

Return to Cockaigne

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The pretty, nervous-looking woman - thirtyish, dark hair in bangs, long cloth winter coat concealing her taste in clothes - entered the Kirby-Ditko Extended Care Residence hurriedly. She brushed past the bored attendant at the reception desk, rode the elevator to the third floor, turned left familiarly down the long, disinfectant-scented corridor, and hastened to a private room. Inside she carefully closed the door, then grabbed a handy chair and wedged it under the knob.

"Westbrook, Calla - sorry I'm late. Do you think jamming the door will give us enough time?"

On the high-tech bed centerpiecing the room lay a comatose man, hooked to various supplemental machines and assorted drips. The sheets neatly drawn up to his neck failed to conceal the lines of his wasted form: limbs like rope-wrapped poles, chest a set of wax-paper bellows. Grapes under blanched rose petals, his closed eyes punctuated a sunken, expressionless face.

Two earlier visitors, a man and a woman both of an age with the newcomer, sat in ugly institutional chairs beside the patient's bed. The finely suited man possessed the brutish handsomeness of a troll, ameliorated by an impish grin. Legs crossed, he jogged his raised leather-shod foot impatiently. The other woman - plain-faced, wearing a drab blouse and skirt, oversized prescription glasses buffering watery blue eyes - remained intensely focused on the unconscious man and seemed content to wait thus forever.

"Our old friend just underwent a bath and massage," replied Westbrook, the male visitor. "Mealtime, of course, to use one of the patient's own favorite phrases, is a non-issue. I doubt he'll receive any more attention for the next several hours, at least. That should give us plenty of time for us to get in and out. With luck, no suspicious or dutiful helper will even so much as jiggle that knob. But I appreciate your concern, Hazel."

The seated woman, Calla, looked up grimly. "Plenty of time if nothing goes wrong."

Hazel's nervous expression deepened. "What could go wrong? Do either of you anticipate something going wrong?"

"You can look at Pike and still wonder what could go wrong? We never anticipated losing him this way."

Westbrook intervened between the women. "Now, now, ladies. Pike's condition owes nothing to the drug and everything to his own megalomania, overconfidence and greed. We three should experience no problems, especially considering we're all two decades wiser than the last time we did this."

Hazel expressed her dissent with this character analysis by a snort. "Speak for yourself."

Some days I feel I know even less than I did at fifteen. I'm less certain about the meaning of it all, that's for sure."

Westbrook's grin resembled a crag fissuring. "But can you really ever be sure about uncertainty?"

Calla stood up. "Enough talk. Let's go rescue Pike."

Westbrook also rose to his feet. "Rescue him from himself, you mean."

"Yes. From himself, from the allure of the Land. And don't forget the starostas."

Hazel shivered. "I hate the starostas. Almost as much as the lumpkins do. But I suppose we're committed now."

With this last remark, Hazel shrugged out of her coat. Naked beneath except for shoes, she appeared at ease with her body on display before these two particular witnesses.

Westbrook bowed appreciatively. "You look as beautiful as you did in your teens, my dear. How I've missed seeing you thus."

"We're not kids anymore, Westy, going skinny-dipping on a dare. We all have our own lives now. Our own families, our own jobs - our own lovers."

Westbrook replied, "Too bad, don't you think? Who knows what would have developed among us four, had the Tetrad retained access to the Land? But such idle speculation is fruitless. As always, Hazel, you cut directly to the chase." The burly man tossed his suitcoat aside and began loosening his tie.

Calla turned her back to unbutton her shirt. "Shouldn't Pike be naked too?"

"I doubt it's necessary. He's firmly in the Land already. I debated even wasting a dose on him, but in the end I felt such a measure couldn't hurt."

As her friends continued to undress, Hazel asked, "This is the real supraliminal stuff, isn't it? The same as twenty years ago?"

Westbrook pulled his pants down. "But of course. Iatros handed it to me himself."

"I still don't understand. Where did he come from after all these years? Why did he cut contact with us back then? How did he find you? Why now?"

Naked knobby spine toward to her companions, Calla peeled off her panties, then turned defiantly around. "You're asking all the same questions we never had the answers to in the first place! Where did Iatros ever come from? Why did he leave us high, dry and hurting? How did he ever find us? Why then?"

"Now, now, ladies. Are you forgetting the Compact of the Winetree Grove?"

Both women appeared humbled. Westbrook nodded approvingly at their contrition, then added, "All I can tell you is that our mysterious friend looked not a day older than when we last saw him. I have no reason to distrust his gift, and look forward to nothing beyond this one unexpected visit. He might show up again tomorrow - or in another fifty years. Who can say? Now, allow me."

