

The City of the Sorcerers

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC]

Synopsis: In a post-apocalyptic new world, a new priest goes on a spirit journey and an old evil arises.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you are offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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Second Day

These things everyone knows. The gods have forbidden anyone to enter any Dead House of Old Time unless he is a priest. Forbidden us to travel far to the east, to the poisoned city that once belonged to the sorcerers of Old Time before the gods rained down fire and thunder to destroy them. Forbidden us to touch the devices of the sorcerers before a priest has purified them, lest the old poisons that may remain in them awaken. Forbidden us to consort with the demons of the sorcerers, lest the hungry evils of Old Time rise and walk among us again.

These are our laws, and they are well-made and good, and all of the People of the Plains must obey them.

This is to be the record of my spirit journey. I fast as required, and my head swims. Forgive me, for the old words in which I must write this are still strange to me even with the clearest head.

I must think too on the generosity of the gods, for they have given us many things. To us, the People of the

Plains, the gods gave the fertile lands and good hunting grounds between the northern mountains and the great southern swamps. To all men, the gods have given the life magic in our blood, our bodies, the seed of our cocks and balls, so that we may be strong and hunt across our lands and prosper. To us priests alone they have also given the mind magics, so that we may defend our people from the spirits and demons of Old Time. To the Tree Folk, who are our enemies, the gods gave the deep eastern forest where we are forbidden to go. Some distance farther east beyond the forest lies the City of the Sorcerers, given to the demons and vile things, the site of the great war between the sorcerers and the gods, where the sorcerers used their mighty machines that allowed them to fly through the air as easily as I walk to a hilltop--to fly even as far as the moon, some legends say!--and where the gods defeated the sorcerers and punished them for their pride and wastefulness. Some say traces of the evil of the sorcerers, even their fanged and blood-drinking demons, may linger in their devices, or in their Dead Houses, or in the ashes of the Sorcerers War, hungry corruptions that must never be released, lest they rise up again to devour us and the life magic in our blood. That is why the city is forbidden to all under the law. Even the priests like my father have never seen it or been there.

As everyone knows, the laws forbid us from entering any of the Dead Houses where sorcerers once dwelled, except to scavenge, and even then no one may touch the devices of Old Time unless he is a priest or the son of a priest, for the legends tell of invisible evils imprisoned in some of their objects, evils that could burn or sicken or kill. But a priest's magic and his faith in the gods will protect him from even these invisible harms. Afterward, both the priest and the device must be purified of the Old Time sorcerers' taint, before any other of our people can touch them.

The laws forbid that we cross the forest, or approach the great eastern river, or look upon the place that was once the City of the Sorcerers--this is our strongest, holiest law. Spirits live in that city; demons and hungry things, formerly enslaved by the sorcerers and once made to serve them, now walk freely among the ashes of the Sorcerers War. They are evils that would seduce and consume us. These things and places are forbidden for our own protection, as they have been since the Old Time of the sorcerers ended in fire and death and our time began.

My father is a priest; I am therefore the son of a priest. I have accompanied my father into Dead Houses to scavenge. At first, as a child, I was afraid. When my father went into a dead man's house to search for devices we could sell or barter to passing traders, I stood by the door and my heart was fragile and fearful. This was the dwelling-house of a dead man, perhaps even a sorcerer, and some of its windows still contained what the people of Old Time called glass, a kind of transparent stone too brittle to make into knives and which we have lost the knowledge to create--but a good sign, for glass meant this Dead House had not been much visited since by men and it might still hold some of the sorcerers' devices. Too, it might hold danger--it might be filled with spirits and some of the devices might still hold a sorcerer's old captive demon. The place no longer bore the signs of the man's life, but his old bones lay in a corner. A priest's son should never dishonor himself, his father, and his ancestors by showing fear. I looked at the bones in the shadows and I did not run; I held myself still and silent.

Then my father emerged with a sorcerer's device--a finely made metal contrivance, though its original purpose was unknown to us. He looked at me with his eyes and his mind magic filled my head, but I did not run away. He gave me the Old Time thing to hold. I took it and did not die, and by this he knew that I was truly his son and would become a priest in my time. This happened when I was young, too young to hunt--nevertheless, my three older brothers would not have done it; for though they are strong and well-made with the strong life magic of good hunters in their blood, the special mind magics to be a priest were not within them. But even a future priest is worthy of some respect, so after that day, they gave me an equal portion of our meat and a warm corner near our fire.

When my own magic emerged, I possessed a magic of the mind, like my father's, but also a magic of fire, which was mine alone. My father was pleased--magics that touched thoughts or created fires were good and useful magics for a priest to have.

My father was much pleased that I would become a priest. He saw to my training and watched over me; he taught me the spells and chants, how to treat illnesses and bleeding wounds, and many secrets. A priest, my father said, must know many, many secrets. But when I was boastful or used my mind magic foolishly, such as influencing one or another of my brothers to do my chores for me, my father punished me harshly, as was proper, because a priest must also know modesty and discipline, lest the pride of the dead sorcerers find a home in his soul and corrupt his magic.

From then onward, I was allowed to go into the Dead Houses alone to search for devices to scavenge. I learned the ways of those ancient dwellings, and when I saw bones I was no longer afraid. Such bones were old and dry--fragile things that sometimes cracked into dust if I touched them. Touching them is forbidden, lest we become tainted by some old evil of illness or death sleeping within them, but I never met such an evil, and chanting the songs of purification kept me safe.

If the hunters think we priests do our work by spell-chants alone, their belief does no harm and help us priests keep our secrets. In addition to the use of my magic, my father and the priests taught me how to read the Old Time word-symbols in the old books, how to turn them into the sounds we speak, and how to write in the old way--these secrets were hard and took a long time to learn. This knowledge made me happy and grew in my heart like a fire. Most of all, I liked to hear the stories of Old Time and the sorcerers. At night, I would lie awake and listen to the wind, and it seemed to carry the voices of the whispering spirits, because surely the immortal spirits surrounding me then were the same ones who had once known the sorcerers as they flew through the air in their marvelous devices. The books tell us that the sorcerers hid their greatest knowledge in the clouds, protected behind walls of fire. The spirits of the winds may keep those secrets hidden still, for they have never spoken of this knowledge to me or any priest of the People.

