

Migration and Fugue

Pétur Knútsson

print 28 September 2024

Book 1

The Road to Kirfa

πολλαχῶς δὲ λέγεται

Manifoldly it is expressed. Aristotle.

The monk Qno gently shifted his weight onto the other buttock. The tiny parallax was enough to clear Brother Sne's halo of hair and the Abbot's far and small white face came into view. Too far away for Qno to see the mouthing, or for his clogged ears to catch the consonants. He would ask brother Cro if it was anything important. The suspicion was growing in his mind that the Abbot was giving the same address that he gave this time last year. Certain flourishes chimed in his ear, evoking the rains of the previous autumn, the red mud between his toes. The halo tilted, eclipsing the Abbot's face again. The voice droned on.

Qno's thoughts went to the Goddess Reagh, love and peace.

At last the Chant began, and the monks began rocking to its rhythm. The pain in Qno's shoulder and in his stomach was eased by the movement, and the beauty of the verses calmed his mind:

Man is the Eye and Mouth of the World.
 Watch, O World, through us, thy becoming.
 Sing, O World, through us, thy song.

But this autumn the sky was still dry, and there was red dust between his toes as he returned to his cell. The path weaved between rocks and trees to the small cluster of stone cells that spread out like so many beehives at the foot of the Hill of the Masters, and Qno came slowly and painfully round the last bend in time to see the brothers' doors shutting one by one. Why was he always last? It was the silence and the light in the empty chapel, the motes of red dust in the sunlight, that kept him sitting alone after the brothers had left. And the great tapestry that hung over the entrance to the inner sanctuary of the Goddess, Reagh's white ring on its white background.

Peace and light.

He opened the low door of Cro's cell and put his head in: Was it anything I should know?

If the legions come this way, we will break down the Bridge, said Cro.

He's said that before, said Qno.

Has he?

Remember the cavalry, said Qno.

Ah yes. But there never was any cavalry.

And are there any legions? said Qno.

We won't know while they come no closer, said Cro.



But this time the brothers were in general agreement that there was more to the new rumours than the old. The normal trickle of refugees was increasing, and larger parties were appearing at the foot of the Bridge; they spoke of burning crops and farms, and armies on the march. The refugees stopped a day or two for food, water and rest in the camp behind the Hill of the Masters, and then continued east. They were all heading for the Holy City.

All except for Mereg and her brothers: they stayed.



It happened this way. Qno had gone over the Bridge, for the kitchen wanted more water, and the Water Women were not due until the next morning. What did I tell you, he had said. We need a well. I have put in my proposal: a well at the foot of the hill under the First Stone. But nobody listens.

He took the handcart over the Bridge, with four large buckets.

The Bridge was a narrow hump-backed stone span over the great chasm that split the Rock of the Abbey from Tarrant Town and the rest of the Hald. It arched from the Gate of the Abbey to the road that ran around the foot of the walls of the town. Far, far below ran the river in its narrow channel at the bottom of the gorge on its way from the Mountains out on to the Great Plain. The faint roar of the torrent rose up from the depths; but the beetling walls of the chasm hid the far foaming waters from sight.

As far as the monks were concerned, the rest of the Hald was the Town of the Rock, locally known as Tarrant. Long ago it had been a thriving town with lords and ladies and merchants and comptrollers. There had at one time been a Provincial Prefect and a garrison. The great walls and many of the old buildings remained, and so did the Abbey. But the Province had reverted to its own devices, and the town was now hardly more than a village, albeit the largest in the Hald.

Qno was of course careful not to put his foot on the road the other side of the Bridge. No monk who did that would be allowed to return. The monks roamed freely all over the Rock, up to the top of the Hill of the Masters and into the meadows beyond; but they never took the road that led east out of the meadows, out through the Backward Gate and into the Eastern Wilderness; and they never crossed the Bridge over to the town in the west. Or if they did (and there were stories of such things) they lost their Monkhood, and were never allowed back.