Westbrook removed a thumb-sized squeeze-bottle containing a barely discernible amount of clear liquid from the pocket of his chair-draped coat. He uncapped it to reveal a pinhole outlet. "A different delivery system this time, you'll notice. Please, take your seats and put Pike in the circuit."

The women took up stations on either side of the comatose man and each gripped a withered hand beneath the sheets. Westbrook moved to Pike's nutrient line, where he added a drop from his bottle directly into a feed-valve. Quickly then he hastened to each woman and decanted a drop apiece upon their tongues. He established himself in a chair at the foot of the bed, squirted the final drop into his own mouth, then grabbed the free hands of the two women.

"Cockaigne, our Dreamland - at last we return!"

The weird adult had been hanging at the fringes of the high-school grounds for the past several days. Mornings and afternoons, as the students flowed in and out of the school, he maintained his innocuous yet disturbing stakeout. Sitting in his luxury sedan on a public street under the shade of a sycamore, reading some kind of strange magazine printed in a foreign language, sipping occasionally from a cardboard cup of coffee, the guy made no illicit or innocent overtures to anyone, male or female. But although the magazine seemed to claim his whole attention, his eyes shifted subtly from time to time over the adolescents.

The principal and the school custodian had gone to talk to the man on the third day, but whatever explanation or identification the guy had offered must have satisfied the authorities in charge of student safety, since no higher security procedures were invoked, and the stranger was allowed to maintain his lazy vigil.

Pike was the first member of the inalienable foursome to suggest speaking to the stranger.

Megawatts of energy barely containable in the thin copper wire of his fifteen-year-old body, the glimmer-eyed Pike often led his three friends down backroads of adventure they might not have otherwise ventured on. Calla, Westbrook and Hazel both appreciated and feared their nominal leader's wild bravado.

They sat now on the deserted bleachers at the edge of the football field behind the school, the last class of the day half an hour behind them.

"Turn that noise down a minute, Westy," Pike ordered. "I want to suggest a little game."

The rough-featured boy bent to the huge Panasonic boombox at his feet and cut the volume, reducing Blondie's "Call Me" to a background drone.

"I don't know why you don't get yourself one of these," said Pike, displaying a Sony Walkman big as an abridged paperback dictionary.

"I like to share my music. Your gizmo makes it too private."

"I'm into being private, okay?"

"Sure. And I'm into sharing."

Pushing her clunky glasses further up her small nose, Calla leaned over to inspect the Walkman. "It's got two headphone jacks, doesn't it, Pike? You could still share your music." Without asking, she popped the tape out. "Devo. I like them."

Hazel rocked backward and laughed. "I can just picture the two of you walking side by side leashed to the same little box. What happens if you spontaneously go around opposite sides of a telephone pole?"

"Kerchung!" Westbrook mimed a jerky fall.

"That's a non-issue. I've only got one set of headphones."

Calla sat back disappointedly.

"But I didn't want to talk about this kind of theoretical crap when I asked Westy to turn his box down. I wanted to propose a little adventure. Let's have some fun with Chester the Molester."

Westbrook objected. "The magazine guy out front in his car? I don't know... He's really creepy."

"What did you have in mind?" Hazel asked.

"Let's try to get him to do something really evil. Then we can turn him in to the cops and be big shots."

"Why hassle the lousy pervert?" Calla said. "He's just pitiful. You're only lowering yourself to his level."

"I'm bored. And who says I'm living on some level higher than this guy to start with?"

"I'd like to think - " began Calla, but she was interrupted by Pike's abrupt leap to his feet.

"I'm doing it now! Whether you guys are with me or not."

Pike gained a lead of a few yards before the others caught up with him. Rounding the building, they saw the stranger apparently slumbering patiently in his car. His seat semi-reclined, he lay back with his glossy magazine covering his face. All the school buses had long departed, and no other kids lingered.

Slowly they approached the car. A yard away, the stranger's voice - accented, dark and bitter as Aztec chocolate mixed with heart's blood - halted them dead.

"Children of Cockaigne, I have been waiting for you."

They arrived in immortal Cockaigne as always, transitionlessly, startlingly, opening their eyes first and eternally upon Piebush Meadow, near the edge of the Winetree Grove.

Three gods regarded each other joyously, with clear-eyed intimacy. Caparisoned in elaborate greaves, gorgets, and gauntlets, caped and cowled, plumed and prinked, laced

and leathered, booted and buckled, the trio - two juno-esque women and a herculean man - stood tall as the lower limbs of the remote winetrees, those branches themselves a good ten feet above the licorice-moss carpeting the Meadow.

"Aniatis."

"Dormender."

"Yodsess."

