

Chosen

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC]

Synopsis: One hundred years after collapse of Old Time, human civilization is trying to begin anew. Arik, the son of a farmer, has been chosen, but no one can tell him what happens next.

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 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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Arik knew. He knew from the moment the massive black vehicle--an honest-to-Jesu automobile from Old Time!--the first operational one he had ever seen--stopped in front of their small farmhouse. Before the blond stranger got out of the back of the long vehicle and looked his way before discussing something with Arik's father. Before his father nodded, eyes downcast, a mask of resignation, and led the stranger toward where Arik toiled among the rows of struggling waist-high corn.

Chosen.

Arik had heard of this stranger, or strangers like him. Arik swallowed, his throat dry in the midday scorch. *An honor*, he reminded himself. *It's an honor to be chosen.*

Nearly a month had passed since the examination day for the local male youths like Arik who had come of age in the last year. Arik and his father had hitched up the mare and cart before sunrise and made the long trip into the township. Arik had come of age six months earlier but his father, always a man of few words, had told him little of what to expect. Once there, Arik said goodbye to his father

and was led away into the great hall, which strangers from the capital had taken over for their tests. Like the other nine young men that day, Arik was stripped and examined; the strangers pressed strange things to his skin and listened and looked and made notes and nodded. They measured this and that, treating him like judges did a bull at the annual livestock contest. Seeing his age-mates naked caused a familiar stirring in the pit of Arik's stomach, but he was too nervous about what was happening, and thus his unruly penis blessedly stayed quiet and limp, even when he was made to endure the indignity of one of the strangers examining it and his balls with brief detachment.

They photographed him--a first, Arik had never even seen a real camera before--and they nodded more often, always speaking low among themselves in their strange words, but otherwise ignoring Arik's attempts at making polite conversation, until he fell silent and let them go about their poking. Finally, one of them did speak to Arik but not for conversation; he asked a school question, about a fact from history on the founding of the Great Republic. Arik understood: to them this was just another test he needed to pass. Though his time in the township's small school had not been exemplary, he had learned his lessons well enough to answer this question--correctly, he thought, judging by the way the examiner nodded without smiling. This led to another, about math. Arik knew his numbers well enough to answer confidently. Another question, and another, and one after that too. More nodding and note-making. Finally the youths were made to demonstrate that they had also learned their defense skills well, made to struggle against each other and wrestle to prove their strength. Arik was pleased that none of the others proved stronger than he, that only Jaff, the smithy's son, was nearly but not quite his equal.

Nearly a month had gone by since then with no word, nothing until this long black vehicle arrived at their home, so far from town. Until this tall, pale stranger stepped out. Arik had heard of men like him, those who came to collect the chosen and take them far away to the city.

Being chosen is an honor, Arik reminded himself, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. His family would receive a substantial sum of money, enough that they would not have to depend on the drought-blighted corn this year, or next year either.

So, when his father returned to the field beside their home, where Arik was half-heartedly hoeing the dry soil, Arik was not surprised by what he was told.

"You've been chosen," his father said, clasping Arik's bare shoulder and squeezing it affectionately. "You're to leave with him." Tears were welling in his father's eyes.

"Now?" Arik was incredulous.

"Yes, now," answered the collector flatly from behind Arik's father. Arik suddenly felt shy and tense at being confronted by one of the men he'd heard about but had never seen. The handsome collector was dressed all in black: smart midnight-dark tunic of some fabric finer than anything Arik had seen in the township, and black pants and boots that appeared to be expensive leather. Even the collector's eyes were shielded by black circles--*sunglasses*, the books surviving from Old Time called them. The collector's tunic did not disguise his muscular build and wide shoulders, and his pants held a promising bulge. Arik felt a stirring of desire. He knew the people in the township considered him comely, and his hard work had given him muscles that drew many lustful stares, even among the pious people of the town; but would the collector find him attractive? Surely a man like this could have anyone he wanted. Standing exposed in no clothing but his dirty deerskin breechcloth and leggings, bare-chested and bare-footed, Arik felt intimidated by the collector's obvious wealth and status.

Arik, when he was honest with himself, understood that he desired another man as his partner instead of any of the short supply of eligible women. He was of marriageable age, and should have already married, out of obligation even if not of desire, had any of the local women-folk been willing to settle for a husband who was pleasing to the eye but had few prospects for providing for a family except the hard labor of farming. And anyway his father needed his help with the farm, so the inevitability of marriage was easily delayed.

Farming was heartbreak work in the area around the township as everywhere. The stock gave birth to as many stillborns there as anywhere; the toll taken by the wild killers was high. The labor was sweat and disappointment, grinding a man down to old age by forty, few farmers ever able to afford to leave. The people got through, as they did in worse places. The climate was not as hot and malarial as regions to the south. The township had a small trade in timber and saddle-horses; manufacture too, though it could not match the industry of nearby larger places to the east and north; a barrel factory to the west of town turned out coffins as a sideline and prospered. The townsfolk scraped along, the same poor snotty human race, all a muddle and on the go, as they have always done and maybe always will until the sun sweats icicles, which will not be next Wednesday.

The collector seemed bored, perhaps anxious to get on his way, as if taking Arik away from the only life he had ever known was but a moment's inconvenience. "He can come as he is." The collector's face seemed aimed at him, but Arik understood that the man was ignoring him and speaking to his father. The collector looked toward the overhead sun, as if judging the time. He sighed, "Everything he needs will be provided." The collector looked at Arik, as if acknowledging him for the first time. "Don't worry. Your family will be provided for too." He turned and strode back toward the automobile.

Arik's father took the hoe from his son. "Go," his father urged, pushing him to follow the collector.

Arik stared at the automobile. It was longer than any he had seen in photos that survived from Old Time, at least sixteen feet Arik estimated, probably more.

One of the doors near the nose of the vehicle opened. Another man, clad exactly like the collector but less handsome, stepped out. The "driver" Arik remembered such men had been called in Old Time, but surely if the Sorcerers had made machines that were as intelligent as themselves, they could have made this one capable of conveying itself. It grumbled and purred steadily, like a living thing. Surely, Arik wondered, the driver was there only to tell the beast where they wanted it to go and maybe nudge it to greater speeds now and then?

Some scraps of Old Time's knowledge survived in its books, knowledge of reading and writing and numbers, but not the secrets of its science, for the books that told how to summon and tame the demons of its science had been burned following the Forty-Minute War when the Sorcerers died and the surviving good folk turned away from their science and back to Jesu. Only the books deemed safe by the resurgent Church that stepped into the void left after the War and the books with pleasing pictures remained, and not many of them.

Was this gleaming vehicle made entirely of metal? Arik had never before seen this much metal in one place, used on one thing, but he knew such constructions had been commonplace in Old Time, when metal was plentiful and could be squandered on even the largest devices the Sorcerers could envision--Arik could barely imagine being lavish with tin, aluminum, or even iron itself! Confronted with the automobile, Arik realized: Old Time had been real; it had happened. The Sorcerers and their science he had read about in the township's few surviving books had really happened.

Surely only the very wealthy could afford such things as this automobile. His father told him of a time, only three generations past, or maybe five, before nature was finally thrown off balance by the abuse of man, before raw materials became scarce and the Forty-Minute War erupted and almost all of the people died and raw materials became even scarcer; the Old Time of the Sorcerers, when most people had access to the science and devices that today seemed like magic--televisions, automobiles, cameras, telephones--things Arik had heard about only in books and in people's tales that grew more fantastic by the year, things attainable now only by the very rich in the cities. Arik wondered what other amazements awaited him in the city, where more of the Sorcerers' toys were rumored to have survived.