So Qno stopped at the foot of the Bridge and called up the ancient Wall that surrounded the town: Water!

There was no reply. No refugees had come for a day or two, and there was no one on the road. He waited. And as he waited, a cart pulled by a donkey appeared around the bend of the wall. A large man walked by the

donkey with a whip in his hand. Qno did not like whips, and he did not like men who wielded them.

In the cart sat three children. They came towards the Bridge, and stopped, because the Bridge was too narrow to allow the wagon to pass Qno's water cart.

The man said: How long are you going to stand there, monk?

I am waiting for the Water Ladies, my friend. They will be here presently. And he shouted again: Water!

How would it be, said the man, if you moved your cart out of the way so that me and the wagon can go over the Bridge?

Unfortunately, said Qno, I am a monk, as you rightly mentioned, and I must stay on the Bridge. I may not put my feet on the road.

The man looked at him, fingering his whip. Then he said: You sit up in the cart, and I'll push you out onto the road, and you won't have to put your feet on it.

It doesn't work like that, said Qno. You might as well tell me to put on my sandals so as not to touch the road. If the cart carries me onto the road, I shall be on the road.

The man fingered his whip.

Then move your godforsaken cart back to the gate, monk, and let me pass.

Qno found a tiny anger stirring in his bowels. He tried to smile. He looked at the children in the cart. The largest, a small girl in a threadbare smock, smiled at him. The smile said many things to Qno. One of the things it said was: Help.

Perhaps your little daughter up there would run up the road for me and let the Water Ladies know I'm waiting? he said.

The girl stays put, said the man.

There was a malignant silence.

I'll try once more, said Qno. Water!

A face looked out over the wall, seven fathoms above them. Were you calling, Qno? said the face.

The kitchen needs water, said Qno.

I'll be down, said the face.

Qno and the man looked stonily at each other.

A Water Woman came slowly round the bend of the road, a heavy goatskin of water on her back. Qno helped her to lift the goatskin and pour into the buckets. It filled three of them.

The man watched. The children watched, too. Qno saw that they were thirsty.

Leave the last bucket here, said the woman. I'll bring it over later. The cart is heavy enough for you with three buckets, old Qno.

I'm not as old as you think, mumbled Qno. He longed to hug the woman. She patted his arm. I know, I know, she said.

There was still a dribble of water in the goatskin. She lifted it up for the children, and they drank from the spigot. The man scowled at them.

The three big buckets were indeed heavy. Qno puffed hard as he manoeuvred the cart over the hump of the Bridge. The man stood and watched.

It was easier down the other side to the gate of the Abbey. The man, the donkey and the cart started up over the bridge. Two assistant cooks were coming up from the kitchens. You took your time, they said to Qno.

We have guests, said Qno.

The man with the whip led the donkey and cart down from the hump of the bridge towards the Gate. Qno took his cart through the archway and moved it out of the way. As the donkey and cart lurched past the man said: When is food ready?

In an hour, said one of the assistant cooks.

The girl's eyes were still on Qno.

There's room in the camp? said the man.

The cook nodded. Empty at the moment, he said. The man, the donkey and the children in the cart plodded on down the road towards the Hill of the Masters.

I've seen that man before, said the cook to Qno. He knows his way about the Abbey. He's no refugee.



Qno had no stomach for food that evening. Instead of following the brothers into the Refectory he took the road that wound round the Hill of the Masters, down to the refugee camp, a row of small huts in the meadows that the monks had erected to shelter the refugees on their way to the Holy City. The donkey was tethered outside one of the huts, still yoked to the cart.

Qno knocked at the door. He heard a sudden movement inside, but no one answered.

Is anyone at home? he said.

Again there was no answer.

The cord that tethered the donkey was wrapped around the latch of the door, preventing it being opened from the inside. Qno unwound the cord and opened the door.

The three children were sitting close together on the edge of the bed.