So they named themselves, and broke into roiling laughter at the splendid sound of their own immense plangent voices.

"How marvelous to be home again!" said the man. "I feel as if shackles have been struck from my wrists and ankles!"

"Dormender, you name the sensation exactly!" The woman who had addressed Dormender whipped off her winged casque and released banners of thick red hair. "The eagle of my spirit soars high once again!"

The second woman smiled also, but fatalistically, and did not remove her own shining headgear, keeping all of her corvine tresses captured, save for a stray curl or two. "Yodsess, I too experience delight at the return of the swelling passion and supernal vitality that form our birthright. But I would advise you to redon your armor. Have you forgotten the starostas? Likewise, what of our mission to rescue our lost comrade, Theriagin? There is no telling what foul manifestations in the Land may have arisen from his perverse and overlong tenancy of Castel Djurga."

Yodsess replaced her helm upon her noble brow, but could not resist twirling around. "Aniatis, as of old, your counsel is wise but oversober. Let all evil crawlers crawl, all ghastly ghaunts gibber, all starostas shamble! Our function is to exult! Look at the firmament that your earthly eyes have not beheld for much too long! Marbled with sherbert clouds! Smell the odors of the pepper shrubs and squab roots! Let the warm winds arriving from their long journey across the Berryjuice Sea caress your cheek!"

Dormender grinned, as much at Yodsess's paean as at Aniatis's obvious attempt to leash her own natural exuberance. "One an inebriate, one a clerk, and only I providing the voice of moderation. Ah, well, the middle path is a fine road for Dormender to travel. Come, ladies, let us leave Piebush Meadow behind, in quest of Castel Djurga."

So urging, Dormender adjusted the long sword yclept Salvor that was slung across his back and strode off. The women followed, and before they reached the marge of the Grove they had all availed themselves of sustenance from the bushes that gave the Meadow its name. Once under the trees, meaty gravy runnelling their chins, they snapped gourds full of heady beverage from the lowest branches and drowned their lunches in tart wine.

"Remember you the Pact made here?" Dormender asked jokingly.

Aniatis and Yodsess blushed at the thought of their old conflicts, and in what pleasant manner they had been resolved. Then the latter answered, "I remember."

"Yes, I too," said Aniatis. "I remember everything."

Pike could not restrain his elation at the self-incriminating words spoken by the foreign creep. All pretense of unnecessary entrapping innocence evaporated. "You heard him guys, he offered us coke! Man, your ass is grass now, weirdo! C'mon, let's go call the cops!"

Much to their surprise, the burly man seemed unruffled by the gleeful threats of the children's leader. He removed the magazine from his face, revealing in profile an olive complexion, chubby cheeks, a splayed blemish-pitted nose and a goatee. Far from frightening, he resembled most closely an opera impressario in a Bugs Bunny cartoon. Out of sight, his hand maneuvered the seat control to power himself upright. He turned to face the four teenagers fully, captivating them with dark eyes.

"Have you never felt the wrongness of your lives? Do you not all experience the odd sense of being exiled? Isn't this world somehow deeply unsatisfying, a pale parody of what might truly exist? Yes, people turn to sense-numbing drugs to escape just such a sense of haunting emptiness. But you misperceived my speech. I named not the crippling white powder cocaine, but the peerless realm of Cockaigne."

Pike hesitated a moment in the face of the man's assurance and subject-changing tactics, but recovered enough bravado to insist, "You can't get out of this with a lot of fancy doubletalk, mister. You're nothing but a lousy drug-pusher, and you're going down."

"True, I do intend to offer you a drug. But it's a drug not of this world. Liberating, enlightening, transporting - "

"That's what all the pushers say! I've heard everything I need to hear now." Pike whirled toward his friends. "Guys, let's - "

His companions obviously failed to share his certainty. Silent till now, they exchanged timid glances among themselves before Westbrook spoke.

"Pike, admit it - we've all felt exactly the feelings he's describing. None of us truly belongs here. And that name, Cockaigne - it means something to me."

Hazel gripped Pike by the wrist, nailed him with her ardent gaze. "I can almost picture the place he's talking about."

"Me too," said Calla.

Pike shook his head in confusion. "This is too weird. He's hypnotized you three and now you're all trying to hypnotize me. Somehow you're putting pictures in my brain - "

"No," said the stranger, "those are memories."

Pike lurched a few feet away, then halted. The man levered open his door and emerged. Squat, wearing a wool suit, he held an old-fashioned satchel in his left hand. He extended his right hand, and Westbrook shook it.

"My name is Doctor Iatros. Take me to a quiet, unfrequented place where we might talk. Quickly. Cockaigne needs you as soon as possible."

