. That would be a monstrous crime against art. Finish the Melikand scene. Do the Dvorn story. And continue on to all the rest." He laughed wickedly. "You can't stop, anyway. The poem has you in its spell. It possesses you."

Glaring, Furvain said, "How would you know that?"

"I'm not as stupid as you want to think I am," said Kasinibon.

But then he softened, asked for forgiveness, promised again to control his overpowering curiosity about the poem. He seemed genuinely repentant: afraid, even, that by intruding on Furvain's privacy this way he might have jeopardized the completion of the poem. He would never cease blaming himself, he said, if Furvain took this as a pretext for abandoning the project. But also he would always hold it against Furvain. And then, once more with force: "You*will* go on with it. You*will* . You could not possibly stop."

Furvain was unable to maintain his anger in the face of so shrewd an assessment of his character. It was clear that Kasinibon perceived Furvain's innate slothfulness, his fundamental desire not to involve himself in anything as ambitious and strenuous as a work on this scale. But also Kasinibon saw that the poem held him in thrall, clasping him in a grip so powerful that even an idler such as he could not shrug off the imperative command that each day was willing the poem into being. That command came from somewhere within, from a place beyond Furvain's own comprehension; but also, Furvain knew, it was reinforced by Kasinibon's fierce desire to have him bring the work to completion. Furvain could not

withstand the whiplash force of Kasinibon's eagerness atop that other, interior command. There was no way to abandon the work.

Grudgingly he said, "Yes, I'll continue. You can be sure of that. But keep out of my room."

"Agreed."

As Kasinibon began to leave Furvain called him back and said, "One more thing. Has there been any news yet from Dundilmir about my ransom?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing," replied Kasinibon, and went swiftly from the room.

No news. About what I expected, Furvain thought. Tanigel has thrown the note away. Or they are laughing about it at court: can you believe it? Poor silly Furvain, captured by bandits!

He felt certain that Kasinibon was never going to hear from Tanigel. It seemed appropriate, then, to draft new ransom requests—one to his father at the Labyrinth, one to Lord Hunzimar at the Castle, perhaps others to other people, if he could think of anyone who was even remotely likely to be willing to help—and have Kasinibon send his messengers forth with them.

Meanwhile Furvain continued his daily work. The trance state came ever more easily; the mysterious figure of Lord Valentine appeared whenever summoned, and gladly led him back through time into the dawn of the world. The manuscript grew. The pens were not disturbed again. After a little while Furvain ceased taking the trouble to lay them out.

Furvain saw the overall shape of the poem clearly, now.

There would be nine great sections, which in his mind had the form of an arch, with the Stiamot sequences at the highest part of the curve. The first canto would deal with the arrival of the original human settlers on Majipoor, full of the hope of leaving the sorrows of Old Earth behind and creating a paradise on this most wonderful of all worlds. He would depict their tentative early explorations of the planet and their awe at its size and beauty, and the founding of the first tiny outposts. In the second, Furvain would portray the growth of those outposts into towns and cities, the strife between the cities that arose in the next few hundred years, the spreading conflicts that caused in time the breakdown of all order, the coming of turbulence and general nihilism.

The third canto would be Dvorn's: how he had risen up out of the chaos, a provincial leader from the west-country town of Kesmakuran, to march across Alhanroel calling upon the people of every town to join with him in a stable government uniting all the world under its sway. How by force of personality as well as strength of arms he had brought that government into being—the nonhereditary monarchy under the authority of an emperor to whom he gave the ancient title of Pontifex, "bridge-builder," who would choose a royal subordinate, the Coronal Lord, to head the executive arm of his administration and ultimately to succeed him as Pontifex. And Furvain would tell how Dvorn and his Coronal, Lord Barhold, had won the support of all Majipoor and had established for all time the system of government under which the world still thrived.