Where's your father? asked Qno.

He's quite dead, said one of the boys. It looked to Qno as if they were twins.

Where is the man who brought you here? asked Qno.

The girl was a head taller than the boys. He's gone to eat, she said.

Qno made up his mind. Come with me, he said.

Qno turned the donkey loose and they watched it amble off into the meadow, put its head down and begin tearing up the grass. Then Qno took the boys' hands, one on each side, and led them up the road back towards the Abbey. The girl took the hand of one of the boys. They walked in silence.

Are we going to have something to eat? asked one of the boys.

Of course, said Qno.

And drink?

As much as you want, said Qno.

The children picked up speed.

Qno took the path through the trees to the brothers' cells. He stopped at Cro's door, pushed it open and peered in. Cro looked up from his prayers. He had missed the evening meal, like Qno, and for similar reasons.

These children are in danger, said Qno. I'm going to hide them in my cell. Can you fetch food and drink for them?

Cro came out and looked at the children. You are an old fool, Qno, he said. You learnt nothing from last time. And he set off up the path to the kitchens.

The door of Qno's cell was ajar, and he pushed the children in through the low, narrow opening, then bowed his head and followed them. The boys climbed immediately up onto the bed.

He sat on the bed and the girl sat beside him. He took her hand in his. What is your name, little sister? he said.

Mereg Merereg, she said.

Mereg, daughter of Merereg?

She nodded.

And how old are you?

My brothers are six, she said. I am older.

Do you know how old you are?

I'm much older than they are, she said proudly.

And what are your brother's names?

We call them Sextus Merereg and Septimus Merereg, she said.

Six and Seven means you have four other brothers and sisters, said Qno. Where are they?

Mereg said nothing. She had an angular face, an expressive, pouting mouth and a pointed nose below dark searching eyes. But Qno did not see her face. Instead the small, flat, peering face of the foundling swam in his mind's eye, looking at him in hope and hopeless trust.

Qno wondered what to say next.

Are your brothers twins? he asked.

No. Sextus was born in the spring. Septimus was born in the summer.

And where are your parents?

Our father was Rufor the Red God, said Merereg.

And Merereg your mother?

The girl did not reply.

Are we going to have some food? asked one of the boys in a muffled voice. They had crawled in under the skins on Qno's bed.

At last Cro returned with soup and bread and rush-water and three apples. The children sat around Qno's table and ate and drank mightily. Qno followed Cro outside.

Did you see the man? he asked.

He was eating, said Cro.

Did he see you?

No.

He is taking the children to Kirfa to sell them, said Qno.

Of course, said Cro.

Later that night seven monks led the struggling, shouting man with his donkey and cart back over the Bridge. Where are my children? he roared. You have stolen my children! At the foot of the Bridge they pushed him and his cart and donkey out into the road, and threw his whip after him. He turned suddenly and ran at one of the monks. They fell together pummelling each other in the dust, and both rolled off the Bridge into the road. The monk tore himself free and stood on the road, staring at the others with horror in his eyes. Then with a roar of rage and despair he swung his fist back-hand into the man's face. The man fell on the road, his face bleeding. The monks stood on the last stones of the Bridge and reached out their hands and hauled their brother back onto the Bridge. Come, they said. It never happened.

But the story went round, and finally came to the Abbot.

He was pulled back, said the Abbot. That too was a sin, but in the opposite direction. Two negatives cancel each other out.

It was good mathematics, and not to be gainsaid.

That was how Mereg and her brothers moved into an empty bee-hive cell where the monks lived and prayed. And Qno was rarely seen again walking alone in the Abbey grounds. He usually had a child holding his hand, and often three.



I can't say your name, said Mereg. Hic-no.

Qno, said Qno.

Hic-no.

That's also what the Water Ladies call me, said Qno.

You can't say my name, said Mereg.

Mereg?

No, Mereg.

Aha, said Qno.