Many staunch words of comfort from Dormender and vast quantities of reassuring petting from Aniatis and Yodsess had been needed to calm the lumpkin enough to secure speech from the creature. At first, when encountered in the foothills of the Sugar Mountains, the quivering, frightened little furball (when standing, only as tall as the shins of the godlings) had retracted all its limbs and tried to hide behind an outcropping of pink-veined rock candy. Prodded from its niche, the lumpkin had deliberately rolled toward the nearby Great Gravy River as if to drown itself. Rescued from this fate, the timorous citizen of Cockaigne had required fully an hour of coaxing to reach the point where it could sensibly converse.

"Now, lumpkin," cajoled Dormender, "speak truly of what drove you to fear us, the legendary protectors of your race."

The lumpkin's voice piped bitterly. "Many and many a century have passed since any of your kind walked the Land to offer a shield or sword on our behalf. The only one of your breed remaining never leaves Castel Djurga. And he is no friend to any who dares trespass on the Jumbles."

"The Jumbles?" queried Aniatis. "What unknown territory do you name?"

"For hundreds of parasangs around Castel Djurga, the Land has been rendered fulsomely and morbidly rebarbative. No feature of the landscape offers solace or nourishment, the rude denizens affright, and the very sunlight that falls heavily there abrades the skin."

Yodsess smacked her mailed fist upon a cinnamon gumdrop big as a hassock. The sweet boulder absorbed the force of her blow, but not the sting of her words. "The Land bordering Castel Djurga was always the fairest spot in this paradise, a harmonious precinct of laughing waters and succulent pasturage! How could it now be so perverted?"

Dormender frowned. "Only through the madness of our comrade Theriagin, I fear."

Aniatis quizzed the lumpkin further. "You cite unkind inhabitants of these Jumbles. Are they the starostas?"

"No, worse! Even the starostas are affrighted of the Jumbles-dwellers, and venture not within their grasp. If I may be so bold, these dreadful beings resemble - they resemble you, your worships! But primitive, cloddish, puny travesties of your divine features."

None of the three divinities had any response to this puzzling information, and after a small amount of additional interrogation, they bade the lumpkin bounce off on his way.

"Too much vilely sweet and egocentric solitude has rendered poor Theriagin a pustule of sickness upon the Land," Yodsess declaimed.

"Judge not our fellow too harshly," Dormender urged. "Any of us might have fallen into the same trap."

"Righting this wrong upon the Land must be our primary duty," Aniatis reminded them. "Rescue and rehabilitation of Theriagin comes second, if at all."

"I recall the dark labors we faced when first we arrived in the Land," Dormender said reflectively. "Those lessons will stand us in good stead now."

Yodsess raised her sharp labrys called Insight. "Onward then to Castel Djurga!"

Pike had chivvied out the two younger embarrassed kids using the space under the gymnasium's back stairs as a lovers' lane. Arranging several scavenged upended plastic milk crates in a rough semicircle on the greasy gravel, he fumed silently while his companions stared worshipfully at the weird Doctor Iatros. The intriguing stranger had refused to answer any of their questions until they were all settled down on their hard waffle-bottomed stools, shielded on three sides by graffiti-scribbled damp concrete. From the mildewy shadows, unpreoccupied observers could look down a long open slope of sunlit grass and spot any intruders long before the conspirators themselves could be surprised.

Once arranged in this manner, with two children to either side, Doctor Iatros began to spin his tale.

"Ten million years ago, I created a world - "

Immediately Pike interrupted with a derisive exclamation. "Shit, man! I thought the dope spiel was lame, but now we get fairytales on top of it!"

"My words are indeed deemed myths in my pocket universe, by those who know no better. Here they are literal facts. But even as myths, they contain much truth. Fairytales too are instructive, but not in the same manner. Now, shall I continue?"

The other three chorused yes, and Pike was forced to consent grudgingly as well.

"Ten million years ago, I created a small universe and named it Cockaigne. It was intended to be an Edenic place, offering its inhabitants an easy life, yet one not without its heroic challenges. Unfortunately, due to my extant immature skills, my universe contained an inherent flaw. A coarseness in the quantum weave allowed all higher intelligences to leak out into the ambient multiverse. I watched with intense dismay as the souls whom I had intended as the guardians of my Land evaporated after only a short existence and pinwheeled away, indestructible but lost, across the cosmos, finding unnatural homes in a myriad of other forms.

"Without sentient guardians to help shape Cockaigne, my creation began to degenerate. Mourning, I left it behind to seek out the original lost inhabitants wherever they might be in the cosmos - a laborious quest, believe me - and offer them the chance to return and help me repair my beautiful world. I cannot transplant you permanently to your native Land, for the congenital flaw remains, irreparable without destroying the place and starting over. But I have found a way to insure that your visits are frequent and extensive enough to be wholly satisfying and productive and beneficial, both for the Land and your own souls."