The driver, a pouch in one hand, approached Arik's father: the financial arrangements being completed. Arik wondered whether the payment would be enough to allow his father to afford a slave or hireling to replace Arik's strong back at the chores.

"Do you like it?"

Arik, startled, found the collector standing beside him. The collector's expression gave away only a confident half-smile. Arik blushed, realizing from the tilt of the collector's head that the handsome man's eyes, hidden behind the dark sunglasses, were scrutinizing his dirt-covered, nearly naked body. Arik had to look away from the man and back toward the automobile. Its windows appeared to be glass but dark in some way, like the collector's sunglasses, preventing Arik from seeing inside.

The collector's purring, lightly accented voice was nearly as deep as the vehicle's. "Yessiree, what we have here is a Jesu-damned hum-vee lee-moh-zine!"

Arik flushed at the man's casual blasphemy. While he did not know what those last unfamiliar words meant, the stranger's tone told him they were words of power, something worthy of respect. Arik considered making the sign of the Church over his heart, against corruption from the blasphemy and the unfamiliar. Arik had seldom heard foreign words; two years earlier the good people of the township had banned the speaking of any language except English--it might be sorcery. The collector, though, did not make the sign, so Arik took the risk of not doing it himself. Arik felt nervous at his own intimidated eagerness for this handsome, sophisticated man of the city to like him; he did not want the collector to laugh and dismiss him as just another ignorant bumpkin. But Arik had been chosen--surely that had to amount to something in his favor too?

The collector opened a door toward the back of the vehicle, touching its metal indifferently as if this behemoth were just another tool. Get in," he said to Arik, "and let's get you sorted."

No one who had been chosen had ever returned. Everyone knew that being chosen was an honor. But no one seemed to know what happened next. *Next* began through that opening, in the darkness beyond.

Arik was not sure how to enter. Entering the interior of this vehicle was not like mounting a saddled horse or a wagon. He had to bend forward. When he put his bare foot onto the edge of the opening and his hand on the frame, he almost expected the automobile to buck like an unbroken horse, but it did not. Perhaps, Arik decided, the Sorcerers of Old Time had some way of bending their creations to their will. The Sorcerers had ridden in machines that climbed into the air beyond human vision. They could make the air vibrate too, and so talk magically with each other across many miles. They traveled back and forth at will between the earth and the moon. Arik decided that, yes, having some way to force their fantastic machines into tameness made sense.

Inside, darker than the sunlit noontime, Arik's eyes needed time to adjust. He was aware of four other people inside, sitting on a sort of long, low padded bench that ran along one side of the space. One of those people, he recognized, was Jaff, the smithy's son from the township and a friend. After so long with none, to have not one but two of their men chosen surely reflected well on the town, Arik thought. The townsfolk must be pissing themselves with civic pride.

"Sit," the collector interrupted, stooping into the low space behind Arik and pointing to a padded bench opposite the others.

Arik began, "But I ..." *Would mar the inside of this glorious beast with my sweat and dirt.*

"Sit," the collector ordered again, more firmly, a practiced efficiency, before Arik could finish getting his bearings.

Arik sat.

"Good," the collector said, crouching in front of Arik and busying himself with something in his hands. While the collector's body blocked Arik's view of Jaff across the way, he could see the other passengers on the opposite bench and--

Great Jesu--is that man Tiger Clan? Arik blushed at taking the Lord's name in vain, a blasphemy in thought only but still something that would have earned him a slap from his father had Arik spoken the words aloud in his presence.

The man on the far right surely appeared to be Tiger Clan. Arik had heard travelers' tales of these savages living far to the west but had never seen one of them himself. Their tribes lived in tents, moved like nomads, Arik had heard, and worshipped the brown tiger as their god. Once, two years before, a brown tiger had appeared in the area briefly, and Arik had seen the beast through the window when it ventured close to their farm, a great tawny cat with faint stripings of darker brown, no puma certainly, too large, maybe descended from something that escaped an Old Time zoo.

This Clan youth, approximately Arik's age or older by a year or two, was naked except for the loin-rag that barely concealed his modesty; he was covered head to toe in some ocher dirt or pigment that turned his skin and pale shoulder-length hair an orange-brown color. Arik saw thick, dark bands on the youth's sides: tattoos that mimicked a tiger's stripes, the first starting just below the youth's left nipple and disappearing under his arm. Nine stripes in all on his left side, from nipple to knee, and three more on his right side, along his rib cage. Had the youth been on his hands and knees, his torso would have resembled the markings Arik remembered from the brown tiger. Arik wondered whether the tattoos had hurt, and what they meant. Were they tigers the youth had killed?--No, that made no sense if his clan worshipped them. Enemies he had killed, then? Or children he had sired? So many mysteries at once made Arik's head spin. If the youth was here, he must have been captured from a raiding party at some nearby township. Arik had heard the Tiger Clans lived several days journey to the west, but if they lurked close enough now to raid civilized folk nearby ...? Another mystery.

Arik had heard Tiger Clan warriors were fierce fighters, like their namesake, but this one sat quietly, arms at his sides, staring quietly into space, blinking now and then. Something at the top of his forehead, just below the hairline, gave a faint green glow. A jewel, perhaps? Actually, Arik realized, the more familiarly clad youth sitting beside the Tiger Clan had a similar green glow in the same place, as did the third, and--Arik craned his head to see around the collector--so did Jaff.

"Don't mind them. You afraid?" said the collector, snapping Arik's attention back to the body crouched in front of him.

Arik shook his head, *no*, a minor lie, because in truth his heart was thumping, fast and hard, in his chest.

"Good. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Not yet, anyway. And some of it you might even like." The collector fiddled with something small. "Let's get your mind-leech on. Lean forward a little."

Afraid to question, Arik did as he was told. He glimpsed something small, hardly larger than one of the Great Republic's copper coins but dull silver, in the collector's hand before the man reached up, pressed the object into the close-cropped hair atop Arik's head.

Arik felt something slide through his hair, along the back of his head. Two other tendrils slid down the sides of his head, just behind his ears, and then two more that stopped at his temples, and finally one pushing forward toward his forehead to stop just after it emerged from his hairline.

The collector worked at a device he wore around his wrist like a bracelet. "Okay," he muttered to himself, and then--then--

Arik blinked. His body felt stiff, as if he had been sitting for a long time. He still sat in the belly of the vehicle, but more bodies had joined them, four more men Arik's age, including one with the shaved head and robes of a monk of the Order of Abraham, one of the religious orders that had set up ministries in the area recently to fight for the good citizens' souls against the forces of darkness that had surely been unleashed in the last days of Old Time and still walked the earth.

Arik felt strangely at peace, a little groggy. He thought he should have felt nervousness, excitement, a hundred surges of adrenaline and eagerness at the unknown, but instead he experienced only an encompassing calm, a quiet blissfulness that filled his entire being and left his arms and legs almost too heavy and relaxed to move. Had the thing on his head done this to him? Was this a Sorcerer's trick? Had it stolen the last several hours from him by making him unknowing? Was it still doing something to him? Arik thought all of these worries and found, as soon as he thought them, they ceased to matter. All he felt was a vast sense of well-being, as though some itch he had not previously recognized in himself were being scratched slowly but irrevocably into oblivion. What was ... simply was.

The others were stirring too: Jaff, the Tiger Clan youth, the monk, all the others. "Look outside," the collector told them. "You don't want to miss your first look at a real city." Arik obediently turned toward the nearest window, for obeying seemed an easy thing to do. The dark glass had prevented him from seeing inside earlier, but now he was easily able to see through it to the outside, another casual miracle. The other youths likewise peered out windows, except for the Tiger Clan warrior, who likely spoke no English and had not understood the collector's words.

