

Les Chevaliers du Rêve



The gardens stretched to infinity. The closest hedges were real, but further in the trees became fantastic sculptures and the air seemed to shimmer with perfume from the perfect rows of burgundy roses that stretched to the horizon. In an aviary a grandly iridescent reptile from some tropical dream stretched its long-necked heads, thrilling a group of ladies-in-waiting while the Duchess of Vendôme read her book. A few guards watched the scene from the palace steps, their inhuman steel eyes fixed firmly on me. I decided to do as cardinal Mazarin and risk all – did I not have the queen’s eyes on me through the peacocks?

Setting



Baroque baroque: a corrupt and surreal Europe in 1670, where the noble courts and church have become dominated by Cambions – half dreams, half humans. Reality at the courts is warped and nearly anything goes. Passions are what drives most courts, not reason or duty.

The Resistance: an uneasy alliance between puritan protestants and the budding Enlightenment. Newton and Locke as resistance leaders – bickering, learned yet distrustful of books, filled with a vision of a universe where reality is objective and ordered, not some chaos of dreams and sin. In the dream the poet is king, in the awake world the philosopher rules – but few recognize his dominion.

To everyday people life is filled with toil, fear and simple joys. They know little of the dreaming world. They understand the power and danger of dreams, carefully put protective herbs under their beds to sleep safely, and know that there are such wonders as Cambions and dreams stalking the world. But all that is remote from the real world that dominates their concerns: people spending time thinking about dreaming are useless wastrels

Background



I am accustomed to sleep and in my dreams to imagine the same things that lunatics imagine when awake.

Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy"

During the late middle ages a number of Cambions became successful soldiers. Some blame the Knights Templar for accepting them; others think they originated in forbidden congress between Turks and the Watchers of Arabic folklore. By 1500 they were part of the wars in Italy, becoming condottiere rulers of city-states. Through intermarriage, conquest and elevation – and some say the deliberate cuckolding of other families – they became an integral part of the European nobility. Invincible on the battlefield, shrewd diplomats, passionate lovers and fearsome princes, the Cambions soon came to dominate everything.

At first the Catholic church spoke out against them and “dream magic”, but gold from the Borgias and Medicis, the sack of Rome and the eventual rise of Cambion prelates here and there silenced it. While many people still think a Cambion lacks soul, the Church has kept quiet on the issue. These days even mentioning it is dangerously close to lèse majesté.

At the Cambion courts reality and dream freely merge. Using their powers miraculous and terrible things can be achieved. Phantasms and wonders can be brought out from the dreamworlds, people can live within the splendor of imagination as easy as in any palace, but there are also spies and assassins prowling the dreams of citizens, and horrific nightmares rampaging across the battlefields. To fuel their power the cambions and dreams seek human flesh, and it is not just condemned criminals who vanish from their cells at night.

Cambions



I am that spawn of witch and demon
By time's mad prophets long foretold:
The unnamed fear of king and freeman,
I roam the lawless outland wold,
Couching amid the weeds and mould
With dire Alecto for my leman.

I am that hidden piper, playing
The Pan-like strains of malefice
That lure the lonely traveller, straying
Upon the crumbling precipice:
To filmed morass or blind abyss
His feet must follow, never staying.

I am that swart, unseen pursuer
Whose lust begets a changeling breed:
All women know me for their wooer:
Mine is the whisper the maidens heed
At twilight; mine the spells that lead
The matron to the nighted moor.

I am that messenger whose call

Convenes dark mage and banished lord
And branded witch and whip-flayed thrall,
To plot, amid the madness poured
On the black Sabbat's frothing horde,
The bale of realms, the planet's fall.
Cambion, by Clark Ashton Smith

Cambions are half-dream, half-human. They normally look like ordinary humans, although usually more beautiful, healthy or strong than normal. In general they have great appetite for the sensual side of life, shrewd minds and a desire to influence others. Their dream nature makes them light: they weigh only half of a human of the same size and do not cast shadows unless they feed on human flesh. Purebloods never sleep: they may need rest, but they cannot sleep. To dream they instead simply enter the dreamworld.

The first generation purebloods are the offspring between a human and a dream, often an incubus or succubus. Purebloods fathered of an incubus will be born by a human mother and start their life in the real world. At first they have no pulse and do not breathe, but as they grow up they become indistinguishable from humans. In the past they were often killed as demon offspring or changelings, but these days they are regarded as having a form of noble birth (at least among the uneducated). Succubi-born will grow up in the dreamworlds instead, becoming far more strange.

Offspring between Cambions tend to be more balanced than their parents. If more human blood is present the result is a human with just some dream in them. Halfblood humans are solid and do sleep, but when they do they always dream. Some families have dreamblood running back generations, occasionally cropping up in unexpected ways. Offspring between Cambions and dreams tend towards the fantastic: many of the stranger companions and dream courtiers belong to this category. They have a hard time manifesting in the fully awake world, but are potent weavers of dreams.

Even hinting at the inhuman relations of a noble Cambion is to invite a duel or execution. It is something everybody knows, but nobody mentions.