We People of the Plains are not ignorant like the Tree Folk, with their long arms and hairy bodies, hardly better than animals. Our people know how to weave strong rope, and we do not eat roots from the ground. Our priests wear moccasins to keep their feet from touching the tainted earth directly, and our priests have not forgotten the old writings, though such are hard to understand. Both my knowledge and my lack of knowledge burned equally in my heart--I hungered to know more.

This is the spring of the year in which I am at last to become a man. I knew I was ready for my own spirit journey. I had already begun wearing the loin-rag of a man, for the life magic all men carry in their cocks and balls had come upon me some time ago, and now I was ready to become a priest. I went to my father in his yurt and said, "The time has come for my journey. I ask your permission to go as I am led."

He looked at me for a long time, then he said, "Yes, your time has come."

That night, in the sacred place of the priesthood, I asked for and received the purification. My spirit was unyielding as stone. My father himself was the priest who questioned me about my dreams. He told me to look into the smoke of the fire and see--I felt his mind magic touch mine, and the trance came upon me, and I saw and I told him what I saw, what I have always seen: a river, and, beyond it, a gigantic gathering of Dead Houses, stretching as far and high as the eye could see, and in it the sorcerers rushing to and fro, on foot, in their ground carriages, in their sky machines. He asked me how the sorcerers were dressed and I told him. I knew how they dressed from the books, of course, but I saw them as if they were before me, and I told him what I saw. I saw also the hungry fanged demon-things that hid in the dark outskirts among the sorcerers and fed upon life magic in the blood but I was afraid and did not say this part of my vision to him.

When I had finished, my father threw the prophecy stones three times and studied them each time. His eyes were hard. He said, "This is a very strong dream. Be careful, for your journey will be long and dangerous; the spirits will lead you far from here, and your choices will be many. A wrong choice may lead you to demons that will devour you."

"This is my dream and this is my journey," I acknowledged, while the smoke rose and my head felt light. In the outer chamber, they were singing the old songs, and to my mind magic their thoughts were like the buzzing of bees in my head. I met his gaze and said to him, "I am not afraid, even if I am to be devoured."

He anointed my chest and forehead. I put on my moccasins and leggings, and I was given the loin-rag of a priest to wear, deerskin painted with a white strike to show my journey was holy. I strapped my quiver and pack across my back. He gave me my small knife, my bow, and three arrows. Finally he gave me these papers and a tool for writing on them, so that I would record the dreams and signs that come to me on my journey. He told me: "You are my son, and the time has come for you to become a man and a priest. You may journey as the spirits lead you, but remember the law. You are forbidden to travel east. You are forbidden to enter the forest or cross the river. You are forbidden to go to the City of the Sorcerers. All other places you may go as the spirits lead you, but those places are forbidden."

"Those are forbidden," I repeated, but only my voice spoke, not my spirit.

He looked at me sternly. "My son," he said, "once I had young dreams. If your dreams do not devour you, you may become a great priest. If they consume you, you are still my son. Go now and journey as the spirits lead you."

I went fasting, as is the law. My body hurt but not my heart. When this dawn came, I was far out of sight of the places of my people, and I began this record. I have prayed and purified myself, and now I wait for my sign.

Third Day

Today I saw the first sign, and the sign was strong and good: a sacred brown eagle, flying toward the forbidden east.

Sometimes signs are sent by devious spirits who would lead a man, even a priest, astray into a place where his soul would be devoured. I waited again on a wide flat rock atop a hill, fasting, praying. I was very still--I could feel the sky above me, the earth beneath. When the sun was beginning to sink, a second sign came to me. Four deer passed in the valley going east--they did not see or mind me. A white fawn was with them--a very strong sign.

I followed them, at a distance, waiting for what would happen. My heart was troubled about going east, but I knew I must. My head hummed with my fasting--I did not even see the great brown tiger until it sprang upon the white fawn. Before I realized, my bow was in my hand. I shouted and the tiger lifted his bloody teeth from the dead fawn. To kill a brown tiger with one arrow is not easy, even for the best of our hunters. My arrow pierced his neck but did not fell him, and he turned to me in pain and rage. I called upon my magic, the magic of fire this time, and desperation fueled my strength. A ball of flame appeared around the tiger's head, heat that I could feel across the distance between us, burning his eyes and into his brain. He died as he tried to spring--he rolled over, tearing at the ground, until he moved no more.

Then I knew I had seen the signs correctly and I was being led east. I knew that was to be my journey, and my heart was no longer troubled. I traveled east until the night fell, and then I made my campfire with another bit of fire magic and I roasted the fawn meat I took to break my fast.

Eleventh Day

For eight more suns I have journeyed east, and I have passed many Dead Houses. The Tree Folk fear them but I do not. Each night I have made my fire by the wall outside a Dead House, and on the fifth morning, in a

dead man's place, I found a good knife, only a little rusted, and better than mine. I took that to be a gift from the spirits, which made my heart feel big. Always when I hunted for meat, I found it in front of my arrow. Twice I came near hunting parties of the Tree Folk and my mind magic clouded their senses enough that they passed without seeing me where I hid. By these signs I know my magic is strong and my eastward journey blessed, in spite of the law.

A half-day ago I left the sorcerers' road; we do not often use the sorcerer roads now, because they are falling into broken blocks of stone, and the forest is safer going. Today, toward the sunset, I came to the banks of a river. At first, some long way off through trees, I saw and heard the water but the trees were dense. When at last I came out of the forest and found myself upon the top of a cliff, looking out over an open space, the river lay below, and I knew it was the great eastern river forbidden in the law. The river was very long, stretched like a serpent basking in the falling sun, wide enough to eat all the streams we People of the Plains know and still be thirsty. No other man of my tribe had seen it before me, not even my father, or his father, or any of the priests. It was magic and I prayed for protection.

Then I turned and looked south. There I saw the City of the Sorcerers.