The wildness of forest and trees gradually gave way to outskirt buildings, indicating the city was close. The vehicle crawled along one of the Sorcerers' wide roads, straight as a spear and level as a stream. Vines had been able to cross it here and there, especially the poison ivy and the jinnacreeper with their countless busy rootlets, but elsewhere the road stretched bleak and clear. Two such roads, similar though narrower, had run near the township. The feet of oxen and horses could not long endure the surface of such roads, of course, but sometimes traders and travelers with their unlimited stores of foolishness had come walking along them during the day and apparently took no harm. By

rumor, the roads were quiet at night; the ghosts of Old Time or the brown tiger or black wolf may have used them then--who was to say, other than a night-caught traveler who would see nothing more afterward?

The vehicle moved itself along this road by whatever magic it retained from its vanished creators, paying no heed to vined patches and open stretches alike. Both sides of the road were lined with flat-buildings from Old Time, some three or even four times the height of anything Arik had ever seen before. Most of them were the flat-topped buildings that someone had told Arik was where the Sorcerers made human sacrifices to their dark gods in return for their terrible knowledge and science. The sheer number of such buildings, stretching along the road in both directions as far as Arik could see, impressed him with the number of demons the Sorcerers must have worshipped. Here and there, signs still stood at the front of the old buildings, likely announcing the dark entities that the people of Old Time would have worshipped therein. Arik understood how the curse of the great Jesu had fallen on the Sorcerers and destroyed them and nearly all their works. In viewing such ruins Arik felt, as he always did, that to have lost the ability to build such wonders was the great shame of Old Time. If only it had been Jesu's will that they were a little wiser, a little readier to heed the warnings! Such marvelous structures; such godless, evil beings.

They arrived at the city proper ten minutes later, the sun beginning to set, and passed through high walls intended to keep the place safe from red bear, black wolf, brown tiger, perhaps even human raiders too.

Tall concretestone and brick buildings jutted into the sky. Arik felt awed by them. Some, especially in their upper levels, still retained glass windows that had not been cannibalized for other uses. And beyond, distant chimneys spilled out clouds of black smoke. "That's where the fuel is burned for ee-lek-triss-it-ee," the collector explained. Arik only nodded. He did not understand *Ee-Lek-Triss-It-Ee*, though he assumed it must be the name of some lingering Old Time demon to whom the city-dwellers in their ignorance still burned offerings in return for ... what? Quite a number of offerings, judging from the quantity of smoke.

As lifeless as the outskirts had seemed, life within the walls thrived with activity. Inside the city, the streets were jumbled, more people than in Arik's entire village, and they all appeared to have someplace to go. The long vehicle maneuvered through the crowded streets, occasionally bleating a loud noise to warn some citizen to step aside. The automobile turned toward a quieter area, fewer people, and passed through another wall of some loosely woven metal, and came to a stop.

For all the flights of fancy about the city Arik might have secretly used to occupy his thoughts when he was in the fields, safely away from his father's admonitions against daydreaming, this particular concretestone place did not appear impressive from the outside in any way other than its hugeness, the way the building itself dwarfed them as they approached. The wide black door in the side of the building opened. Two men in uniforms--likely guards, Arik decided--emerged and walked to the vehicle. The collector opened the door to greet them. They spoke for several minutes.

The collector reentered the belly of the vehicle. "Look alive. Everybody out."

Once again the easy obedience of doing what he was told seemed to overcome the lethargy that leadened Arik's limbs. He found himself pushing off the luxuriously soft cushion and stumbling out, blinking, into the late-afternoon sunlight. The collector himself led the uncomprehending Tiger Clan warrior into the open.

Another man, tall and thin, older, his hair a bushy mass of steel gray, bearing an air of importance on his handsome face, joined the two guards. He wore a long maroon robe and, to Arik, he looked almost like a priest. The older man consulted the papers that the collector had earlier handed the guards. "Who do we have here?" the elder said, not unkindly but not interested either, merely performing a duty, the way the town clerk acknowledged the delivery of a wagon-load of his father's corn.

As the elder read off each name, the collector pushed forward the corresponding man for inspection. Arik's name was halfway through the list.

"Ah," the elder mused, studying Arik's bare chest hungrily. "Very nice. Beautiful face, wide shoulders, excellent muscles. Where did you retrieve him?"

"About thirty miles from here, slaving away on a farm with his father," the collector replied.

"Hard labor," the elder nodded, smiling. "Explains the muscles. Looks strong as a young bull."

Arik wanted to introduce himself, shake the man's hand, the way his father had taught him to do when greeting a dignitary. He wanted to ask if the elder knew any of the Sorcerers' secrets and whether the elder had ever flown to the moon and back in one of the Sorcerers' machines, though he knew just the inquiry might be rude. But magic woven by the device on his head left Arik feeling too blissfully quiet to move or speak, so he could only stand there under the elder's evaluating stare.

"Yes," the elder continued, "with that innocent farm-boy look, he'll be quite popular in the arena. And if he's built like a bull in other areas too"--the elder's gaze flickered down to Arik's breechcloth, then up again--"the masters will love him. I might place a bet on him myself, if the odds look good."

The elder and the collector continued down the list, until the final entry, the Tiger Clan youth, called simply "Captured Savage," hardly a name but perhaps, Arik thought, his betters had determined this young enemy of civilized folk did not deserve the blessing of a name of his own. The elder and the collector swapped a few randy comments about him too, and the elder flicked up the Tiger warrior's loin-rag to examine what it concealed. Arik half-expected the youth to react in some way, but he simply accepted the indignity without no apparent response crossing his blissful expression. Arik wondered if this was the work of the mind-magic or whether perhaps Tiger Clan folk were not burdened by modesty like civilized people.

Arik noted that the youth's penis, like his ribs, appeared to be tattooed with dark stripes that mimicked a tiger's markings too. The elder flicked at the youth's tattooed cock and balls, making them bounce, and laughed with the collector at the warrior's passive acceptance of their insults. "He like as much don't even speak Jesu's own English." The elder turned his head and spat. "Bunch of filthy savages. Arena's too good for them, if'n you ask me."

"Just watch yourself with this one," the collector advised. "Leeches set at level two keeps the rest of 'em docile, but we had to turn the savage's all the way up to eight. Anything less and he'd be ripping your head off right now. Took four men to hold him down long enough for me to get the leech on him--he even broke one's arm and another's nose in the process. He's a wild one, he is. Probably not good for much except the arena--but there I bet he's favored to win."

The elder nodded perfunctorily. He fiddled with the black band around his wrist, the one that matched the collector's. The two men conferred, holding their bands close to each other. Then the collector nodded and stepped back. The elder looked around for the guards, motioned to one of them, who

affixed some sort of collar around the Tiger warrior's neck, then a pole to the collar, and used the pole to push the youth toward the black doorway into the building. Arik had seen red bears handled this way once, when a gyppo circus visited the township years before and his father had consented to Arik's boyhood pleas to go see the wonders. The animals were pushed into the rings using similar poles, and there the trainers made them perform tricks for the people who could afford the coin for admittance. Arik wondered if the Tiger boy would be trained to perform tricks too, and somehow that thought made him giggle, a sound that seemed giddier to his own ears than he meant.

"Come on, you lot. Follow me," the elder said to Arik and the rest. "Don't dawdle." Arik found himself compelled to trail the man, as they walked into the doorway and left the collector behind at the vehicle.

Inside--darker, cooler--Arik's eyes were blind after the brighter light of the dying day outside. He accidentally stumbled into one of the others before his eyes adjusted and he saw the way more clearly.