Qno sat with the children on the wall above the Gate, watching the Water Women toiling with the heavy goatskins over the Bridge, and pouring them into the monks' buckets arranged outside the Gate. The two small brothers sat quietly together, holding hands. They were darker than their sister, with heavy black eyebrows and wide dark eyes. The monks said they were twins, but Mereg said no. Sextus is two months older, she said.

It takes nine months to make a new child, said the monks.

Not if your father is Rufor the Red God, said Mereg.



Get up, Qno. I cannot abide old men on their knees.

Qno rose painfully to his feet.

Sit, said the Abbot, for Heaven's sake.

Qno sat on the stool before the Abbot's lectern.

You know this cannot be, Qno, said the Abbot. You know how this will end. Last time it took you two years to stop feeling sorry for yourself. You know it simply won't go, having women in the Abbey. And the boys are not of our blood.

Winter will soon be upon us, said Qno. They are too young to be sent away. What would happen to them?

The girl's breasts are coming, said the Abbot. We cannot have that.

There was a long pause.

She is only a child, said Qno in a low voice.

There was another long pause.

Very well, said the Abbot at last. They may stay until spring. But don't say I didn't warn you.



Qno and the Abbot had very much the same conversation the following autumn. The children ate in the Refectory and sat with the monks at the Chant. They worked hard in the gardens and orchards, and lent their hand with the cows and the sheep. They learnt to read and write, and Sextus spent long hours in the Scriptorium helping the scribes. He learnt to cut splendid pens, and was allowed to do a little copying himself, particularly of the Lives of the Lesser Gods. Septimus spent much time in the kitchen, helping the cooks and learning about herbs, and soon the physician Sne noticed him and allowed him into the Herbarium and taught him about medicines. Mereg spent a lot of her time in Qno's cell, listening to his stories. There was laughter in the cloisters. And Qno grew younger every month.



Hic-no, said Sextus. Tell us about Reagh.

I have told you about Reagh, said Qno.

Tell us again.

Once upon a time, said Qno, there was a young man who came from another world. He wanted to learn the ways of men here on Huld.

How did he come from the other world? said Sextus.

He flew, said Septimus.

He flew, said Qno.

How did he fly? asked Sextus.
He closed his eyes and flew, said Mereg.
You all know this story by heart, said Qno. Why don't you tell me?
Because it's your story, said Septimus.
It's everybody's story, said Qno.
Go on, then, said Septimus. About the beautiful girl.
And when he arrived, he found an order of men and women who took him in and taught him about this world.
You never said that part before, said Mereg.
What is an order? asked Sextus.
An order is a community of people who live together and follow the rules of the order, said Qno.
Like an Abbey?
Yes, an Abbey is an order.
An Abbey is an order where there are only old men, said Sextus.
Not all of them old, said Qno.
Why are there no women in the Abbey? asked Mereg.
Because that's what an Abbey means, said Qno. Men-only.
That's not a meaning, said Mereg. It's a mistake.
Tell us about the beautiful girl, said Septimus.
So the young man stayed with the order. And there he met a beautiful girl.
Reagh, said Septimus.
And they fell in love, said Mereg.
Did they have children? asked Sextus.
Nobody knows, said Mereg.
Nobody knows, said Qno.
The young man loved the beautiful girl very much, said Mereg, but one day he discovered she was the Goddess of Love and Peace. And he

told everybody and the beautiful girl had to leave and go back to her home in the Region of the Gods.

You spoilt the story, said Septimus. Qno tells it better.

I think Mereg has told the story very well, said Qno. But now it's time for dinner.



After dinner Qno sat by their bedside, his voice and his demeanour attempting authority. Now is the time to close your eyes and go to sleep, he said.

Why is the Span called Reagh's Span? asked Septimus.

That, said Qno, is a very good question. Do you know the stars in the Span?

If I ask you a question, said Septimus, it's rude to change the subject.

That's true, said Qno. But in order to answer your question, I need to know how much you know first. Perhaps you already know the answer without knowing.