I cannot describe what it was like. It sprawled there in the sunset light, mighty and ruined, a great collection of Dead Houses, and they were far bigger than the dwellings I had known. I saw the flat-topped places that must surely have been used for human sacrifices, and places where the sorcerer-dwellings rose up nearly into the sky. I knew that if I tarried too long, hungry spirits dwelling there would see me and curse me. I bowed my head in prayer and crept back into the forest.

Twelfth Day

When the sun rose, I thought, "My journey has been holy and blessed. Now I will go home." Surely to look upon the City of the Sorcerers and still live was journey enough, I told myself. Surely to spend the night upon the cliff was proof enough of my courage and worthiness to be a priest. Yet, all through the night, in my dreams and restlessness, I felt myself drawn by the spirits to cross the river and walk in the places of Old Time. If I went to the City of the Sorcerers, I would surely die as the legends said; but if I did not go, I would never be at peace again. Perhaps the better journey is to lose one's life than one's spirit, especially if one is the son of a priest, a priest himself, and a seeker of knowledge.

My magic and prayers were no help to me, and the call of the city remained a fire in my soul. Some of the Old Time books have passages where the sorcerers come together to do what was surely the giving and sharing of life magic, and they often call out to the gods in these tellings. My life magic was strong within me this morning and I thought to make such a ritual as an offering for guidance. This was not one of the priestly rituals my father taught me, but one I had learned myself, though I knew all men somehow learn it and perform it, even those who aren't priests, for all men have the life magic in their blood and their seed. I knelt in the sunrise where the gods could see and pushed my loin-rag aside. My manhood hardened at my touch. I thought on the gods and rubbed my shaft, intending to make an offering of the life magic in my seed to them. I rubbed my shaft faster, faster, and thought on the gods until soon I spent myself in quite a satisfying storm, ejaculating my seed and the magic it contained onto the ground for the spirits to find and carry to the gods.

As I knelt there, panting, I looked about for an answering sign. At first I saw nothing; I feared my magic had been spent in vain. Then I saw, nearby, a small spider, making its way along and over a group of sticks toward the direction of the river. Spiders spin the very air itself into a strong cord, ropes to weave into their webs, as is their nature. I thought on this. I knew a little of the way of weaving vines into cords and nets, though my brothers knew more because they are strong hunters, and I knew a way to weave the vines of the ginny creeper and ivy and the wild grape, perhaps the kudzu too if it grew here, to bind pieces of tree limbs into a type of small raft; we had once done this for sport at a lake when my brothers and I were younger.

Perhaps?--Yes, I was meant to use the vines and limbs of the forest to make a raft to help buoy myself across the great river. A fine, strong sign, given in answer to my offering of life magic. I knew truly my journey had been blessed.

The great river is too wide to swim. As I made my small raft, the Tree Folk could have come upon me unawares and killed me without a fight; but the spirits surely guarded me for the Folk did not come.

When the raft was done, a pitiful thing almost too small to be called such but passable enough to keep my head buoyed in the water, the best I could make quickly and alone, I used mud to paint my chest and face with the signs for the dead and I said the chants for the dead, in case I was to die in the river or when my foot touched the shore of the City of the Sorcerers. As I pushed the raft into the currents, I trembled with fear, but the burning need to see the city drove me forward. I began my death chant--such was my right if this place was to kill me, and I made a fine song.

The great river, once a servant of the sorcerers, had its own magic; from the bank the water had looked wide and calm, but its current turned strong as it took hold of my raft. I know little of the ways of wide rivers--we are a People of the Plains. I tried to guide my raft, but I was swept downstream, sure that I felt water spirits, perhaps more mischievous than evil, swirling around me. I had never been so alone, so at the mercy of a force outside of myself--my magics, my strength, none of it mattered in the middle of this current. I was as small and weak against it as a newly birthed fawn. But I had come too far to yield to panic, and I could not go back. The river did not care to bend itself to my will, and so I could only paddle toward the opposite shore.

The huge ruins rose before my eyes, and I was afraid. I thought the river meant to sweep me past the city and beyond into the Great Poisoned Sea of the legends. My fear turned to anger then, strengthening my heart. I called out to the spirits around me, "I am the son of a priest and a priest myself! I have been led here by the will of the gods! Take heed of me!" The spirits surely heard me--they pushed the raft into a turn of the current that spun me through the middle of the river, toward the far shore, closer to the City of the Sorcerers.

I could see both banks; I saw the sorcerers had built sky-roads that once crossed the waters, though now those roads were broken and fallen, shattered no doubt in the Sorcerers War when the gods made fire fall from the sky. The water was sweeping me downstream toward one that had collapsed. The side stretching from the city was intact, but halfway across the river it broke and tipped down into the middle of the water, ending in a great spike of rusted metal and road-stone. The opposite end on the forest side was completely gone.

My small raft struck something under the surface and was jerked from my hands, abandoning me under the water. The current gripped me. My brothers had taught me how to swim in our lakes, and I pushed myself toward the closest surface ground: the collapsed mass of the sky-road where it descended into the river, fearing otherwise I might be swept out into the sea. I reached the mass and hauled myself onto it and sat there, panting in the sun on a slab of broken road-stone. I had saved my bow, two arrows, the knife I found in the Dead House, and these papers to record my journey, but all else was gone. My raft continued in the swirling water, already almost out of sight. I was thankful that the river had not rolled me deeper into its depths, for then I would have been truly drowned and dead in the arms of the water spirits. I was still alive, and so I set about drying my papers and my bowstring in the sun on the warm rock. Once I had re-strung it, I drew up my courage and climbed the angled arm of the sky-road. When I reached the top, the way into the great dead City of the Sorcerers lay clear before me, and I walked forward.

The sorcerers' road-stone felt familiar underfoot; it did not burn me. I learned then that the tales were false in saying the ground here burns forever, for I saw no flames, no smoke. Here and there on the ruins were the signs of fire from the Sorcerers War, true, but these were aged marks. Nothing here had burned in quite a long number of years. In all directions were cracked and broken sorcerer-roads. The city was a giant Dead House--a collection of Dead Houses, many larger than any I had ever seen, many soaring into high towers where surely the most powerful sorcerers had lived.