Doctor Iatros fell silent. Westbrook ventured, "Are you, like, God?" The Doctor laughed and patted his stomach. "With this body? Hardly!" Hazel said, "Do you have any pictures of Cockaigne?" "No," replied Iatros, "for your kind of cameras do not work in the Land." Ever practical, Calla asked, "How do we get there and back?"

As his answer, Iatros reached down to the satchel at his feet, opened it, and withdrew a square of blotter paper about the size of an index card. The paper was printed with

smearly blue watercolor lines dividing it into four cells; inside each cell a different blurry symbol shone with a faint indigo radiance: sword, spear, double-bladed axe, and flail.

Pike jumped up, nearly banging his head on the underslant of the stairs. "That's acid! LSD, pure and simple."

Iatros paid no heed to the accusation. "These tabs have been soaked in a supraliminal drug of my own devising, tailored to the physiology of your species, which allows your souls to awaken fully and travel astrally to Cockaigne, where they will automatically manifest bodies out of the templates I have installed there. Once embodied, all will come naturally to you. Your return is likewise automatic, upon the timely waning of the drug in your mundane veins. I recommend taking the drug in unison, while maintaining physical contact of some sort. Ideally, to facilitate your temporary abandonment of this world, your psychic rebirth, you should also be naked."

Pike was beside himself. "Naked! Naked! Now we're taking orders from a sex pervert too! Have you guys all gone totally nuts?"

"I will not be present when you use the drug. But might I suggest that you make your first experiment soon? I have many lightyears yet to cover in my quest, and I would like to leave you with a supply of the drug while I'm away. But not before you satisfy yourselves as to its use."

"Right, right," Pike ranted. "Hook us now for free, then make us pay in blood and sex games. Well, I'm not biting, Doctor Asshole! Let's just see what the cops have to say about all this."

Bent over, Pike scuttled for the exit. Halfway there, Iatros called out, "Pike! Recall Castel Djurga!"

Pike stiffened, then collapsed to the gravel. His friends hastened to his side and helped him up, laying him down across several crates. Within minutes his eyes fluttered open, and he reached toward Iatros.

"Hand that stuff over, Doc. Cockaigne needs us."

Aniatis pulled her begored and steaming spear named Caritas from the guts of the starosta, and the hideous creature, formerly pinned to the trunk of a broadcloth tree, fell to the turf. The mortally wounded yet still belligerent monster whipped its many suckered tendrils in vain, lisped chthonic obscenities from its psittacine beak, shook its riotous green mane, exuded venom from all its stingers, fangs and barbels, and madly clawed scales off its own teated belly. Darting gracefully in and out of the circle of its lashing mace-like tails, Dormender and Yodsess employed sword and axe to amputate and eventually decapitate the evil being. Upon final expiration the creature released a noxious cloud of puce bodily gas; but knowing the eventuality of this ultimate assault, the three practiced attackers had already retreated.

Cleansing their weapons with swatches plucked from the broadcloth trees, the godlings regarded their fallen prey with mixed satisfaction and concern.

"This marks the tenth starosta we have slain twixt the Diamond Lanes and Firewater

Creek," noted Dormender, "a region where once their vile kind were extinct. I thought we had battled long and hard in ages past to confine the feeble remnant of their race to the Sherbert Polar Floes."

Yodsess slung the gleaming Insight over her brawny shoulder. "Cockaigne has slid inevitably a long way back toward the chaotic conditions reigning when first we regained our home."

"To think that the starostas once cruelly ruled over all the Land," said Aniatis. "Why Lord Iatros ever created them in the first place, I shall never understand."

At the mention of Iatros's name, all the trees bent and the grasses murmured, though no breeze passed.

"Unriddling the ways of our Creator concerns us not," Yodsess chided. "Our mission must be to reestablish the critical balances we once so carefully engineered."

"We are over halfway to Castel Djurga," Dormender said, pointing with pristine Salvor toward the east. "Soon, if the lumpkins spoke accurately, we will cross into the misshapen Jumbles. But at the moment, if memory serves, a covey of Roast Fowls is wont to nest nearby, hard upon a patch of Mead Gourds. Let us refresh ourselves, then make hard march."

They sallied forth in high spirits then, while the elephant-sized carcass behind them slowly deliquesced into the scorched turf.

Eagerly the four sweaty teens shucked their daypacks and fell with near-unanimous exclamations of relief onto the coarse grass of the clearing.

"Ow!" complained Hazel, "I landed on some kind of pricker!"