Small artificial torches along the ceiling of some sort gave off an anemic light, but enough that Arik could see. A long, slowly curving corridor lay before them, the floor made of some smooth concretestone, and walls of concretestone blocks. Arik had seen smaller buildings built like this once in the Old Time ruins half a day's walk from the township, when he, Jaff, and two other boys had snuck away from the school instead of attending winter lessons. But those buildings had suffered decades of weather and neglect. This one had been maintained, at least as best as its tenants probably could with the secrets of concretestone and construction on this scale lost to them. Arik had never been inside a building so large before. The corridor seemed to stretch on forever.

In several side rooms they passed, Arik saw Old Time machines, great hulking things whose use he could not fathom. A few rooms had been converted to smithies, where ironsmiths labored and banged and clanged toward unknown purposes, as if trying unsuccessfully to awaken the demons in the Sorcerers' inert machines.

Arik wondered why he felt no fear, no uncertainty--just a pervasive calmness. The leech, he decided. Had these devices been left by the Sorcerers in a place like this? Or had they been repurposed by the smithies from some earlier intent? Were these the devices the Sorcerers used to control their machines? Too many questions, Arik decided, and no answers yet.

The elder turned and led them down another corridor and into a large room tiled with some sort of smooth, shiny ceramic bricks, once white but now grayed in places, yellowed in others, and the mortar-work blackened and cracked with dirt and age. They were led to a trough where they were told to relieve their bladders if they needed, which Arik did. Then they were led to the back of the room, to a large alcove, where the air felt more humid. Near the ceiling, rods of metal with bulbous ends emerged from the walls, and below each was a sort of round handle-knob mounted on the wall.

"Wait there." They stopped. One guard walked ahead in the alcove. He moved along the wall, turning the knobs. The metal rods above gave a hiss, and water spurted from the bulbs: artificial rain.

The other guard, the one with the black band around his wrist, worked at the device. Arik felt the leech's spell around his thoughts recede a degree, making movement of his own volition easier.

"Strip," ordered the first guard, emerging from the alcove. "Inside, all of you. Wash yourselves, and be thorough about it. Use plenty of soap."

Arik understood his orders. His body moved as if of its own accord, and his breechcloth and leggings were removed. Except for the Tiger Clan youth, the others disrobed too, modesty forgotten. With only his breechcloth and leggings, Arik wore less clothing than any other except the unmoving Tiger and was naked soonest.

He walked into the alcove, under one of the sprays. The hot water shooting out of the bulb pelted his flesh, a tremendous force. Arik was familiar with the principle. As a child, he had helped his father make a platform behind the barn to hold two tarred wooden barrels aloft, an array of troughs to catch and funnel rain into the barrels. Standing under the barrels, his father had taught him how to work the rope cord that caused collected water, warmed by sunlight, to sprinkle down on him, how to bathe and clean himself under it, a luxury reserved for times when rain was plentiful, and the water had to be conserved to stretch the captured supply as many weeks as possible.

Their shower at the farm was never like this. Arik found he liked the heat of the water, whether the product of a forgotten Sorcerers' trick or some human ingenuity, and the force of it striking his body. He took up a bar of soap. It lathered quickly, obviously a finer stuff than the coarse version made by Old Man Samuals, the township's butcher, who rendered the slaughtered animal fats to make his soap. This bar smelled faintly of perfumes but also of something sharper that Arik associated with medicine, similar to the ointments the herb women made for killing the lice that always seemed to infest the heads of the youngest children in the town every fall and winter. Perhaps someone wanted to make sure the chosen were free of such tiny irritants too.

Arik worked the soap through his hair, nudging the leech. It clung snugly against his scalp and did not dislodge. He pushed at it, just to see what would happen, and felt a buzzing numbness invade his arms, not painful but not pleasant: the leech's warning that it best remain undisturbed. Arik decided not to test it again.

He sensed dark hair, a naked body, moving under the spray near him. He sputtered under spray and rinsed the suds from his head and eyes enough to see who. Jaff, whose body Arik knew nearly as well as his own: the wide strong chest trained at his father's forge, the arms whose strength was nearly equal to Arik's, legs lean and corded with muscle. Jaff paid Arik no mind, turning himself under the spray, bathing as if the miracle of this water were a daily occurrence.

Arik began to relax and worked the lathering bar over his body. The guards had ordered them to be thorough, and Arik was, cleaning every cranny. He liked the feeling of the dirt and sweat being swept away. He liked the warm caress of the water, the way its rivulets stroked down his body. He worried for a moment about getting an erection, tried to work up the will to order his reckless cock to stay quiet.

Jaff moved beneath the shower beside Arik's, his finely etched body clad only in lather. Jaff bent forward, perfect ass pointed toward Arik, and Arik saw Jaff's hole wink at him. In another time, another place, that might have been an invitation. On the weekly trips to the township for Sunday church, during the hours after services while his father jawed about local matters with the other men-folk, Arik had been allowed to play with the other children of the town, and not all of their secret play had been innocent. As was the way of older children, a hundred ways had been devised to slip away from the watchful eyes of the church elders, especially the ancient Mam Solas who was prone to napping through the afternoon anyway, and find a bit of privacy. Arik remembered that more than a few of those sex-games had been played with Jaff, and quite satisfactorily too.

Again Arik tried to will his cock to behave. Fortunately, all too soon and all too sadly, Jaff righted himself under the spray and began to turn and rinse, and there swung Jaff's cock. Arik searched for another place to aim his eyes. Beyond Jaff was another naked chosen, bare chest broad and crowned by tight, dark nipples. And another's pleasing ass, stuck back as he lathered his privates. And the monk's stubble-shaved head--what would rubbing it feel like while thrusting his dick into the monk's ass, Arik caught himself imagining. No!--No, he couldn't risk an erection, not here, not now. He needed to find safer place for his gaze.

The Tiger youth still stood outside the alcove. The guards had removed the collar and pole. One had used a knife to cut the cord on the youth's loin-rag, which lay beside his foot. Naked and heedless of it, the warrior watched the bathers with that same unreadable calmness.

The guards were nervous. Arik could not hear their whispers over the hiss and splatter of the water, but they poked and shoved each other, as if trying to saddle the other with the work of pushing the Tiger youth into the alcove. Perhaps they feared the water might unleash the warrior's ferocity, too much for the leech to suppress.

Arik found himself motioning to the Tiger Clan boy, catching his attention. The collector said the youth's leech was stronger than the others'; no doubt its spell clouded the youth's thoughts even more than Arik's. It should have compelled obedience. Arik realized that the youth had remained outside for a simpler reason: not from obstinacy but because he did not understand English--he had merely not understood the guards' instructions, thus did not know to obey.

Arik's gesture caught the Tiger's attention, resulted in his blank gaze swiveling toward Arik. Arik tried another gesture, a hand motion communicating what he hoped was a universal sign: *Come here*. The naked Tiger youth stared. Arik tried again: *Come here*. The warrior took a step toward him. Well, then: the gesture translated into something even Tiger Clans could comprehend--communication was possible. *Come here*. Another step, and another.

The Tiger youth stood before him: similar height, longer hair. Eye contact; an unreadable expression. This close, the youth looked dazed, maybe intoxicated, like Arik had seen in the men-folk who over-indulged in the alcohol that was technically against the township's rules but which everyone knew old Mam Solas brewed in her shed--*strictly for medicinal purposes*, she maintained.

Arik put his hands slowly, gently on the Tiger youth's shoulders. *It's okay--I won't hurt you; let me help you*, Arik tried to say, but the leech's spell made speech more difficult than he expected: "...Izz okie ... Wonne hur du ... Lemme he'p yuh ..." Still, eye to eye, the Tiger warrior seemed willing to trust him, so Arik guided him backward into the water spray, moving slowly, giving the youth time to accustom himself and never breaking eye contact.

