Chapter 7

*Funerals*

The days on which the funeral rites for the nobility were held were set aside as national holidays, disguised for the benefit of the people under various religious designations. No work was done, no one engaged in business or politics. Social intercourse was reduced to the barest minimum, as the palaces prepared themselves for what one only describe as orgies of collective mourning. Every account that has come down to us concurs in the opinion that the nobility grieved far less for the departed than they did for themselves.

Even death can be treated with exaggerated solemnity. In fact there was quite a lot of graveyard humor, not permitted in polite society, and roughly on a par with prurient obscenity in all cultures. On the other hand such topics as death , dying and the dead when taken seriously, were steeped in an aura laden with morbidity and superstition.

The garments worn by the deceased would never again be touched by mortal beings. They were removed at a distance by long rods holding forks and mechanical hands at their far end, manipulated by priests whose faces were streaked with red paint to ward off evil spirits. All items of clothing and bedding were carted to a barren field where they were burned and their ashes deposited in rivers to be washed away.

The corpse, naked as it had come into the world, was wrapped in a broad linen sheet painted over with magical incantations. Its skull was broken by axes until disfigured beyond recognition, for it was believed that the thoughts entertained at the moment of death could still be read in the face, causing injury to those who looked upon it. So as to extinguish the contaminated breath of devils, a priest using a long-nosed bellows forced air through its clammy lips . Finally all its bones were broken with clubs to prevent the ghost of the deceased from walking freely about the earth and causing injury to his enemies.

After the death chamber was painted a solid black all of its doors were sealed. So that it would not know where it was being taken, the ritual specified that the corpse be carried out feet first. In each season of the year two weeks were set aside for collective funerals, burials and extended periods of mourning. However friendless the deceased had been when living, neither song nor smile broke the oppressive silence within the palace walls all through these periods. Widows and female relations, draped in black shrouds, walked about with heavy tred, shrieking and sobbing like willow branches soughing in the icy winds. Throughout the interminable nights, the choruses that rose from the palace walls resounded like the wailings of a captive nation.

These were busy times for the priesthood, who lost no opportunity to exploit the hypochondria endemic in the ruling caste so as to fill their bottomless pockets with plunder. Bustling about, they purified locales which the deceased were known to have frequented, burning and smashing objects known to have been contaminated by their touch. It was a time of endless praying, sacrificing, sermonizing and solemn procession.

Great numbers of those who had survived their first century were to be seen wandering about, lost and morose, sitting idle on benches , leaning against trees, their vacant faces gawking idiotically into empty space, or mumbling saccaride canticles from the Book of Common Prayer. The wake of the immediate family over the remains of the *han-anak* , ( literally, 'traveler to unknown realms') , lasted the full two weeks. They maintained vigils and fasted for days on end: anguish was their meat and tears their drink. Sexual abstinence was rigorously enforced at these times, while the pleasure gardens remained closed. One may perhaps attribute part of this to a latent feeling of disgust at the unsavory mingling of mourning with the degraded activities that went on in them, but the main reason seems to have been that no commoner could be allowed anywhere on the palace grounds during the periods of mourning.

It must appear indeed appear strange that although life itself seemed to have little meaning to these valetudinarian regents, yet death commanded their entire attention.

All aristocratic women between the ages of 16 to 22 were impressed into service as bridesmaids to the deceased, for the priests taught that the deceased would be married to a goddess or a god upon arrival Vanarosa, pictured as a paradise of perpetual sensuality. While the adolescent girls took turns as professional mourners by the sides of the coffins, ancient spinsters, underscoring death's barrenness, crouched at its head and foot .

For several days before the burials one saw bands parading about the palace grounds blaring oppressive elegiac music. The normal makeup of these groups was horns, woodwinds and percussion, perhaps kettledrums, tambourines, bells and so on, and a consort of singers. The texts of their sacred offerings reiterated the triumph of death and the guarantee of an afterlife in paradise. Music continued uninterrupted for five days within the cemeteries and the confines of the crypts. This music was so awe-inspiring and beautiful, that one our most distinguished modern historians has commented that, had the aristocracy of Nin accomplished nothing else, they should be commended for the beautiful music they commissioned for their own funerals.

Corpses awaiting burial were put on a waiting list. So great was the backlog, that it was not unusual for 3 months to pass before the remains of the deceased were placed in their final repository. During this interval the *han-anak*  lay, embalmed with consummate skill, in a kind of warehouse for bodies. Its eyes were sealed tight over with red wax. Between its teeth a small loaf of stale bread was crammed. Hopefully this would assuage its’ desire for the food of the living. Precious gems adorned all ten fingers of its fingers. A steady stream of friends, relatives and visitors in black shrouds , veils and robes, came to sit by these coffins for periods of time lasting from an hour to entire days.