"Better than landing on some kind of prick," Calla dryly observed.

Pike reacted to the bawdy comment unmercifully. After his placename-triggered faint, from being the biggest detractor of the concept of Cockaigne and their own revealed relationship to the Land, he had switched to the biggest defender of Iatros and his message.

"Shut up, Calla. This has nothing to do with sex. We're here to find our true home and save it from decay."

Westbrook shrugged. "We'll know the truth of it all for sure in a few minutes, won't we?"

Hazel said, "I still don't see why we couldn't stage this test inside."

Pike patiently explained. "Zonked out in somebody's bedroom, we'd be more likely to get discovered by horrified adults. But no one ever comes up here, except maybe once in a while some other kids. If anybody stumbles on us, they'll think we're just on some kind of nut and berry nudist trip."

"Trip is the right word," said Calla. "Despite everything, I'm still half expecting this stuff

to be nothing but acid."

"And if it is plain old LSD - something you've talked about trying more than once, Calla - this setting should be safe and pleasant enough to give us a good trip. Okay, enough talk. Everybody strip."

Westbrook, Hazel and Pike undressed swiftly enough, while Calla hesitated, three-quarters turned away from her friends.

"Oh, come off it, Calla. I've seen you naked plenty of times in the locker room already, and you've got nothing to be ashamed of."

"I can't help being modest, Hazel."

"Modesty won't cut it where we're going," admonished Pike. "When I was out of it under the stairs, I saw vague shapes of the things we have to fight, and they won't care whether you're naked or not before they try to rip your head off."

"Which poses an interesting question," Westbrook said. "Can our bodies here be hurt by whatever happens to us in Cockaigne?"

"Don't know. But if we ever manage to shut up and do it, we'll learn that too."

Naked, the foursome found comfortable spots in the wild pasture in which to sit. A vagrant breeze riffled the fine down on the girls' arms and tightened the boys' scrotums. Pike held the blotter paper. Once settled, he ripped it into quarters and passed the embled squares out. Regarding each other with fervent determination, the teenagers placed the chalky papers on their tongues, then linked hands.

Within ninety seconds, their souls were loosed.

The sun climbed across the sky, reached its height, then began to fall, while clouds raced or ambled and wind pimpled the insensate flesh of the immobile, softly breathing adolescents. Finally their errant spirits returned, relighting their visages.

"Pike, you were awesome!"

"That canyon!!"

"Those rapids!"

"The way those leopard-deer things ran!"

"What did we call them? I can't quite bring up the name now."

"But there's so much wrongness there to put right!"

Calla held forth her arm. "Feel the spot where the stained-glass thorn went in."

Her friends took turns pressing an area above her wrist.

"So cold, so very cold," Westbrook said.

"All right, all right," Pike admitted. "So we have to be careful. But didn't you feel more or less invincible? Powerful too! What could stand against us in Cockaigne, once we get our

bearings?"

"Nothing - so long as we stick together."

Upon first beholding the mad unnatural sprawl of the Jumbles, the trio felt their souls truly quail, for the first time since their return to Cockaigne.

"Can it be that here once stretched the Chocolate Vale?"

"And what of Lemonade Lake and the Doughnut Isles?"

"I bring to mind the gay flocks of Marzipan Macaws that used to darken the skies."

From a promontory they surveyed the cankerous conglomeration that cordoned Castel Djurga, that distant towered and buttressed manse just visible on its own isolated mesa at the center of the abominable territory. Even the firmament above the Jumbles appeared tainted with smokes and ashes.

A grid of hard-surfaced black streets divided the landscape into harsh lines. Flanking the streets without so much as a blade of grass between them, one tall glass and steel box after another unashamedly revealed their hive-like interiors, lit with actinic lights. The residents of the Jumbles - small simulacra resembling the godlings, dressed in drab uniforms, their faces dull, their voices reedy - rushed into and out of the buildings, clutching rigid cases and small, ear-braced deities to which they ceaselessly prayed. Down the streets, in obedience to colored signals, raced noxious self-powered carriages.

Dormender spat upon the outcropping of marbled bacon rock on which they stood. "This obscenity touches some dim nightmare in the recesses of my brain."

Aniatis said, "Ever unhappy with his surroundings, Theriagin seeks to recreate what we all willingly left behind."

Yodsess exclaimed, "Ah, of course! Despite his stated dream, to possess all Cockaigne forever, he nonetheless quickly reverted to a facsimile of what he had deliberately abdicated."

The three titans hefted each his weapon: Salvor, Insight and Caritas.

"Further speculation avails us naught. Let us wade through these vermin now, and confront our errant brother."