Then the fourth canto, a transitional one, depicting the emergence of something resembling modern Majipoor out of the primordial structure devised by Dvorn. The construction of the atmosphere-machines that made possible the settling of the thirty-mile-high mountain that later would be called Castle Mount, and the founding of the first cities along its lower slopes. Lord Melikand's insight that the human population alone was insufficient to sustain the growth of a world the size of Majipoor, and his

importation of the Skandars, the Vroons, the Hjorts, and the other various alien races to live side by side with humankind there. The exacerbation of human–Metamorph conflicts, now, as the relatively sparse aboriginal population found itself being crowded out of its own territories by the growth of the settlements. The beginnings of war.

Lord Stiamot's canto, already completed, would be the fifth one, the keystone of the great arch. But reluctantly Furvain realized that Stiamot required more space. The canto would have to be expanded, divided perhaps into two, or more likely three, in order to do justice to the theme. It was necessary to limn Stiamot's moral anguish, the terrible ironies of his reign, the man of peace compelled for his people's sake to wage a ghastly war against the original inhabitants of the world, innocent though those inhabitants were of anything but the desire to retain possession of their own planet. Stiamot's construction of a castle for the Coronal at the highest point of the Mount, symbolizing his epic victory, would be the climax of the middle section of the poem. Then would come the final three cantos, one to show the gradual return to general tranquility, one to portray Majipoor as a fully mature world, and one, a visionary ninth one not entirely shaped yet in Furvain's mind, which would, perhaps, deal somehow with the healing of the unresolved instabilities—the*wound* —that the war against the Metamorphs had created in the fabric of the planet's life.

Furvain even had a name for the poem, now.*The Book of Changes* was what he would call it, for change was its theme, the eternal seasonal flux, the ceaseless ebb and flow of events, and in counterpoint to that the steady line of the sacred destiny of Majipoor beneath. Kings arose and flourished and died, movements rose and fell, but the commonwealth went ever onward like a great river, following the path that the Divine had ordained for it, and all its changes were but stations along that path. Which was a path marked by challenge and response, the constant collision of opposing forces to produce an inevitable synthesis: the necessary triumph of Dvorn over anarchy, the necessary triumph of Stiamot over the Metamorphs, and—someday in the future—the necessary triumph of the victors over their own victory. That was the thing he must show, he knew: the pattern that emerges from the passage of time and demonstrates that everything, even the great unavoidable sin of the suppression of the Metamorphs, is part of an unswerving design, the inevitable triumph of organization over chaos.

Whenever he was not actually working on the poem Furvain felt terrified by the immensity of the task and the insufficiency of his own qualifications for writing it. A thousand times a day he fought back the desire to walk away from it. But he could not allow that.*You have to change your life,* the Lady Dolitha had told him, back there on Castle Mount, what seemed like centuries ago. Yes. Her stern words had had the force of an order. He*had* changed his life, and his life had changed him. And so he must continue, he knew, bringing into being this great poem that he would give to the world as his atonement for all those wasted years. Kasinibon, too, goaded him mercilessly toward the same goal: no longer spying on him, never even inquiring after the poem, but forever watching him, measuring his progress by the gauntness of his features and the bleariness of his eyes, waiting, seeking, silently demanding. Against such silent pressure Furvain was helpless.

He worked on and on, cloistered now in his rooms, rarely coming forth except for meals, toiling each day to the point of exhaustion, resting briefly, plunging back into trance. It was like a journey through some infernal region of the mind. Full of misgivings, he traveled by wandering and laborious circuits through the dark. For hours at a time he was certain that he had become separated from his guide and he had no idea of his destination, and he felt terrors of every kind, shivers and trembling, sweat and turmoil. But then a wonderful light would shine upon him, and he would be admitted into pure meadowlands, where there were voices and dances, and the majesty of holy sounds and sacred visions, and the words would flow as though beyond conscious control.

The months passed. He was entering the second year of his task, now. The pile of manuscript steadily

increased. He worked in no consecutive way, but turned, rather, to whichever part of the poem made the most insistent call on his attention. The only canto that he regarded as complete was the central one, the fifth, the key Stiamot section; but he had finished much of the Melikand canto, and nearly all of the Dvorn one, and big pieces of the opening sequence dealing with the initial settlement. Some of the other sections, the less dramatic ones, were mere fragments; and of the ninth canto he had set down nothing at all. And parts of the Stiamot story, the early and late phases, were still untold. It was a chaotic way to work, but he knew no other way of doing it. Everything would be handled in due time, of that he felt sure.