I went cautiously, my bow notched with an arrow, my magic ready for danger, and I whispered the chants of protection and purification in case some demon or invisible taint of the sorcerers' evil lay in wait. I expected the howls of demons, the hisses of spirits, but I heard none, only the whisper of the breeze and the talk of birds going about their business. The day was sun-bright, the area quiet. The signs of weather and time were everywhere. Grass and small plants grew in cracks in the broken stone, here and there small trees grew. Limbs and fallen corpses of their predecessors testified to how long they had been doing their work.

But the Dead Houses of the sorcerers! Not all were shattered--here and there some towers still stood, stretching upward toward the sky. But their window-eyes were blind, for their sorcerers were gone. Here and there Old Time numbers and letters were carved into stone on the towers, no doubt part of the sorcerers' magic. I could read the letters, sometimes the words, but I could not understand the messages. I saw a shattered gray stone, larger than a man but shaped in a man's image; whether the image of a sorcerer or a god I could not guess. He wore clothing that I knew from the Old Time books had been old even in the time of the sorcerers. A tablet carved with words was built into stone on which he stood, but half of it was broken away--I could not determine whether the tablet captured the tale of some exploit of his if he were a god, or some incantation if he had been a sorcerer. I said a chant of protection under my breath, in case the partial carved words were sorcery.

I saw no sign of living man here; my mind magic felt no one. No man had been here for some long time, perhaps not since the days of Old Time ended. I saw many birds nesting and flapping among the towers, doves and pigeons and sometimes a small type of falcon that hunted them. Perhaps the sorcerers had kept the ancestors of these birds as pets or used them as sacrifices to fuel their magics.

I found entrances that led down underground, into what seemed great caves or tunnels--perhaps the City of the Sorcerers extended as deep into the earth as it did into the sky, a revelation to me. These underground places must have been where they housed their many servant-demons and their slaves. But as I stood at one of the openings, I heard the chirping and calls of rats, great numbers of them, and perhaps other dark things as well, so I did not go down into the underground, because rats and things that live in the darkness are unclean and could harm me, and I had no torch to keep their numbers at bay.

The more I saw, the less I feared. This place had seen no man in longer than I had been alive. I went toward where the number of the tallest towers seemed greatest, and soon I no longer tried to hide myself. If I happened upon a god or a demon, then surely I would die. In the meantime my heart was no longer afraid. My craving for knowledge burned--all around me was so much that I did not understand, and I hungered to decipher it.

I hungered too in my belly. The sun was starting low, and I could have hunted for meat, for the birds were plentiful, but I had only my two arrows, which I could not risk losing, and so I did not hunt. We People of the Plains know that the sorcerers did not hunt as we do--their food came from boxes and jars enchanted with their magic. Sometimes we found these in the Dead Houses. Once, when I was a child and had a child's foolishness, I opened the top of such a jar and tasted the contents, some sort of fruit but with a thick, sweet syrup instead of juice. My father caught me at it and punished me sternly, for often that old food is death to us. Now, though, I had passed the point of worrying about what was forbidden, and I considered the towers around me, wondering which would most likely contain the food-boxes and jars of the sorcerers. I would need a tall one, because I knew from the Old Time books that the mightiest sorcerers preferred not to live on the ground but high above it, near the sky and the clouds where their secrets were kept. Perhaps their magic was that of night wind and the morning light, stronger far from the ground.

Hearing a small noise, I turned, an arrow in my bow and ready. I saw a dog watching me. His tongue hung from his mouth, as if he laughed at me. He was a big, gray-brown thing, larger than our dogs but not so large as a wolf; perhaps he grew strong by eating the many rats I had heard before. I shouted at him, but he did not retreat--he simply sat there, laughing and patient and unafraid, watching me as if I were to be his meat. I

knew fear then, for I know the ways of wild dogs, how they hunt, how a group of them can pull down even a strong hunter. This dog was likely not alone. I could have killed him with an arrow, but rather than waste one, I scooped up a stone and threw it. The dog moved nimbly out of the way, and then I saw a second dog.

My mind magic would not work against dogs, but I was not going to make myself easy prey. I looked about for my escape. Leading north was a great, broken sorcerers' road. The towers there were not so high; perhaps lesser sorcerers and thus lesser evils had lived there. Many of the tall Dead Houses were wrecked, but several were still stood. I went toward this road, and the two dogs followed. They were confident enough of their hunt that they did not hurry. When I had reached one of the standing towers, I saw more dogs join behind them. Soon they would have numbers and courage enough to come at me and tear out my throat.

The door of this towering Dead House had once held some sort of inlay, perhaps glass but now gone, and now only the frame of the door remained. I turned to face the dogs. They kept watch from closer now. Doubtless they expected me to run and they would have the fine end of their hunt. I called on my fire magic and sent it at the lead dog, the one who had first found me. His head burst into a ball of flames and he fell back, twisting and howling in pain as he died.

Most of the pack sidestepped in confusion, distracted by the unexpected stink of burning fur and their leader's death-throes, uncertain what to do. I ran for the entrance door and passed through the hole.

I ran deeper into the tower, and soon the dogs began to follow through the entry after me. One, two, five, more. But a dog cannot open a door, and I needed to find one that moved.

I had only just found a door that pulled open for me when the dogs made their rush. I slipped through the gap, tugged the door behind me. Ha!--The dogs were surprised when I shut it in their faces! It was a good door, of strong metal. I could hear their howls, scratchings, and bayings, angry, frustrated, from the other side but I did not stop to answer them. I was in darkness, the only light a dimness from a small window above, grimed with age--but here were stairs and I hurried to climb them, in case the dogs' noise summoned some greater danger or demon.

This passage had many stairs, going up, up, turning around, around, and I ran until I grew dizzy. I paused on a flat place between lengths of stairs to catch my breath. A door was here, like several others I had passed in my climb. I turned the knob and pushed it. No movement. I pulled. It did not give. I climbed the stairs again to the next place with a door. This one made a noise but it opened for me as I pulled. Beyond, stretching into the belly of the sorcerer's tower was a long, narrow small chamber, doors at intervals on each side. I heard and saw nothing, my mind magic sensed nothing, so I crept forward. The first door had no handle and so I could not open it; perhaps opening it required an incantation or a word of power that I lacked. I moved further until I found a door whose knob turned, and I opened it and went inside.