With seven-league strides they descended into the Jumbles. At the sight of the giants, whose heads topped the second story of each building, the deformed and mindless inhabitants of the Jumbles panicked like ants. Above the sounds of their synthetic screams and the crumpling of metal and crashing of glass, the laughter of the three conquerors rang like rolling thunder, as Caritas spat, Salvor cleaved, and Insight hewed.

"I don't understand why we can't divide the doses into four sets, and each keep our own."

Westbrook had obviously been brooding on this topic for some time. Confronting Pike now, the homely-looking boy could not hide the indignation in his voice. Pike ignored the provocative tone, and replied matter-of-factly.

"First, Iatros handed the sheaf of hits directly to me, remember? 'Theriagin,' he said, 'I entrust these to you.'"

Supportive of Pike, Calla chimed in. "True. That's what the Doctor said. Just before he told us he'd be gone for short time."

Pike nodded smugly. "Second, by having a single guardian of the drug, no one can be tempted to make a solo trip to Cockaigne."

"No one but you, that is."

Pike turned on Hazel. "What are you saying? Are you accusing me of visiting Cockaigne alone? Where's your proof?"

"I don't have any proof. Just a suspicion. The last time we were all there, the Land felt different somehow, as if - I don't know! It's so hard to retain impressions and memories from Cockaigne, or even to find the words for them back here on Earth."

"What if I swear to you all by the stones of Castel Djurga that I haven't been cheating? No solo trips. Would that satisfy you?"

Westbrook tentatively said, "I suppose it would have to...."

Calla moved closer to Pike. "I don't know why you two are ganging up on Pike, but I don't like it. We all need to trust each other. Do you want to suspect the comrade guarding your back when a pride of poppyfaces or a school of basikores are attacking? I certainly don't!"

Hazel agreed. "There's no way the Tetrad can succeed in rehabilitating Cockaigne if we don't all work together."

Pike clapped his hands as if gaveling a motion closed. "It's settled, then. I'll hold on to the doses."

"How many do we have again?"

"Fifty four-part blotters. At two trips a week, that's roughly six months worth. Doctor Iatros will certainly return by then."

Calla shivered. "Six months from now is November. I don't plan on being butt-naked outdoors by then. We're going to have to figure out some other jumping-off place."

Hazel said, "I wish we could afford to go more than twice a week. The time differential between Cockaigne and here cuts two ways. One of our excursions lasts a long time in Cockaigne's frame. But between trips a lot of time continues to pass. I hate going back and seeing stuff we worked so hard on wrecked by the starostas. Just look at the mess they made of Bugtown."

"True. But twice a week is a good compromise. Spacing out the trips this way actually allows us to gauge the long-term effects of our actions. Aren't you glad we got to see the

consequences of nearly eliminating the Sewing Needles, before we totally exterminated them?"

Westbrook grimaced. "Major screwup! None of the Turkey Trees got pollinated."

"It's hard to be a god," Pike said.

"Gods," said Hazel, frowning. "Hard to be gods."

They paused, breathing stertorously, to lean upon the gore-slick machicolations and crenellations of Castel Djurga. In this brief lull from carnage, there obtained no time for such niceties as cleaning of nicked steel or bold asseverations of justice. The sole task the three tattered and wounded warriors could focus on was filling their laboring lungs with air enough to battle anew.

Reaching the foot of the bluff upon which loomed Castel Djurga had presented no real challenges. The puny mock-citizens of the Jumbles had offered no substantial resistance, fleeing madly or at the most hurling small harmless pebbles from noisy hand-throwers. At the base of the bluff, Aniatis, Yodsess and Dormender had halted before setting eager foot upon the Adamantine Stairs. Halfway up they had met the first line of Theriagin's inner defenses, a barrage of razor-headed hoopsnakes tumbling down the narrow way. Upon sighting their foes, the snakes had loosened teeth from tail to arrow futilely at the armored bosoms of the invaders. Meeting that assault successfully, the trio hastened forward, reaching the pastille-tiled top of the butte, only to encounter wave after wave of enslaved malignant beings. In a frenzy of slaughter the godlings dispatched spike-tailed, acid-dripping, scalpel-toothed beasts by the bloody scores, amidst a furious storm of shrieking, scratching, and snarling. All the while they wept at seeing Castel Djurga - where many and many happy, peaceful years had been passed with song and laughter and sensual dalliance - so besmirched.

Their goal was the Council Chamber on the highest level, where they intuitively sensed Theriagin had closeted himself.

Now, interrupting their hardfought recess, a last-ditch wave of defenders sought to overwhelm them. More in the nature of domestic servitors than soldiers, these imps and halfings nonetheless brandished implements of potential harm. Tearful yet determined, the godlings perforce slayed them all.