Many of the visitors had little biological kinship with the deceased. They came to persuade his spirit to intercede for them in Vanarosa, or at the very least to promise not to work spitefully upon the living. Into the opened box they tossed jewels, art objects, weavings and tapestries, weapons, medallions, even clothing, money and food for the journey into the next world. There were some who, it would appear, believed that no amount of treasure was sufficient to abate the vengefulness of the ghost of the departed.

The cemeteries of the rulers were off the palace grounds, in thinly populated areas some distance from the cities and towns. They were used for about 50 years; then for the next 50 years they were off limits to the populace and closely guarded. The lands were then thoroughly ploughed over to remove all indications of their previous purpose: headstones, tombs, crypts, even coffins were demolished. The slaves and servants who had administered at the bedside of the *han-anak*  in his final illness were all executed. The official version of his disappearance from public view was issued about a year or so after death. This was in the form of a proclamation stating that he'd traveled to a distant province, another country, or across the ocean. It was to be another thousand years before the voyages of exploration would open up the vast territories across the seas, so that sending him there was a safe bet. Merchants do travel around quite a bit, however. On rare occasions one of them might arrive at a distant city and make inquiries at the palace about a certain lord reputed to have taken up residence there. The merchant would be put off with some story. If this didn't satisfy him the chances were that he would never be heard from again. Society's problems had simple solutions in those days.

It is safe to assume that most of the populace weren't about to concern themselves over whether their overlords were living, or traveling, or on another continent , or another cosmos, or whatever story they were told. It was the nobility who deluded themselves with the vainglorious belief that their individual presence or absence was a matter of great importance to their helpless subjects.

An oppressive climate of despair, sanctimony, lurking guilt and pious hypocrisy hovered over the palaces in the funeral season. Repulsive as it may have been, it was but a thin camoflage over a condition of emotional misery as universal as it was profound. One cannot hold back a certain feeling of compassion for these wretched beings, although they themselves had little enough to bestow on others. The aged and infirm retreated to their darkened apartments for long periods. Much of the time was used up in writing diaries and journals. These run to thousands of pages and are so repetitive, so overladen with egotism and self-pity, that even professional historians cannot read them without a considerable effort. One might find them gazing in mirrors for hours on end, poking and squeezing the wrinkles emerging in their pasty foul-smelling skin, weeping bitter tears at the sight of each new crow's foot, or crease on their brows, or potentially cancerous facial wart.

Although most of the items associated with the *han-anak*  were reputed to bring bad luck, a few were considered beneficial. When incantations were chanted, and powders sprinkled on the ground to disperse spirits of harm, it was considered beneficial to stand for a moment or so in places which they deceased had been known to frequent: some of his vital energy might still be lingering there. Mourners were encouraged to fill the coffin with presents: the deceased might then be inclined to intercede for them in heaven . It was also a good idea , within reason, to imitate his manner of speech: this, too, increased one's vitality. And it was always good form to sacrifice sacred animals on the anniversary of the death of a prominent individual.

*The status of widows*

A widow who was not well connected had to shave her head and dress in mourning for the rest of her days. Over the passage of centuries widows came to be shunned as embodiments of evil. Sinister powers were attributed to them; even physical contact was deemed maleficent. Widowers suffered from none of these prejudices. In particular, they were allowed, after a decent interval, to remarry. In the long run chaste spinsters actually had a much better chance at happiness, which is why a relentless propaganda campaign had to be mounted at all times to get women to consent to marriage. However a widow's prospects were so bleak that it is no wonder than so many of them chose to follow their husbands into the next world.

The rationale for these attitudes can stand as a paradigm of the logic of superstition. Through having had sexual intercourse with her husband, his widow was believe to retain remnants of his living seed. In them slumbered a virulent life-force, capable of transmitting his vengeance beyond the grave. On the other hand, the widower's body bore no traces of his wife's vital fluids.

Owing to the contempt heaped upon them, widows lacking protection could turn into the very kinds of people they were accused of being: malevolent hags, vindictive and scheming, their souls bloated with the venom of hatred. Some of these aged creatures grew into real monsters. They practiced witchcraft of various sorts, seeking to induce blindness, lameness, miscarriages , death itself . They were notorious for seeking out young men and, through drugs or other means, sterilizing them . The assistance of the widow-witches in all matters connected with palace intrigue, from the manufacture and administration of poisons to the execution of vindictive schemes, was essential.