"... filth ... sav'jehz ..." Jaff muttered from under the adjoining spray as he turned away.

Arik eased the youth backward slowly, slowly, under the spray. The water flowed over the Tiger boy's head, plastering his shoulder-length hair to his skull and neck. The youth huffed and sputtered when the water flowed down his face. Two days of beard stubble--had no one dared go near him with a blade for shaving? The youth's hard bands of muscles and faint scars suggested that treating him with caution and respect would be wise. Arik took a bar of soap. "Izz okie," he told the youth and started by swiping the bar across his own chest to demonstrate, then the youth's, making lather that took up the orange-brown ochre dust coating him and rinsed it away in the rivulets to reveal paler human skin. What emerged, aside from the tattoos, was the torso of a man like any other Arik had seen. Judging by

the bruises from previous struggles, perhaps a few beatings from the guards too, this man could be hurt like any other too, Arik mused.

The Tiger tolerated Arik's hands as he lathered and soaped the youth's back, arms, neck. Arik worked the soap through the warrior's hair, careful not to get the suds too close to his face; the sting of soap to his eyes might overcome even the leech's mind-spell and shatter their fragile cooperation. The soap rinsed away orange from the hair to leave a yellower color beneath. Arik worked the soap into the youth's armpits, down his ribs. The tattooed stripes on his sides darkened, becoming almost black, as the dust fled. Arik wondered again at their meaning.

Lathering the youth's side and stomach, Arik felt something unexpected and warm on his thigh. He looked down, saw the Tiger youth's penis was streaming piss which struck Arik's thigh. The youth's expression was one of simple animal relief, not malice, and Arik understood: Well, okay, this was nothing more than the Tiger's bladder reaching capacity. Arik recalled the youth had not used the urine trough with them earlier, had not understood the order to piss there. Against the thousand wonders and terrors of the automobile ride, the city, this concretestone building, he was surprised only that the Tiger had lasted so long without wetting himself. Arik hoped the guards and Jaff and the others were not seeing the faint yellow in the water, and the perfumed soap covered the dissipating urine smell. The stream faded and ended.

Conscious of the guards and the Tiger youth watching him, Arik knelt, skipping the youth's hips and genitals, soaping instead his muscled thighs and calves. Arik tapped the youth's foot, hoping he would lift it so that Arik could bathe the sole, but the warrior's blank stare showed no understanding. Communications by signs, Arik decided, had narrow limits.

Arik looked up at the youth's crotch. Unlike Arik's skin, which was deeply tanned above the waist and paler below, the Tiger boy's body was sun-kissed all over, suggesting a lack of decent modesty. Still, on his way down with the soap, Arik had skipped the stretch of skin between waist and thighs--the resting cock with its narrow stripes and the heavy balls beneath it, and the ass behind it all--because he was unsure how the Tiger boy would react to a stranger's hand on his most intimate parts, even if that hand meant to help. *Be thorough*, the guard had said. Now Arik had to finish those private areas to complete his task.

Arik lathered his hands. He cupped the youth's scrotum, working the lather around the wrinkled skin. He heard one of the guards chuckle, saw them nudge each other at the spectacle of Arik soaping the Tiger's balls. The guards seemed thankful to not risk performing that task themselves, but in their thankfulness they did not spare Arik the humiliation of their lewd grins. Fortunately, the calmness that the leech oozed through his thoughts prevented Arik from feeling the righteous anger that he knew he should. The anger kept slipping away.

Arik sent his hand between the youth's legs, sliding, to spread soap up and down the slot of his ass. The youth shifted, half-stumbled, spooked at the intrusion, but kept his footing and did not otherwise react. The guards hooted. Arik barely heard them over the water spray and ignored what he heard.

His hand spread soap around the Tiger youth's cock, wrapping the limp shaft in suds, pushing back the foreskin. When the water rinsed away the foam, the youth's penis looked longer, thicker: soft skin around a solider core. The narrow stripes perpendicular to its length widened as the dick rose to quarter-hardness. Arik looked up at the youth's face, fearing his reaction, and found the youth was gazing down at him, a calm mask that seemed to be evaluating Arik. But to what end? Finally, the

youth seemed to smile, almost imperceptibly, seeming to Arik to convey *It's all right* or perhaps *Thank you*.

"Okay, that's time enough," one of the guards bellowed. "Rinse yourselves and come out here." Arik felt the leech's compulsion to obey, but first he stood, eased the youth's shouldered back under the spray one last time to eliminate what little lather remained. He took the youth by his arm and led him out of the showers.

Two other youths, about Arik's age and clad in white tunics, had joined the guards. The new youths held towels. As Arik and the other chosen filed out and one of the guards deactivated the sprays, the youths began to dry Arik and the others, rubbing each briskly with a towel and then moving to the next chosen. The Tiger youth shied at first but did resist.

Next, the youths dressed the chosen in red loincloths. The youths wrapped a cord around each chosen's waist, a flap in front to barely conceal the modesty of their genitals, and one behind covering their butt cracks. A snug knot at one hip held the ends of the cord together.

"You're ready," one of the guards announced, "and just in time. We'll take you into the Coliseum now. Follow me."

The guards silently led them out of the room, through a dark corridor and down a set of stairs.

Arik wondered what was going to happen to them next.

At the foot of the stairs was a closed door. The guard pressed at his wrist controller, and Arik heard a lock-bolt click. The door swung open.

"Inside, you lot," the guard ordered, and they filed in. "Keep going. Don't stop."

"A word of advice," the other guard drawled as they entered. "Whatever happens, don't resist. Do as you are told." With a sly sidelong grin at Arik as he passed, the guard added, "Though some of you certainly seem willing enough already."

The door shut, leaving the chosen alone there. More darkness. A corridor. Light at the end. Arik shuffled with the others toward the light.

He heard the distant voices, an unseen crowd. He wondered why he did not feel afraid, felt only the pervading calmness, and decided again this was the leech's doing.

The corridor opened into a huge openness, the floored cover with something that looked like grass but felt odd under his bare feet, stiffer and pricklier than grass. Rings of bleachers on all sides around the wide, flat open area where they stood; all of this under a roof almost as far above them as the sky above an open field, dotted with multiple orbs that burned like miniature suns. Arik could feel the heat in their brilliant white light. Had the Sorcerers of Old Time flown to the sun and back as well as the moon? Such a miraculous feat, and even bringing shards of the sun itself to burn in the overhead torches in this place did not seem so unfeasible after the other wonders Arik has seen so far that day.

But what was this place? An arena, perhaps? What had the guard called it?--A Coliseum? Arik knew from the books that coliseums and fights had been popular since Rome, a time that had been considered ancient even by the historians of Old Time. More of the open-weaved metal fencing surrounded them, separating this open floor space from the bleachers--possibly to prevent escape?

Pictures flashed on some sort of lighted wall suspended over the center of the open space. Arik recognized himself, shirtless, on what must have been his examination day. He remembered the men photographing him. Words ran alongside his image, too quickly for him to read. Jaff's picture too, and then another chosen's, even the Tiger youth's.