At the wide brass-studded double doors of the Council Chamber, they hammered defiantly. Her flaming hair clotted with alien matter, Yodsess shouted, "Theriagin, your long-delayed bane arrives! Open for your doom!"

The doors swung soundlessly apart under no man's hand, and the three avengers entered.

A stalwart figure, brawny of torso and wry of lips, Theriagin confronted them from the far wall of the tapestried, raftered room. They halted, and Aniatis said, "Advance, traitor."

"Alas, I cannot greet you properly, old friends. My situation is rather, ah, inflexible."

Moving cautiously closer, all quickly realized what Theriagin meant.

Their comrade of yore formed a living bas-relief, integral with the wall of Castel Djurga. Soul melded to stone, only the frontward third of his body, including his entire arms but not his legs, retained an independent existence from the marmoreal stratum.

"Only thus," said Theriagin, "and at such price, did I insure my solid anchoring in this realm throughout all these lonely centuries."

Dormender cursed. "And so you chose perpetual tainted exile over any sane return! Now you can only die!"

Heeding Dormender's decisively voiced declaration even before it ceased ringing in the air, Yodsess broke from the others and, ululating wildly, with axe upraised, plunged toward the tethered villain.

Theriagin's right hand, concealed in shadow till this fatal moment, swung up, bearing Success, the flail. Yodsess either failed to see the threat or cared not for her own safety.

The barbed chains of the flail wrapped around the woman's neck, and Theriagin yanked.

The sound of Yodsess's death-impelled axe cleaving the mortal breastbone of the granite-backed godling coincided with the sharp crack of her own snapping spine.

Amidst the debris of a small New Year's Eve party, the four teenagers, alone together, unsupervised by adults, huddled mournfully after all their cheerful peers had departed.

"What are we going to do now?" Hazel moaned. "He's overdue by two months."

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm really hurting," said Westbrook. "Without Cockaigne, the rest of my life seems like a joke."

Calla's hand sought Pike's. "That's just how I feel too. What good is the future, if we can never return to the Land? How can we grow up without Cockaigne? The whole experience is already fading, like some kind of wonderful, impossible dream."

Pike patted Calla's hand, then released it. "Have faith. Doctor Iatros will come back sooner or later."

"But till then - how do we go on?"

No one had an answer. And after a short silent time of being alone with their thoughts, Westbrook strode off with Hazel into the empty new year.

Calla fell into Pike's arms. He cradled her with a certain remoteness. "If only the four of us had just one more dose apiece," she murmured.

"I have one more dose. For myself."

Calla shot out of his tepid embrace. "What!"

"You heard me. I kept a dose aside. Several sheets, actually. But they've all been used up except for one last hit. I'm going into Cockaigne tonight, Calla - and I'm not coming

out."

"But, but - that's impossible!"

"No, it's not. On my earlier solo trips, I learned how to get around the inherent flaw of Iatros's creation. There's a price to pay, but it will all be worth it. The sacrifice is a non-issue."

"Caitiff bastard!" Eyes leaking behind her glasses, Calla balled her fist and raised it as if to strike Pike. He awaited her assault patiently, until, quivering, she finally dropped her unclenched hand and threw herself on him.

"Pike, don't go! Wait with us, please. Iatros will return soon, I know it. Pike, if you stay, I - I'll sleep with you!"

Delving beneath her shirt, Pike said, "Oh, really?"

Calla made no reply, but lowered her eyes and began to unbutton her blouse.

When they had finished having sex, after Calla had fallen asleep in his arms, Pike, still naked as he must be for transit, disengaged himself without waking her, removed his wallet from his pants pocket, took out a tab of blotter paper, and slipped it beneath his tongue.

The frantically beeping equipment revealed that all of Pike's vital signs had flatlined, his twenty-year coma ended. Unbreathing also, Westbrook, spine shattered, lay contorted like a broken doll upon the linoleum floor.

Donning their clothes quickly yet without any signs of agitation, Hazel and Calla failed even to flinch when the banging started on the jammed door of Pike's room. What terror could such mundane assaults hold?

After shrugging into her coat and slipping on her shoes, Hazel bent to kiss tenderly Westbrook's cooling brow. "Always did fiery Yodsess exhibit more bravery than caution."

"The Land will enshrine her name forever."

As an ethereal gleam faded from their eyes, the women hugged each other, then moved toward the door.

"If he found Westbrook after so long - " began Calla.

"Then, Dormender, plainly Iatros can find us," finished Hazel.

"And when he does, Aniatis?"

"What else? Would you have all this death among the Tetrad be for naught? We return. We return to Cockaigne."