Sometimes they went mad, doing evil for its own sake, torturing slaves in their bedchambers or starting fires about the palace. At night their deranged laughter, punctuated with screams, could be heard echoing through the corridors. In the periods set aside for mourning, the cries and jeers of these women savagely echoed the wails of the newly widowed, who asked themselves if the same terrible fate were not soon to be prepared for them.

From the earliest days a widow had always been granted the option of saving herself from the life of a pariah by following her husband into the grave. For this purpose the priests had developed drugs to make death painless. If the suicide took place before the funeral rites, she would be buried in the same grave as her husband with all of the pomp and splendor befitting a high-born lady.

The bodies of widows who killed themselves after their husband's funeral were thrown on the dungheaps in barren fields, serving as carrion for vultures and dogs ; in society's eyes they had already become witches. Their body hair was shorn away and burned. Because of its close connection to the brain, hair was supposed to contain traces of her malevolent thoughts .

The widow-witches continued to benefit from the protections of the aristocratic code: they could not be forced to take their lives against their will, and it was a crime to injure or to kill them. Yet it sometimes happen on funeral days where emotions ran high that , caught up in a surge of collective madness, groups of noblemen did lose control and rioted through the widows' chambers, beating them, murdering them and burning their property. In 1168 R.I. the entire north wing of the palace at Bellek was destroyed by a fire started during one of these riots.

Pompous and majestic was the funeral of a lord of the realm. Starting from a date deemed auspicious on the basis of an elaborate astrology, the ceremonies lasted 3 days. From the early dawn of the first day to the late afternoon of the third those who were in good health fasted, while those too sick to participate lay in bed, soaking their pillows with the tears of contrition.

On the first day, at the break of dawn, the solemnities were officially opened by a loud blast from the elephant's tusk trumpet. This instrument, which has long been obsolete, is known to have promulgated a sound so rich in terrifying overtones of woe that those who heard it shook physically as from the shock of a whip. To martial and strident music a trio of priests dressed in black robes with golden belts of braided cord, holding aloft flagstaffs supporting banners of purple, black and gold, solemnly marched five times about the inner palace walls. The priests on the sides sang the liturgy, while , from satin ribbons held in his right hand, the one in the middle swung a key, a book and a censer: the key symbolizing the mysteries of life and death, the book for the esoteric learning of the priesthood. The incense smoking from the censer was for the purpose of frightening away malign spirits. Sets of priests repeated this ritual every 3 hours.

The coffins lay in stacks, stored up like piles of wood in special shelters constructed for them, awaiting eventual transport to the outlying cemeteries. They were kept open in order that who came to pay their final respects could drop written notes, presents or money into them. The writings consisted of short homilies, poems wishing happiness to the departed when he should reach the vales of heaven. Here an unrelieved din of weeping and lament was ever present . The tears of greybeards rocking in their wheelchairs fell copiously on the shattered faces of the indifferent corpse. Crones tore their hair and rent their garments. They beat the ground with their bare fists as they shrieked to heaven, whining for a merciful end to their own existence when their time should come.

The afternoon and evening of the first day were periods for quiet meditation and rest, Many congregated in the temples to pray for the salvation of their antique souls. Torches burning with every color of the rainbow illuminated their dim interiors . Their precincts rang around the clock with singing, weeping and prayers. A water organ piped music both soft and sweet, while the incense laden air was heavy with the muffled sounds of coughing and sobbing. In exchange for exorbitant fees the priests chanted, their voices rich, mellow and warm with tenderness, psalms and hymns, long meditations on the vanity of life, the certainty of death, and the unending bliss of the afterlife. Routinely, at times fixed by custom, the clergy performed elaborate ceremonies that instilled awe, and, presumably carried magical significance.

The burials took up most of the morning, sometimes the afternoon as well , of the third day. As early as 2 or 3 AM a steady train of horses, litters and coaches began the journey from the palaces to the burial grounds, Typically the travel time was 5 hours. To the blaring of trumpets and the low droning of choirs, the caskets were lifted up on long poles and carried by pall bearers about the cemetery grounds. Behind them followed the lines of mourners and priests. After about an hour a halt was called to the procession to allow for the ceremony of the "Questioning of the Dead".

First the opened caskets were placed on the ground and arranged in a circle. A high ranking priest walked into the center and proceeded to ask questions to each corpse, moving from one to the next. Each question was separated from the others by a brief period of silence, time enough, presumably, for the *han-anak* to give his reply . It is highly unlikely that the han-anaks were in a position to say much of anything. However on occasion a priest trained in ventriloquism might extemporize for the benefit of the relatives. The questions were four in number:

*" Sire: Tell us what it is to die..."* (Silence)

*" Sire: Where are you now?..."*  (Silence)

*"Sire: Have you left anything undone?..."*  ( Silence)

*"Sire: Will you injure the living ?..."*  ( Silence)

After the questioning the caskets were once again lifted up on poles and carried another three times about the grounds, trailed by numerous priests splendidly arrayed and the throngs of the bereaved. Scrambling at the far end were a crowd of widows, mingling the piercing cries of grief with the laughter of madness. People swooned , others collapsed with fits. Medical attendants were always on hand to transport them back to their apartments or to the hospitals and clinics.