Now and again he would ask Kasinibon whether any replies had come to his requests for ransom money, and invariably was told, "No, no, no word from anyone." It scarcely mattered. Nothing mattered, except the work at hand.

Then, when he was no more than three stanzas into the ninth and final canto, Furvain suddenly felt as though he stood before an impassable barrier, or perhaps an infinite dark abyss: at any rate that he had come to a point in the great task beyond which he was incapable of going. There had been times in the past, many of them, when Furvain had felt that way. But this was different. Those other times what he had experienced was an*unwillingness* to go on, quickly enough conquered by summoning a feeling that he could not allow himself the shameful option of not continuing. What he felt now was the absolute *incapacity* to carry the poem any farther, because he saw only blackness ahead.

Help me, he prayed, not knowing to whom. *Guide me.*

But no help came, nor any guidance. He was alone. And, alone, he had no idea how to handle the material that he had intended to use for the ninth canto. The reconciliation with the Shapeshifters—the expiation of the great unavoidable sin that humankind had committed against them on this world—the absolution, the redemption, even the amends—he had no notion whatever of how to proceed with that. For here was Majipoor, close to ten thousand years on beyond Dvorn and four thousand years beyond Stiamot, and what reconciliation, even now, had been reached with the Metamorphs? What expiation, what redemption? They were still penned up in their jungle home in Zimroel, their movements elsewhere on that continent tightly restricted, and their presence anywhere in Alhanroel forbidden entirely. The world was no closer to a solution to the problem of the Shapeshifters than it had been on the day the first settlers landed. Lord Stiamot's solution—conquer them, lock them up forever in southern Zimroel, and keep the rest of the world for ourselves—was no solution at all, only a mere brutal expedient, as Stiamot himself had recognized. Stiamot had known that it was too late to turn back from the settlement of the planet. Majipoor's history could not be unhappened. And so, for the sake of Majipoor's billions of human settlers, Majipoor's millions of aborigines had had to give up their freedom.

If Stiamot could find no answer to the problem, Furvain thought, then who am I to offer one now?

In that case he could not write the ninth canto. And—worse—he began to think that he could not finish the earlier unfinished cantos, either. Now that he saw there was no hope of capping the edifice with its intended conclusion, all inspiration seemed to flee from him. If he tried to force his way onward now, he suspected that he would only ruin what he had already written, diluting its power with lesser material. And even if somehow he did manage to finish, he felt now in his hopelessness and despair that he could never reveal the poem to the world. No one would believe that he had written it. They would think that some sort of theft was involved, some fraud, and he would become a figure of scorn when he was unable to produce the real author. Better for there to be no poem at all than for that sort of disgrace to descend upon him in his final years, he reasoned.

And from that perception to the decision that he must destroy the manuscript this very day was a short journey indeed.

From the cupboards and crannies of his apartment in Kasinibon's fortress he gathered the various copies and drafts, and stacked them atop his table. They made a goodly heap. On days when he felt too tired or too stale to carry the poem onward, he had occupied his time in making additional copies of the existing texts, in order to lessen the risk that some mischance would rob him of his work. He had kept all his discarded pages, too, the deleted stanzas, the rewritten ones. It was an immense mound of paper. Burning it all would probably take hours.

Calmly he peeled an inch-thick mass of manuscript from the top of his stack and laid it on the hearth of his fireplace.

He found a match. Struck it. Stared at it for a moment, still terribly calm, and then brought it toward the corner of the stack.

"What are you doing?" Kasinibon cried, stepping swiftly into the room. Briskly the little man brought the heel of his boot down on the smoldering match and ground it out against the stone hearth. The pile of manuscript had not had time to ignite.

"What I'm doing is burning the poem," said Furvain quietly. "Or trying to."