Several little gray things flitted in the air around them. At first, judging by the way they hovered and bobbed, Arik thought they might be some sort of drab species of hummingbird or dragonfly; but one came close to his face and he saw that it was a mechanical thing, a toy of the Sorcerers. Too small for a human sorcerer to ride in, of course, but perhaps some of their smaller demon servants used such devices to fly about? Was the demon still within it? Arik would have swatted it and its possible demon inhabitant away and made the sign of the Church, but his arms were too heavy to move so he could only stare. Its thin body held a single round bit of glass, about the size of a coin, which seemed in return to regard Arik like an eye. The eye moved up and down, as if evaluating Arik's body, and then the flying thing buzzed off. Another flitted near the Tiger Clan boy, seemed to peer at his tattooed stripes. Then on the overhead lighted wall, the same view of the boy's tattoos appeared--they were unmistakable. The flying thing lifted near the Tiger youth's face, and that same face appeared on the lighted wall overhead too. Amazing: what this tiny thing saw somehow immediately appeared on the wall overhead. Arik had heard his elders tell stories that the Sorcerers could see and talk to each other over great distances, but to actually experience such a thing himself seemed a wonder beyond comprehension. But Arik knew better than to dwell on these amazements at length, lest the pride in them infect him too. As the elders had often said, no matter how immense and unreal the miracles of the Sorcerers and their science seemed, the great Jesu had still punished them for their ego by sweeping them away with the most human of forces: folly, war, fire, pestilence, and that death which is simply the end of living.

Lights shining in his face prevented Arik from seeing the crowd beyond in the raised seats ringing the field, but he could hear them. He heard a man somewhere calling out, his voice oddly timbered and unnaturally loud, working his audience, describing in an auctioneer's rapid speech the benefits of this chosen, the superior qualities of that one, as if they were livestock. The crowd voices were a wall of sound, too fast, too quiet, too oddly accented, for him to make out much, but he was sure they were making bets on him and the other chosen. The guards had said earlier that such gambling took place here.

Suddenly, a shaft of overhead bright light burned down on Arik and the others. Squinting, he heard a roar of approval from the crowd. The open space, he understood, had become a stage, enclosed by the metal fence. While the bright light prevented him from seeing, the crowd was a large one, judging by its appreciative roar. Some of the other chosen looked around too, as if startled by the noise.

"Ladies, gentlemen," declared the announcer, "you're in for a treat tonight as we present our latest contestants, brought to us just today at no small expense from the far reaches of the Republic--and beyond! As you can see, one of our contestants today is a fierce Tiger Clan warrior, captured when the savages attempted a raid on one of our frontier communities." The crowd roared again.

When the noise died down, the announcer declared, "Please direct your attention to the rules posted on the scoreboard. As you know, there are few rules short of killing an opponent--which their mind-leeches should prevent, but you never know what to expect from these barely civilized frontier types and wild savages. Aggression and physical strength will be the key here, but will they be enough? These contestants have been hand-selected to give us a good show. Now, without further delay: Round one! Begin!"

Begin what? Arik wondered. No one had told him what would come next.

Then, he felt the change: at first just a loosening of the pervasive lassitude that had kept his limbs almost too heavy to move except when told to do so, like he was rousing from a daydream. No, more than that, he felt angry--but at what? For being taken from his family? For being brought here? No--more than angry, Arik realized. He felt flushed, his muscles tensing. He was enraged, madder than he had ever been at anyone ever before--mad enough to use his bare hands to--

The Tiger boy's snarl and his hand swiping at the hip where he had probably worn a knife before his capture were Arik's only warning. The warrior threw himself at Arik, and Arik reacted automatically, as the instructors had drilled into him during township defense training back in school, dodging to one side, turning as he moved, grabbing the Tiger's arm, and adding his own weight and force to the warrior's momentum to send him hurtling past. *Oh, yeah*, Arik thought, *I'm gonna kick your savage ass!*

Chaos all around him on the floor. All of the chosen were paired off and fighting each other, all roaring like animals. Arik saw Jaff go at the monk, who sidestepped the lunge lightly as if dancing and slammed the edge of his fist hard on the back of Jaff's neck as he passed. *Wait--this isn't right*, Arik thought. *Need to calm down--think about--*

But then the fury flared stronger in him, overwhelming everything, and Arik needed a target. He caught motion from the corner of his eye; the Tiger youth was off the floor, angrier than ever, and leaping at Arik again. Arik rolled himself into the warrior's charge as he had been taught, the need to think swallowed by the imperative to fight.

The Tiger boy bared his teeth as if he had a cat's fangs, snarling, and his eyes were feral. He sprang forward, entirely focused on Arik. The Tiger was the more seasoned fighter, but he was accustomed to fighting with a knife, too reckless at hand-to-hand struggles, all fury and speed. Arik's advantages were his strength and training. Arik had been drilled by the village men-folk in hand-to-hand combat moves they called *Marshall's arts*, through none of them could explain to him who Marshall was. Still, Arik had learned their teachings well, and he was glad of it. The rage left him practically no other tools except instinct and the need to smash his opponent; he had learned the Marshall's arts techniques until they were practically instinct. Arik knocked aside the Tiger boy's slashing hands, and he stepped inside the youth's reach and turned his block into a grab for the youth's lead wrist, moving in a waterwheel motion that pulled the top half of the warrior's body instead of pushing against it. Arik shifted his weight into his hips, his hips into the Tiger's lower half, bending so that he pulled the Tiger over the curve of Arik's descending shoulder in a natural progression as the youth's body pushed forward. At his speed and power, the Tiger boy went feet over head through the air, smacking one of the small flying eyes aside as he fell, and landed flat on his back, hard.

The Tiger warrior tried to scramble upright by putting his arms behind him, but Arik kicked a wrist out from under him and the youth fell onto his right side. The Tiger boy rolled into the fall, turned all the way onto his right shoulder and swiveled to grab at Arik's ankle with his left hand, but Arik yanked that ankle out of the way by knee-dropping toward the youth's extended wrist, intending to break it. Years of training and conditioning warred with the raw rage flooding Arik's head, the instinct to hurt and dominate and kill, but at the last moment he turned his knee aside and rolled without snapping the Tiger's arm. Arik's knee scuffed against the artificial grass instead.

From overhead the announcer's voice boomed unnaturally, louder than thunder: "You didn't come here for talk. You came here for bare-handed bloodlust, and you're sure getting it tonight! Look at those fighters go! Have you ever seen such fury? No one leaves the arena until the other one's down!"

The sound that came from the watchers above them might have been a communal snarl or a rumble, louder than any crowd noise Arik had ever heard before. The sound and the shifting patterns of lights and another flying eye-thing buzzing near his head distracted Arik briefly, time enough for the Tiger youth to skip nimbly to his feet and out of Arik's reach for the moment.

But only for a moment, then the Tiger and Arik charged each other. Swinging and grabbing at each other, Arik learned quickly that the warrior was just as fast as he, nearly as strong, probably more agile; but the youth announced his moves with his shoulders, and what little of Arik's mind remained to use strategy figured out ways to sway back or block the warrior's blows. Arik set up a steady rhythm of his own, easy to anticipate. The youth must have thought it an unconscious rhythm or not thought about it at all, because when Arik broke out of the pattern and feinted an overhand right, the move caught the Tiger off-guard. The youth panicked and overcompensated in an arm swing that would have barely blocked the punch if Arik had followed through with it, and instead Arik caught the youth with a left uppercut that rocked him back on his feet.

While the youth was stunned and off-balance, Arik moved inside his guard and hammered the Tiger with three short, stiff punches into his torso. The warrior doubled over, and Arik might have finished him then, but the youth lashed out, and Arik stepped back just enough, ready to move in when the youth's punch went by and left him open. The warrior spun away instead of attacking, looking for a moment to recover.

The watchers were not restrained any longer. They were roaring, screaming encouragement to the combatants, growls and snarls and hoarse yells and high shrieks.