Know the answer without knowing, said Sextus. That's nonsense.

Without remembering, then, said Qno.

All right then, yes, I know the stars in the Span.

Tell me, said Qno.

First there's Tungel, said Septimus. The Bright Star.

Go on.

Then Three-Beyond-Tungel, said Sextus.

Good, said Qno.

I know, said Septimus. But I've forgotten.

The beautiful one? prompted Qno.

Tenes! said Sextus. The beautiful yellow star.

The star that comes and goes, said Septimus.

And why does he come and go? asked Qno.

Because sometimes he is sad, and sometimes happy, said Septimus.

And why is that?

Sometimes Reagh is kind to Tenes, and kisses him, said Septimus.

And sometimes she goes away, and then he is sad.

There you are, said Qno. You knew why the Span is called Reagh's Span.

I sort of forgot, said Septimus.

I knew all that, said Mereg sleepily.

But why does Tenes really come and go? asked Sextus.



And finally the third spring arrived, and the Abbot's warning about the breasts could not be ignored.

Do you want me to make arrangements for them, as we did with the foundling? said the Abbot.

No, said Qno. Not again. I shall go with them.

And cut your hair?

And cut my hair.

You have a great need for children, said the Abbot. That is not good for a monk. If you go, you can never return. You will never chant again.

Qno sat with his head bowed.

One more winter, then, said the Abbot.



How will they break the Bridge, if the legions come? asked Septimus.

You see the keystone? said Qno.

Yes, said Septimus. They throw a chain over the keystone, said Qno, and pull it out sideways. The Bridge will fall into the Chasm.

And then how will we get water?

Before the Bridge was built, said Qno, there were steps and ladders down into the Chasm, and a little rope bridge at the bottom. The brothers hauled up water from the river in buckets on a rope. It was heavy work.

Now the water-women do the heavy work, said Septimus.



Where will we go, brother Qno, when they send us away? asked Sextus.

We will find some good people who will care for us, said Qno. We will work for them on the farm. There will be three children on the farm, a boy and two twin sisters. When you grow up you will marry them and plough the land and the farm will prosper. And I shall sit in the shade of the trees and play with your children.

I only want to marry you, Hic-no, said Mereg.

You can marry me, said Sextus.

No, me, said Septimus.



And when the spring came, and the snows were gone, and the birds were singing in the valley, Qno packed his few belongings in a burlap bundle. The Abbot came to his cell and said, Qno, you need not cut your hair.

Thank you, Abbot, said Qno.

The breeze was warm and the sun shone as they walked together over the Bridge. The monks followed them to the foot of the Bridge, and then

stood and watched as they continued down the road. When they came to the bend they stopped and turned to look at the monks, and waved to them. The monks waved back.

Qno saw in his mind's eye how the gatekeepers engaged the heavy chains and turned the great cogs to pull the keystone, how the bridge split and fell, slow and solemn, into the chasm.

2

Qno cleared his throat. They told us in the town you needed workers, he said.

The woman stood, a head taller than Qno, in the yard of the farm at Upper Crop on the hillside in the Valley of the Hald behind Tarrant. She studied them, her arms folded.

We are good workers, said Mereg.

You look like good eaters, said the woman.

Yes we are very good eaters, said Sextus.

What he is trying to say, said the monk Qno, is that we do not need much food.

A smile flitted across the woman's face. There isn't much food, she said. Can you mow, old man?

I am not old, said Qno indignantly. There is nothing I cannot do. I am a monk.

Hmpf, said the woman.

I am the best worker, said Mereg.

I can see that, said the woman.

She looked up at the sky, as if to seek advice there. Or to gauge the weather.

My sons have gone to war, she said. I had a labourer, but I had to send him packing. I need help with the haymaking.

Qno looked triumphantly at Mereg, who grinned back.

You can stay for a few days, said the woman. To show me what you can do.