Within, I found myself in a place of obvious wealth. The sorcerer who had lived there must have been a powerful one. The first room was small, with chairs and seats; perhaps visitors and supplicants sat here as they waited until the sorcerer would deign to hear their petitions. I knelt there for some time, whispering to any spirits remaining in the place that I came in peace and was not a foe or desecrator. I repeated my prayer, and after they had time to hear me, I went deeper inside.

What riches lay here! The windows, a wall of them looking out over the city, were streaked and dirty from many years but had not been broken--everything was dusty but otherwise remained as the sorcerer had left it. The floors had some sort of soft covering, the colors not greatly faded, and the chairs were soft and deep. I saw pictures on the walls of places that were strange and wonderful, and a small figure of a naked man, in some hard clay, stood on a table, the image of a sorcerer, no doubt. As I studied his body, I was pleased to see his figure was so like my people; he might have been one of us People of the Plains, and was not hairy or long-armed like the Tree Folk at all.

Everywhere were books and writings, several in tongues that I could not read. The sorcerer who lived there must have been a wise one, having much knowledge. Perhaps he was not as evil as the rest. I felt as though he would not have minded my presence, because I sought knowledge too.

The air felt stale and dry in this sorcerer's house, and the place was strangely made. I found a small basin like the ones in the Dead Houses near my home, basins my father said were their washing-places, but of course there was no water--perhaps the sorcerers conjured their water or knew some spell to wash themselves with air. I found no candles, no lamps, nothing that would hold oil or a wick. The sorcerers must have had other ways to make light--secrets I am not ashamed to say that I wished I knew.

Everywhere too were the devices of the sorcerer! I chanted the song of purification quietly, so as not to anger the spirits. All of the devices around me had been receptacles of magic, but I touched them and lived, because by now the sorcerer's magic had left them. Still, the magic had not fully left this dwelling place. I felt the spirits about me, weighing upon me. I had slept outside of Dead Houses on my journey, but never had I slept inside a sorcerer's Dead House before--and yet with night approaching I knew I must sleep there tonight. The alternative was to go down again and face the dogs--certain death, and I was not yet ready to die. When I thought of sleeping there among the spirits, my throat became dry, because sometimes fear is stronger than the thirst for knowledge and can overcome it.

I found knives and other tools in the sorcerer's cooking-place, not practical blades for hunting but they were made of good metal and some were very sharp. I took a good-sized one, the sharpest; I missed the knife my father had given me, lost in the river when my raft turned over, but I still had the one the gods had given me in the Dead House during my journey, and now I had two again.

I found food as well, in the heart of the sorcerer's home, behind a small door that still opened. I ate only the fruits from the jars, and only a few in case the magic in them had curdled into poison over the years as my father had once warned. The sorcerer had left drink, too, in glass bottles--I recognized the bite in my throat as the dark golden liquid went down, the same magic that some of the priests make by fermenting grains and fruits, but the taste of the sorcerers' was different, less bitter, easier and smoother to swallow, almost seductive. I felt the warmth of it in my belly, and soon in my limbs too, and so I drank more. The drink of the sorcerers was strong; it drove away my fear and made my head swim, and a dizziness came upon me. I lay on the soft floor covering, my bow and knives at ready by my side, and let the warm dizziness carry me into sleep.

The spirits of this place whispered and sang to me as I slept, and I dreamed. I dreamed of the City of the Sorcerers when it was alive, before the Sorcerers War.

The city should have been dark, for night was upon it, but nothing was dark. Everywhere were lights, like in some of the images from the Old Time books. Everywhere, even at night, went the sorcerers, on foot and in chariots--sorcerers beyond counting, and their chariots filled the streets, and dark things walked among them unnoticed, demons and darker spirits that hungered for life magic and disguised themselves in the forms of men. The sorcerers turned night into day for their pleasure--they did not have to sleep when the sun went down, and hungry dark things that also did not sleep at night passed among them, though whether tolerated or simply undetected I could not discern. The noise of all things coming and going was fearful, a blurred din louder than the noise of the many rushing rivers.

The restless sorcerers seemed always in motion, going about their business with their strange devices. They were mighty, and if they wanted something they summoned it to themselves immediately. Perhaps they could even have pulled the moon from the sky. I would have been beneath notice to them.

These things I knew from the Old Time books, but that is where the books stop; none of them recount what happened next, the Sorcerers War. But in my dream, I saw what happened after the book-tales end, the start of

the legends. I saw the sorcerers' fate fall upon them, terrible beyond my ability to describe. I have joined my people in the fights against the Tree Folk, and I have seen men die--but this was terrible far beyond like that. When the gods had endured enough of the sorcerers' pride and arrogance and wastefulness, their punishment came upon the sorcerers as they walked the nighttime streets of their city and rode in their chariots and sailed in winged craft through the air. When the gods brought war to the sorcerers, they used weapons I could not understand. Fire fell out of the sky, and the ground erupted in flame and fury and the voices of a thousand thunders, and buildings fell, and invisible poisons tainted the air and made it unbreathable and burned the lungs and blistered the skin, and many, many died. This was the time of the Sorcerers War. The sorcerers ran like ants in the roads as their towers began to fall, and the collapses threw out stone and glass that killed many more. A few escaped the gods' wrath--yes, the legends say a few did, and I saw it in my dream. Perhaps these were lesser sorcerers, beneath the gods' notice, and perhaps their lesser magics became those of the People of the Plains; perhaps too some of their dark servants escaped, their twisted forms becoming the ancestors of the Tree People. Mysteries upon mysteries. But the fate of the city is known to everyone and I saw it around me in my dream. Darkness and smoke filled the broken city and the Old Time of the sorcerers came to an end. Even after the city became a Dead House, for many long years the poisons lingered in the ground, ready to strike at all who ventured here, and the hungry dark things remained trapped here, and the city became forbidden under our strongest law, so that no one came here.