"Doing*what* ?"

"Burning it," Furvain said again.

"You've gone crazy. Your mind has snapped under the pressure of the work."

Furvain shook his head. "No, I think I'm still sane. But I can't go on with it, that I know. And once I came to that realization, I felt that it was best to destroy the incomplete poem." In a low, unemotional tone he laid out for Kasinibon all that had passed through his mind in the last half hour.

Kasinibon listened without interrupting him. He was silent for a long moment thereafter. Then he said, looking past Furvain's shoulder to the window and speaking in a strained, hollow, barely audible tone, "I have a confession to make, Furvain. Your ransom money arrived a week ago. From your friend the Duke. I was afraid to tell you, because I wanted you to finish the poem first, and I knew that you never would if I let you go back to Dundilmir. But I see that that's wrong. I have no right to hold you here any longer. Do as you please, Furvain. Go, if you like. Only—I beg you—spare what you've written. Let me keep a copy of it when you leave."

"I want to destroy it," Furvain said.

Kasinibon's eyes met Furvain's. He said, speaking more strongly now, the old whiplash voice of the bandit chieftain, "No. I forbid you. Give it to me freely, or I'll simply confiscate it."

"I'm still a prisoner, then, I see," said Furvain, smiling. "Have you really received the ransom money?"

"I swear it."

Furvain nodded. It was his time for silence, now. He turned his back on Kasinibon and stared out toward the blood-red waters of the lake beyond.

Was it really so impossible, he wondered, to finish the poem?

Dizziness swept over him for an instant and he realized that some unexpected force was moving within

him. Kasinibon's shamefaced confession had broken things open. No longer did he feel as though he stood before that impassable barrier. Suddenly the way was open and the ninth canto was in his grasp after all.

It did not need to contain the answer to the Shapeshifter problem. Since Stiamot's day, forty centuries of Coronals and Pontifexes had failed to solve that problem: why should a mere poet be able to do so? But questions of governance were not his responsibility. Writing poetry was. In *The Book of Changes* he had given Majipoor a mirror that would show the world its past; it was not his job to provide it with its future as well. At least not in any explicit way. Let the future discover itself as its own time unfolds.

Suppose, he thought—suppose—suppose—I end the poem with a prophecy, a cryptic vision of a tragic king of the years to come, a king who is, like Stiamot, a man of peace who must make war, and who will suffer greatly in the anguish of his kingship. Fragmentary phrases came to him: "A golden king . . . a crown in the dust . . . the holy embrace of sworn enemies . . ." What did they mean? He had no idea. But he didn't need to know. He needed only to set them down. To offer the hope that in some century to come some unimaginable monarch, who could unite in himself the forces of war and peace in a way that would precisely balance the suffering and the achievement of Stiamot, would thereby put an end to the instability in the Commonwealth that was the inevitable consequence of the original sin of taking this planet from its native people. To end the poem with the idea that reconciliation is possible. Not to explain how it will be achieved: merely to say that achieving it is possible.

In that moment Furvain knew not only that he could go on to the finish but that he *must* go on, that it was his duty, and that this was the only place where that could be accomplished: here, under the watchful eye of his implacable captor and guardian. He would never do it back in Dundilmir, where he would inevitably retrogress into the shallowness of his old ways.

Turning, he gathered up a copy of the manuscript that included all that he had written thus far, and nudged it across the table to Kasinibon. "This is for you," he said. "Keep it. Read it, if you want to. Just don't say a word to me about it until I give you permission."

Kasinibon silently took the bundle from him, clutching the pages to his breast and folding his arms across them.

Furvain said, then, "Send the ransom money back to Tanigel. Tell the Duke he paid it too soon. I'll be staying here a little while longer. And send this with it." He pulled one of his extra copies of the finished text of the Stiamot canto from the great mound of paper on the table. "So that he can see what his old lazy friend Furvain has been up to all this time out in the east-country, eh?" Furvain smiled. "And now, Kasinibon, please—if you'll allow me to get back to work—"