Arik and his opponent moved quickly. A grappling tackle that Arik could not fully dodge took them both down on to the stiff not-grass, the impact loosening the Tiger's grasp just slightly. Their bodies were both covered in sweat, and trying to hold on to the other reminded Arik of trying to grip an eel. He gouged at the youth's eyelids. The warrior howled and loosened his arms further, just for a moment. Arik moved his hands under the youth's jaw and pushed himself down, sliding out of the warrior's embrace.

Arik rolled to the side and behind the youth, coming to a crouch behind him. Arik twisted down as the youth tried to rise, getting an arm around his throat. Arik's grip was not a traditional choke hold, too clumsy--the men-folk who had taught him Marshall's arts would have scolded his lack of technique. Still, he managed to slap his arm around the youth's neck and pulled tightly enough and locked his wrist in place with his other hand. The youth could not manage to get a breathe in through his throat. He tried to pull Arik's arm away, but their flesh was too sweaty, Arik's forearm pressed so tightly into the youth's neck. The Tiger tried to head-butt backward, but Arik felt the muscle movements through his arm in advance and swayed aside when the blow came. The youth tried to reach a hand back over his shoulder to grab at Arik, but Arik managed to slide around his neck while still maintaining pressure. When the warrior tried to position his other knee to stand, Arik kicked the back of it to knock him back down; the youth had expected that, moved with the strike, and threw himself backward on top of Arik.

Again, the crowd roared, louder, almost a thunder. Arik felt like he was being caught under a falling tree, but he held on while the weight and impact resonated through every bone and tendon in his body.

He squeezed tighter, ignored the black patches in his vision, and focused everything he had on maintaining the choke hold. Now the youth really could not reach Arik because Arik was pinned beneath him.

The Tiger boy went limp. Arik, though, was anticipating that old trick and used the sudden lack of resistance to squeeze even tighter. The youth began to thrash in reflexive panic then, managed to roll onto his side, dragging Arik along. Arik was ready for that move too and cinched his arm in tighter. The Tiger boy realized too late that he could not get the gulp of air he needed. Arik held on. The next time the warrior limp was for real.

Arik slowly, painfully stood up and did his best to stretch. The rage was fading. Gone. A buzzing flyer moved around him, but the shadowy watchers above were not screaming encouragement or appreciation. If anything, they seemed caught in a sullen pause. They wanted blood, not breath deprivation. "What an upset, ladies and gentlemen!" the announcer blared, trying to work the crowd back into its frenzy. Arik wondered how many among the audience had lost money betting against him.

Arik looked around. Jaff had bested the monk somehow, probably had gotten a lucky blow through the monk's defenses and downed him with superior strength, the way Jaff won most of his fights. The monk rolled on the artificial grass, not unconscious, but the will to fight was gone from him. The fury fading from his expression too, Jaff looked around in wonder, as if realizing for the first time where he was and what had happened.

Arik felt the mind-leech's spell seem to fade entirely. The Tiger boy writhed on the ground, not quite able to stand yet, but recovering quickly. Arik was glad the rage was gone, because he could not have fought the Tiger much longer, or Jaff, or any of the others.

"And now, what you've *reeeeally* come here to see," the unseen announcer told the audience, "Round two!" Again, the crowd roared, the noise getting louder but different, more hoots and whistles than yelling.

"We don't have to fight each other!" Arik called out to the other chosen. "We can--we can ... can ..."

The mind-leech's spell had not disappeared; it had simply changed. Arik felt his skin prickle and begin to sweat again, his body trembling as he was flooded with another overwhelming sensation. *Lust*, Arik realized as his prick began to stiffen, lengthen. *Jesu help me, I'm so fucking horny I could--* Their loincloths did little to hide their erections. Jaff, already hard, ripped his own flimsy red loincloth completely away, tossed it aside, letting his erection swing long and proud in the air for all to see. *Shameless*, Arik thought, though he wanted to do exactly the same without caring who saw.

Arik's sudden erection was a fierce thing, a weapon ready for a different kind of struggle. The Tiger boy, still on the ground, moaned and writhed. He rolled onto his belly, thrust his ass high in the air, groaning like a cat in heat, eager to be bred--he thrust his ass toward Arik. Arik felt his world narrow to two things: his cock and need to get it into the Tiger boy's ass.

The Tiger flipped his loincloth out of the way, exposing his buttocks and crack. He had a beautiful ass: hard-muscled, perfectly round, smooth-skinned, a deep crevice between the halves. The warrior reached back with both hands, pulled his cheeks apart, revealing his hole like an eye winking or a mouth blowing a kiss at Arik.

The Tiger's body was incredible: each muscle and curve heavily defined, from his broad shoulders to his narrow hips to his bulging legs. Arik could think about nothing except getting his loincloth pushed aside and then aiming his cock at the Tiger boy's hole. Spit would not be the best lubricant, and Arik knew from his own experiments that lubricant was required, but spit was all he had. He hawked up as much as he could into his hand, then wiped his hand around his hard-on.

Arik held on to the Tiger's hip with one hand, used the other to reinforce his cock against the hole. The Tiger warrior ground his butt back at Arik, eager to be impaled. No preliminaries; the entry was difficult for them both. Arik shoved the first few inches of his cock into that stretching hole. The Tiger yowled in pain and lust--a big dick like Arik's must have felt like it was splitting the Tiger boy in half--but the youth did not pull away. After a moment, he pushed back, trying to capture more of Arik's thickness inside him.

For some time, the crowd had been chanting: "*Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!*"

Arik considered himself knowledgeable in the ways of the body. His beauty of face and body had allowed him to charm his way into the breechcloths of any age-mate, male or female, who struck his fancy--even his friend and sometime rival Jaff, a pleasing memory, and on more than one occasion. Arik considered himself good at sex. Well, then: if the hidden watchers wanted to see him rut like a breed-bull in heat, he would give them a good show.

Holding the youth by his hips, Arik began to fuck. More of his cock disappeared into the youth's depths with each stroke. The warrior was still vocal, but his cries were less of pain now and more of delight. As Arik thrust into him, the youth started to squirm, open-mouthed with ecstasy. The Tiger had been ass-fucked before, Arik realized, and knew how to find pleasure in it.

While his body worked by its own instinct, Arik looked around. Jaff and the monk were fucking nearby. Arik watched without jealousy as Jaff's dick sank into the monk's ass in long, deep strokes. The monk seemed even more adept at the carnal arts than he had been at fighting.

More buzzing eyes floated in the air around Arik and the Tiger, watching every thrust. The audience howled encouragements. Arik heard them striking the woven-metal fence above them surrounding this field and wondered whether they would storm down onto the floor of the arena, offer their swampy vaginas and rigid cocks to the chosen, partake of this same fever-lust that burned through every fiber of Arik's body.

The Tiger boy shifted, one hand still propping up his torso, the other hand redirected to stroking his tattooed cock. Erect, the warrior's penis and its stripe markings had lengthened like the body of a predatory cat stretching in the sun. Arik's dick in his ass seemed to be working the youth toward a frenzy. His cries were quickening, getting louder, his hand-strokes getting longer and faster. The warrior's hole and the clamping warm muscles inside it seemed to respond in kind to Arik's every thrust and roll. Arik ran his hand up and down the Clan youth's taut-muscled ribs on the side with the most stripe tattoos--surprisingly authentic markings, Arik decided, based on what he remembered from his one glimpse of a real brown tiger--and the animal danger of that fueled his lust further. Arik had never touched a tattoo before, and he wondered whether they hurt. He ran his hand up and down them again. No, touching them did not seem to hurt the Tiger; he seemed to like it and roared, a hoarse cry burdened with something both animal and too human. Arik understood the youth's plea to get fucked harder, faster, deeper, and he obliged gladly.

Nearby, one of the chosen howled in climax. Then another yowled. Beneath Arik, the Tiger youth threw his head back and side to side, his hair flailing like a horse's mane.