Some little noise awakened me from my dream. My head still swam from the visions and the magic in the sorcerer's drink, but less than before. I found my feet quickly, my stance at ready, a knife in each hand, for my bow would be useless in close quarters like this. The moon outside made the grimed windows glow a faint silver-gray, so I could see a little. Another soft noise, outside the door, from the long corridor between the sorcerer's quarters and the stairs. Had the dogs found their way to me? My mind magic would not be much use, and I feared my fire magic--with my head still unclear, a fire in this closeness could prove as deadly to me as the dogs, for fire and smoke could harm me, and I feared the spirits of this place would rise up against me if I burned the sorcerer's possessions.

The door had no lock. When the dogs found it, they would find me, but I would show them how well we People of the Plains can fight. I would not make an easy end of their hunt.

The door swung open and on the other side stood not a dog but a man-shaped thing, clad in black from his neck to his feet; his garments were old, hardly more than rags, and his skin where it showed was the pale corpse-white of the full moon. The being smiled as he saw me, his lips curling in an inhuman, hungry way, showing fangs. I had never seen a spirit made flesh, and so I knew I was facing not a man or a spirit but a demon, one of the dark things that hungered for life magic. Moreover, something moved in the passage behind him--somethings--I was facing two demons, perhaps three.

Had the sorcerer who once lived here been alive, the demon-things could not have passed over his threshold, for the legends say they cannot enter a home uninvited. But the sorcerer was long dead, and this place was no longer his home, and the first demon stepped across the doorway easily.

Can you understand my words?

His voice spoke the words of Old Time inside my head. I felt my thoughts touched by a slippery sort of mind magic--so different from mine! Not a crude poking like mine or my father's or any of the other priests', but a sliding-across, a caress, both stronger and more supple. Truly their clever demon magic surely exceeded my own, and I trembled in fear. I would have faced a hundred dogs instead!

I pushed back against his with my own mind magic. I steadied myself and readied my knives to fight, a small sweep of one blade through the air between us to show I was no novice and to warn him against approaching. I tried to make my voice hard as stone: "Yes, I understand you. Begone from this place, demons, for I am a priest and the son of a priest, and I am on a journey blessed by the gods themselves, and I am not afraid of

you."

The lead one's smile curled tighter, revealing sharp teeth again, like a wolf's fangs, or a serpent's. *Good. There's no need to be afraid. Look into my eyes.* I felt his mind magic slide around my thoughts again, a seductive caress that urged me toward quietness even as it pierced deeper into me, and I saw how his eyes glinted hard and silver-white as the stars on a clear night, and I could not look away. His were not human eyes, and I could not make myself look aside, and I felt my mind magic waiver. I steeled myself and pushed back harder.

We have not had visitors in a long, long time, and you, youngling, are a revelation. Relax. Be at peace.

My magic faltered. His own slid around mine and squeezed in some way I had not known before, and my mind magic collapsed.

Yes. Look into my eyes. We want to be your friends. Such good, good friends.

I felt as though I was drowning in swift waters, his mind magic swirling around me. My voice spoke: "Friends ..."

Yes--friends. That's right, youngling. Look deeper into my eyes, deeper. We're going to be such good friends. Where are the others you came with? How many and where are they? Surely you did not come alone?

"Alone ..."

This seemed to disappoint him. *Alone? You are either very brave or very foolish. We had hoped for more, youngling, but we shall have to content ourselves with you. Do not be afraid. We're going to be such good friends. You have no need of your knives. Just relax and let them go.*

His mind magic burrowed into my thoughts and flowed like liquid through me in a way that made me dizzy, not the dizziness of the sorcerer's drink, but a warm, relaxed lassitude that spread through me, washed aside my fear. Much of the tension drained from my shoulders and arms. My fingers loosened, and I felt the knives slip, first one, then the other, as they fell from my grip.

Good, my new friend. Now let us examine you. We are so hungry, and we will show you wonders you have never felt before.

They moved around me then, not three but four of them, all moon-pale skin, silver-eyed, clad entirely in black. I was powerless to resist, could not move, could not look away from the eyes of the one who had spoken--could not even chant a song of protection. They moved around me, cold hands touching my bare chest, arms. They were strong, more than our strongest hunters, even my brothers, and I felt myself lifted easily, as if floating in their grasps, and my body was turned and lowered onto my back on the soft floor covering. My moccasins were removed, my leggings, my loin-rag, and I was naked to the inspection of these demons.

Wonders you have never felt before ...

The face of the one who had spoken hovered over me, his eyes swimming in the darkness before me, digging and twisting into my soul, and his mind magic caused a torpor that made my limbs too relaxed and heavy to move. I could not push him or the others away. I felt no fear now, only a peaceful quietness. My manhood stood up stiff and aroused, and I felt one of the demons grip it, guide it, engulf it in his mouth, too cold to be a man's, and begin pleasuring me. A finger slid along the crack of my ass, then into me, and soon the mouth and the finger coaxed out delicious pleasure, first in spasms, and then in waves, then in a continuous flow. I felt as though I was floating, being buoyed up on currents, a river of bliss such as no one had ever caused in

me before.

I felt one of the demons kiss the inside of my wrist, the prick of his fangs into my skin, the flow of my warm blood into his mouth. Another demon at my other wrist, also nipping into my flesh. The demon over me lowered his mouth to my neck--a kiss--then a piercing that caused my body to swell with ecstasy. I began to cum. The sucking one at my manhood swallowed my seed and its life magic, and I sailed upward into delight and happiness and paradise, toward a great darkness, and that darkness swallowed my senses.

Thirtieth Day?

I have been here in the city at least through the passage of a moon, perhaps more. I am unsure how many days have gone by since I began my journey. I am not ashamed to say that in the first days I was afraid and fought them as hard as I could. They kept me naked, my hands bound when they were not drinking from my wrists, so that I could not so easily strike them or devise a way to escape. They proved they were too fast for my fire magic to catch; by the time the flames would come, they were simply somewhere else. Their mind magics seduced me and turned my thoughts easily, creating a quietness that I could not resist, seducing me with pleasures I had never known I was capable of feeling. After the first few days, I began to believe we were indeed friends, and I no longer fought. A few days more and I felt them closer to me than my own brothers, and I welcomed them and no longer thought of escape from their thrall. In less than a moon they bound me to them so tightly that I can no longer contemplate resisting them or parting from them. I belong to them now, and I think of no other life for myself. My time before coming to the City of the Sorcerers seems so long ago.