Fulfilling the many requirements of ritual and ceremony could take three hours. Finally arrived at the burial sites, the coffins were deposited next to the opened graves, whereupon the high priest intoned a final question:

" Sire: Has your every wish been satisfied?"

Taking this as their cue, all those who still had presents to give to the *han-anak* came forward and handed them over, with the appropriate fees, to the priests. Following the deposition of presents the tape binding the eyes of the dead was removed, so that he should not be deprived of the sight of Vanarosa , and his tongue cut out to keep him from spreading malicious stories about those still living. Bonfires were lit, papers covered with hymns and incantations thrown into them, and fireworks set off.

Next widows who had chosen to go on living came forward, kneeled beside the opened graves, and mumbled certain traditional formulae . While they did so, priests walked among them and threw 3 clots of earth mixed with animal urine in each of their faces. Then they were dismissed.

One could imagine that, had the corpses been able to express themselves they would have shown considerable irritation at the length of time it was taking to get on with it. However the end was in sight : amidst an insane ruckus of shrieking and sobbing, of distempered singing by throngs of obsessed and sickly hypochondriacs, to the wailings of a hundred vestal virgins and the strenuous beating of high-pitched drums, the bodies of the noble *han-anaks* were lowered into the ground. A gallon of holy water was poured into each grave, the earth shoveled in and beaten down. Then all proceeded homewards to gorge themselves at the wake.

In recent years teams of archaeologists have dug up these grave sites. Despite the many accounts of princely fortunes interred alongside with the princely dead, it seems that they rarely turn up anything more valuable than odd trinkets or cheap jewelry. One would like to know what happened to these treasures.

Commoners weren’t allowed near the burial grounds for at least a century. There are no accounts of any of them ever being punished for grave robbery. The priests may have stolen some of the lost wealth. Yet the most likely hypothesis is that it was the nobility itself who , perennially pinched for cash, and whose love for their dead relations was hypocritical at best, who contracted with certain of the priests to plunder the graves.

The subsequent wakes, which could last through the night, might be described as orgiastic rituals of gluttony, wherein the bereaved tried to anaesthetize their personal misery in forced displays of conviviality.

Religious precept dictated chastity before the burials. Perhaps this is why now, throughout the night, the palace corridors echoed with the hideous rictuses of an almost self-righteous debauchery. Could it be that these valetudinarians now descended into a frenzy of self-perpetuation because they were shocked by the bitter recognition of their own mortality? Presiding over these grim bacchanales were drunkenness, insolence and violence. Later that night the young lords would mount their steeds and ride into the cities to riot, rape, vandalize and pillage. On the nights following a funeral many a respectable citizen ended up crippled with bruises and injuries, his store wrecked, his wife and daughter ravished, his son drowned in the river. There were laws against these things, but they were rarely enforced. More often than not the punishment was meted out to the person bringing the suit.

The fourth and final day of the funeral ceremonies was given over to the games. There were few athletes among the nobility, so contestants were drawn from the criminals, slaves, and prisoners of war. All classes of the society crowded into large sports arenas to watch teams from foreign lands compete with the refuse of Nin. On at least one occasion this served as the provocation for war. The neighboring nation of Eäthør took umbrage at the refusal of Nin's aristocracy to compete against the cream of their knighthood in tournaments and jousts.

In the beginning these games were innocent enough, involving nothing more than races, ball games, tests of skill in archery and horseback riding. The tone of brutality increased over the centuries. By the 10th century they'd become gory spectacles. One legion of the army fought another to the death. Armed gladiators squared off and savage executions carried out before roaring, raving crowds. To provide yet greater stimulation for their jaded and cowardly imaginations, wild animals transported from distant jungles tore helpless captives to bits.

It is doubtful that the nobility really enjoyed witnessing these atrocities. The populace, unfortunately, found in them a vicarious release for their own unending misery. These spectacles were mounted primarily because they were felt to be necessary. Somehow the sacrifice of dozens of beings from the common trash was deemed just compensation for the death of a single one of themselves. Judging from the accounts of these cruel entertainments, there appears to have been no upper limit to the piling up of tortures on these pitiful wretches, merely in order to distract the mourners from the bitter knowledge that they, too, would someday have to die.