Suddenly, Arik realized his orgasm was upon him. He gasped and shuddered and rammed his cock hard into the Tiger's buttocks. Arik threw back his head and bellowed his pleasure toward the ceiling and those distant bright lights. He clenched the Tiger's hips and, with a final deep thrust, sent his spurt after spurt of hot cum into the youth's guts. As if responding to the Arik's release, the Tiger boy dipped his head and snarled. He stopped his ceaseless howling when he swallowed his breath at the point of orgasm. Angling his head to see around the Tiger's hip, Arik saw that the youth had also spilled his load onto the artificial grass, the last of his white cum dribbling off his fist.

The unseen crowd continued to roar, nearly deafening Arik. "How about *that*, ladies and gentlemen!" the announcer barked. "We haven't seen a spectacle like that in months! Such fire! Such youthful virility! Are you having as hard a time as I am at picking a favorite? Now, for those of you in our elite category, let's start the bidding at--"

As the announcer brayed through whatever he was auctioning, Arik separated himself from the Tiger youth slowly, not wanting to risk causing pain when his spent and softening cock slid out. Arik stepped back. The Tiger groaned, spent and not yet attempting to rise.

Arik looked around. The leech-spell had gone again. The other chosen also looked around, both in wonder and embarrassment.

Jaff approached, glaring at the Tiger boy on the floor. The flesh around one of Jaff's eyes was darkening, likely where the monk had landed a bruising blow, but Arik thought best not to tease Jaff's temper about that. Jaff held his hands in front of his groin, hiding his nakedness as best he could but his familiar arrogance intact. Arik knew he should hide his privates too but decided he liked the new shamelessness he had experienced under the leech. He put his hands on his hips, leaving his body and scummy cock on defiant display, daring any and all to gaze upon him. If Jaff or the audience wanted to look, well, let them.

Jaff averted his eyes from Arik's body, a small victory for Arik in their rivalry, and gestured with his bare foot at the Tiger boy. "What was he like?" Jaff hissed, barely audible through the crowd noise, the announcer declaring something sold, barking out numbers for the next, and the crowd calling back. "Filthy savage. Did he mewl like a kitten when you stuck it in him?"

Jaff made to step closer to the Tiger boy, readying a leg to kick the prone youth, but Arik caught Jaff's arm, restraining him. Jaff stared at him. Arik understood the Tiger warrior was as human as himself or Jaff, civilized too in his way, enough to make rudimentary communication possible, even though he was not civilized enough to speak English like Jesu-fearing folk. Arik knew Jaff would need time to be made to understand the Tiger boy was not a rabid savage like they had been taught. And maybe, just maybe, the Tiger boy would be capable of learning English. Arik hoped the Tiger could someday at least learn enough words to answer Arik's questions about his tattoos, how they had come to be on him, what they meant. But Arik knew better than to speak of such here in this arena, where Jaff would just laugh at him and remind him that even dogs can learn to understand a few words of the civilized tongue but that does not make them a man's equal.

But Jaff's question needed answering. "He knew how to make it good," Arik said, "and he was the best I've ever had."

Jaff's scowl darkened, the question--*Better than me?*--hanging unsaid between them. Arik knew Jaff must be remembering their own pairings on those times they had snuck away together, and Arik was pleased to have scored another small victory against Jaff's pride. But in truth, Arik had indeed enjoyed the Tiger's skills and did indeed rank their time among the best orgasms he had ever felt, though the circumstances in this arena shamed him. He wondered if he would have ever experienced the Tiger's carnal talents otherwise--another question to be pondered later.

Two flying eyes ventured closer as the Tiger boy stood. He saw Jaff's glare and understood what it meant, answered it with a frown of his own. The Clan youth moved into the space between Jaff and Arik, not taking his eyes off Jaff, slightly ahead of Arik--possessively, Arik wondered--and responded to the threat of Jaff with a narrowing his eyes and puffing out his chest to meet the challenge, ready to fight and defend. Arik knew only luck and the will of Jesu had let him defeat the Tiger warrior's savagery; would Jaff be able to fare as well?

"And that concludes our bidding, ladies and gentlemen," the unseen announcer boomed. "Uh-oh--just in time too! It looks like two of our players are eager for another round! They'll have wait until next time because--"

The announcer said more, but Arik was swallowed by disorientation as he felt the leech's will-sapping spell return to steal his thoughts. Under its influence, his emotions simply ... drained away and his mind quieted. He felt his body relax, his face go slack, saw the Tiger's and Jaff's expressions do the same. One of them made a quiet sound of frustration as the spell took complete hold. Their arms went limp and hung loosely at their sides. Now they simply stood, as if awaiting instructions for what to do next.

Arik was almost glad for the return of the leech-spell. It deferred the inevitable conflict between Jaff and the Tiger Clan boy, meant Arik did not have to choose sides between them just yet.

The youths from the shower room earlier moved among them again, pulling the chosens' red loincloths back into position, retying those who had removed theirs. The guards and the maroon-robed elder returned as well.

One guard pushed his angry face close to Arik's. "I lost good money today--a lot of us did--because we bet on the Tiger. You're just lucky you fight and fuck well. If you hadn't put on such a good show, I'd--"

The elder's voice cut in. "Careful with them," he cautioned, as if warning the youths instead of the guard. "Handle them gently, or their new masters will have you flayed."

The guard's mouth worked as he considered a final insult, but he withdrew with the cruelty unuttered.

The youths moved among them again, as the elder consulted a paper and directed the youths to wrap an inch-wide band of fabric around some of the chosens' left biceps. Blue for Arik; blue for the Tiger and Jaff too; gold for the monk; crimson for a fifth chosen; and black with a red stripe for a sixth. The remaining two chosen were not banded; another guard led them away without mention of their fate.

Arik looked at the blue fabric around his own arm, Jaff's, the Tiger's. Were they now slaves, Arik wondered--surely not? Were they being marked by color to indicate which master had bought them? Only the wealthiest could afford slaves; to have acquired a chosen must be even more expensive--but to have bought three at once was an extravagance Arik could not comprehend.

"Take them to be cleaned up and fed. They'll leave for their new masters within the hour," the elder ordered, sounding bored now that the excitement of the arena was replaced by mundane tasks to be completed.

Arik's belly rumbled at the mention of being fed. Apparently, he mused, the mind-leech could do little to quell the fussing of his lower organs.

"Okay, you lot," one of the guards called, "come with me. Let's go. Be quick about it."

Arik and the remaining chosen obeyed, followed the guard back to the opening of the dark tunnel that led from the arena back into the depths of the concretestone labyrinth itself. Arik noted that the Tiger boy had managed to fall into step alongside him. In spite of the pervasive calmness, he felt a brief flicker of satisfaction at this. He knew the Tiger Clan boy had some intelligence, no matter what Jaff and the others might think, suspected the warrior needed only to be educated about English words and then might be capable of speech and thought like civilized folk. Someone had taught the youth how to fight and to fuck, which seemed proof enough that the boy's Clan was capable of more than just animal savagery. The mind-leech's spell would be released eventually; if they stayed together, Arik wondered, would he then have an opportunity to try to civilize the youth?--And would the youth let himself be tamed? More questions for another time.

Part of Arik, a part that had not been completely quieted by the leech, still fretted. Being chosen, he understood now, was not an ending but a series of beginnings. He had been awed by many mysteries this day, and apparently he was to see still more. Perhaps indeed being chosen was an honor. Still, no one seemed in a hurry to reveal what would happen to him--them--next. All he knew was that *next* began on the other side of the opening he and the others were entering, through the darkness beyond.