They have drunk from me often, daily, taking just a bit of my blood apiece, enough to strengthen themselves but not enough not weaken me, and they take the fluids of my manhood too. Otherwise, they continue to sustain themselves as they have done since the fall of the city, on the blood of rats and dogs.

I have come to crave their chill touch, their magic in my thoughts, their kisses, their bites and suckings at my neck and wrists and cock. They take my blood, because the life magic in it makes them strong, but they are careful not to cause me harm by taking too much. The life magic in my semen nourishes them as well, and they drink of it as plentifully as I can make it, multiple times a night. I have never before felt so alive, or known such bliss.

They kept me at first in a locked room underground intended in Old Time for prisoners, and replenished my strength by feeding me roasted meat, greens of plants, and some unfamiliar round red vegetable, both acidic and sweet, that they say has been reseeding itself since the city fell, perhaps waiting for the return of men. They do not call these things the City of the Sorcerers or the Sorcerers War or Old Time; they have other words for these and many other things, but we understand each other. As they have grown confident that my mind is bound to theirs, that my love and obedience are deep-rooted and genuine, they have afforded me more liberties, allowed me to roam where I want during the days, so long as I return by sunset and come to them immediately when they call. Once I became lost and was delayed returning, and they punished me, as was just, their mind magics making me feel agonies beyond what I can describe, as if my body was truly being ripped apart and devoured, something beyond my father's mind magic or mine when I came here. I writhed in torment on the ground and pleaded for their forgiveness, and I resolved never again to disappoint them.

Perhaps they think of me as a pet, as I think of them as my masters. They have treated me well; in return for the life magic they take from me, they have given me knowledge of many things, and they have shown me how to use my mind magic to make the dogs and rats run from me, so that when I wander I no longer worry about becoming their meat. Perhaps I bear some mark of my masters on my soul now, for the wild things that dwell in this city seem to avoid me even without my mind magic.

We have walked the city often at night, sharing our stories as I accompany them on their hunts, which are brief and quickly over. They tell me what this tower was, and how that one was used, what this device did, and how that one was made to glow with bright light when the invisible current of spirits ran through it. I understand very little of these wonders, for their tales of the sorcerers' everyday feats and magics seem miraculous to me, but I am learning. They have taught me more now about Old Time and the city and the sorcerers themselves than any of the other priests know, and my heart is glad of the knowledge.

They are amused that I still chant the songs of purification quietly as we walk, tell me I am superstitious. They tell me they are not demons but something nearly as old, and the name for what they called themselves was a word I have never heard before, not even in the books, a word lost to us. They walked among the people of Old Time, and before that, taking care not to be discovered. The inhabitants of the city were not sorcerers, they tell me, but people like me and mine, and their devices were simply fantastic tools powered by forces from nature instead of by spirits or demons, though when they try to explain this heresy the forces they describe sound like spirits or demons, perhaps a distinction I am still too ignorant to understand. Therefore, more light! The pride and evil of the sorcerers died with them and should remain so, but what of the good they discovered and their knowledge?

When the city fell, they tell me, the war was made not by the gods but by other tribes of men, a further heresy, and they laugh at my shock, but they lived through the fact of it so their tales must be the truth. In their telling, the legends of the fall, the fires, and the poisons themselves ring true. Obviously so--the wreckage of the great city lays all around me and cannot be explained away. Before the city fell, nearly one hundred of my masters' kind lived here among millions of people. After, ten of them remained. At first they fed on the humans who survived, but soon the people died of invisible poisons unleashed during the war. The years have been long, too many to count, and they stopped counting, for sometimes even those who do not die grew bored and too weary to endure the further passage of suns and moons. Not so long ago, the four told me, they were five, and before that six.

They cannot cross flowing water, some quirk of the magic that gives them long life, so they have been trapped and unable to leave this ruined city of Dead Houses, surrounded by rivers whose courses changed as a consequence of the war and the shaking of the ground it caused. But they have rats and dogs enough to stay strong, even if the blood does not sustain them as well as a man's. The Tree Folk on the other side of the river came here sometimes, in the early days, before their bodies were fully twisted into the forms they wear today. Their blood is tainted, its life magic locked away somehow, so the demons here saw no reason to try to reach them, not knowing that we of the Plains lived beyond their forests. The Tree Folk fear dogs, so eventually they learned to avoid the city and came no longer.

The knowledge that men survive to the west has been a revelation to them. Indeed, we People of the Plains have prospered, our numbers growing thanks to fertile lands and good hunting. We have not known famine since before I have been alive, before my father's time too. My masters insist on hearing everything I can tell them about the People.

They are fascinated by my magics, especially my fire magic, of which they have never seen the like, and indeed it is rare among the People too. They have trained me to use my mind magic in ways I would never have learned on my own: how to reach further, how to use it more subtly, how to make it compelling to overcome even the most defiant will. I will never be as strong or as subtle as they, but they insist I am learning, that no man or priest could be able to resist my will now, not even my father, who is a great priest with strong magic, even as I cannot resist my masters'.

My tales of my brothers especially fascinate them. Are they truly like me, except hunters instead of priests? Have they no magic at all except for the life magic that all men have? Are they strong of body? Vigorous? Well-made? They tease me by asking whether my brothers are as handsome as I?--Handsome? I tell them the stories: how my brothers can hunt and run great distances and not tire; the number of Tree Folk they fought in

the last battle; how the eldest slew a brown tiger with a single arrow once, the shaft surely guided by spirits through the tiger's eye and into the soft parts of its brain; how another built a raft for crossing one of our quiet lakes just for the sport of it. And what of my father? What authority does a priest have? What is the strongest magic I have seen him do? Will the People of the Plains follow him, even if he begins to teach a new law?

They are learning, my masters, and they are planning.

Forty-Fifth Day

I had been away nearly two moons, far longer than my journey should have lasted. By the time I returned my father and brothers thought surely I must be dead, and indeed, the boy-becoming-a-man who left on his journey is not the same as the man and priest who returned to them, for I follow a new law now.

My masters, that last night before I departed, took me to a building where the people of Old Time stored books for all to use; anyone seeking the magic inside could read them. They gave me two small ones, one containing much knowledge about the growing of crops by hand in a manner useful to us, without the sorcerers' magics or devices, and it had many pictures so its knowledge would be easily gained, and the other on raising a beast much like the wild cattle of our plains that produced much meat but seemed tamed like our goats. These books went into my pack for my father, examples of the valuable knowledge freely available in the city for the taking.

They gave me jewelry, a double-handful of rings of yellow and silver-white metal set with stones as red as blood, bluer than the skies, greener than the forest, proof of the wealth waiting to be gathered, worth a hundred fortunes in trade. These went into my pack for my brothers, to fuel their greed.

I was given my bow and my quiver to strap across my back. I was given my moccasins and leggings and loin-rag, which I donned. After so long walking naked beside my masters, being clad felt alien to me. But this was necessary. I needed to return as I had left.

I had no fear, going home, though the river remained full of treacherous spirits that twice tried to drown me as I crossed. I was ambushed too by the Tree Folk; I had nearly freed myself from a net-trap when four of their hunters appeared, but my strengthened mind magic stopped them from reaching for their knives, and my fire magic burned their heads in moments, and I escaped before more could come.

When I saw my father again, I joined him in his yurt and prayed and was purified, but the words sounded hollow as I chanted them, for I have new masters now, obey new laws. My father anointed my lips and my chest; he said, "You went away a boy. Now you have come back a man and a priest. You have been to the City of the Sorcerers, which is forbidden in the law, but the law is a hard meat to hunt and the chase of it does not always follow the same path for men and the gods. What you have done is done and you have lived, as the gods have willed it. I could not have done this thing in my time, but you have been chosen for a different path. Tell me what you have seen."

He touched my thoughts with his mind magic, so that a trance should have come upon me, a priest's way to ensure I told him true, but my masters had trained me in subtleties beyond my father's skill and my wits stayed with me. I told him much of what I had done and seen, though I did not tell him of my masters or show him this record, which I said had been lost to the great river. He believed me. I was a priest and the son of a priest--why would I lie? He listened to my tale. I showed him the two books the masters had given me, and I told him of the many books of knowledge there to be freely taken. The books in his hands did their work, and the temptation to see the city for himself was planted.

As he looked through one of the books, I caressed my father's thoughts with my mind magic as I had been

taught. He felt my magic and understood I was using it not just to touch his thoughts but to bend them to my will, and he tried to fight. But my new masters had taught me many secrets about my mind magic, including ways to seduce with an overwhelming pleasure. My father would never have believed such a thing was possible, that I could have evaded his magics or used mine in these ways, and so he did not understand what was happening, and then I had him. As the trance came over him, his body slowly relaxed, going limp, eyes closing. I knelt between his thighs, and reached beneath his loin-rag; his maleness was erect from the pleasure, and I took it into my mouth, and suckled it until his semen was spent across my tongue; I swallowed its bit of life magic, made it my own.

Now his thoughts were mine too, mine to shape. I spoke into his quietened mind, told him that he longed to see the city and its wonders for himself. I fueled the temptation so that it would catch fire under his thoughts when he woke and would consume them; his one will would be to would come to the city with me, my brothers with us too, so that we could see some of the knowledge and the riches there, gather and purify them, and bring them back to the People of the Plains, to reclaim a bit of what was squandered and lost when the sorcerers warred.

While my father still slept, I went to my three brothers. I showed them the rings, a double handful. They were unafraid, for was I not a priest who had surely purified them? My brothers admired the finely made metals, finer than our best smithies can forge, and they prized the stones, especially my middle brother, who wore the knotted betrothal cord around his neck, for he had chosen his mate and his chosen's family was demanding a hard price for the bonding-dower. My hand squeezed my eldest brother's bare shoulder; he was the strongest, the natural leader, the best hunter, and his eyes shown with greed. This would be easy. My magic touched the minds of all three, the work of but a moment, for the rings had planted their seed: I had already returned with enough Old Time relics to make us wealthy beyond compare, so how much more must there be in the city just waiting to be taken? My magic wove through the eldest's thoughts of avarice and found its purchase, and my will became his. My youngest brother too dreamed of taking the city's riches, of legends being told of his courage, and followed a moment later. My middle brother was more modest, thinking of his intended mate, a life together here, and he had no temptation to see the dangers of the City of the Sorcerers--surely what I had brought back would make us rich enough for many, many dowers, enough for our lives and our children's lives, and our children's children, would it not? I pushed a little harder and found the spark of greed that I needed, which was easy enough to fan into a flame, and then he forgot his fear and his thoughts belonged to me.

They had earlier that day returned from hard hunting, my brothers; they were tired but their manhoods swelled as my magic sank deeply into their minds, and their hard cocks found the strength to push outward from under their loin-rags; I knew from my masters' ministrations on me that the side effect of cock-hardness often accompanies a trance. I knelt and sucked. One after another they surrendered their seed magic to me--middle, youngest, oldest--and in those moments my will became their law. They still sleep now, as I write this, and when they wake, they too will burn with a need to see the city with their own eyes, to touch its riches with their own hands.

We will leave for the City of the Sorcerers with the sunrise tomorrow. My father and brothers have knowledge of making, and rivers, and the ways of crossings. The eastern river is mightier than those in our places, but we will find a way. Perhaps we will make a cable of woven vines to string from the riverbank to the fallen sky-road halfway across the water, and poles, ways to guide a better, bigger raft reliably across. We will reach the city, and we will explore. They will not know I am guiding us toward my masters. Soon enough my father and brothers will know the bliss of the masters' mind magic as I do and will gladly offer themselves and their life magic to the masters' feeding.

We will make boxes, sturdy, proof against light and the water, so that we can ferry the masters across the running river that they cannot cross on their own. The city will no longer be their prison. We will make a new beginning when we bring them here to the People of the Plains. They will share their knowledge of the ways

and magics of Old Time, and we will share our lives and blood. The masters will feast and grow strong, for the first time in untold years. They will be not our demons but our tangible gods, as they make us and our laws in their own image, and I will be what I am already: their first and greatest priest.