So they stayed at the farm for ten years, and Mereg and her brothers grew ten years older, and Qno grew at least ten years younger, and his beard became red again; and the woman's name was Amfer.



Looking back, much later, on those ten years, Qno remembered some events better than others.

One afternoon in the late summer of their arrival at the farm, Mereg looked into the farmhouse where Amfer was sitting at her loom, weaving cloth from the spring sheering. Qno and the children had finished the chores for the day, and there were two hours to milking-time.

Amfer, said Mereg. Qno and I are going to be married this afternoon. Do you want to come to the ceremony?

Of course, said Amfer. Where will it be?

In the Overfield, said Mereg. Dwork is going to marry us.

There were two cows at Upper Crop, Dwork and her daughter Dwork
3. They spent most of the summer together in the Overfield, coming down to the gate to be milked twice a day.

Dwork is the best cow I can think of to do a marriage, said Amfer.

Sextus and Septimus were the bridesmaids. Mereg had woven chains of buttercups for them to wear. The all stood in front of Dwork who surveyed them placidly, chewing the cud.

She swallowed her cud and said, Are you sure you want to be married?

Quite sure, said Mereg.

Same here, said Qno.

Then I hereby pronounce you married, said Dwork. Everybody clapped. Amfer announced that there was to be special tea and biscuits back at the farm for the wedding guests.

Inside the farmhouse, Amfer took down a bottle of the White Water and poured two small goblets for herself and for Qno. A toast to the marriage, she said. There was a definite twinkle in her eye.

Can't I have a taste? said Mereg. It's me who's getting married.

No, said Amfer. You're not old enough yet.



The boy with the cleft palate from Lower Crop came up every other day or so with the horse and cart to take their milk and sometimes cheese and other goods into Tarrant. Sometimes he sat and drank coffee with Amfer and Qno, telling them the news from Tarrant Town. Mereg found it difficult to look at him.

They were talking about you, said the boy.

About me? said Qno.

They want someone to be a magic—

Magician, said Amfer.

Magistrate, said Qno.

That's right.

Dream on, said Qno. I'm a farmer. And Amfer chuckled.

You're famous in Tarrant, she said. The Monk who crossed the Bridge. The Water Women talk about you.

You shouldn't listen to their gossip, said Qno. They're no better than the Brothers in the Abbey. He was smiling to himself.



And then one day the boy from Lower Crop brought his sister, who jumped out of the cart and ran into the kitchen and hugged Amfer mightily, spluttering with happiness. She was small, and her legs and

arms were not quite right, and her face was round and featureless, and her mouth and teeth were a little crooked. Mereg gazed at her in wonder. The happiness in her face was a beacon of beauty.

Qno came in from the yard and stopped in the doorway as if turned to stone, his wide eyes unseeing.

This is my sister Cirsc, said the boy from Lower Crop, with obvious pride.

This is my little brother Hadr, said Cirsc, turning to him and hugging him. It was the first time Mereg had heard his name.

Qno stood still in the doorway, breathing heavily.

And this is Mereg—and this is Sextus—and this is Septimus—Cirsc hugged them mightily, one after the other, and this took quite a long time, because a good hug is not something to be hurried.

And then Cirsc turned to Qno. For a moment they both stood motionless, staring at each other. Then she hopped a little on one leg and then the other. Qno's face was streaming with tears. At last she ran at him and tried to fling her arms around him, hardly achieving half his girth. The top of her head reached his waist, and the pair of them hobbled about the kitchen for some time in a sort of dance. When the dance finished, everybody clapped.

You seem to know each other, said Amfer.

Qno is my best monk, said Cirsc. She pronounced his name with exactly the right sound on the Q.

Qno was almost choking. I never knew where you went, he said. And you were here all the time!

I can read and write now, said Cirsc. And ride a horse. This is my little brother Hadr. And Amfer is my best friend.

There was a lot of coffee drunk at the table that morning.

Was Cirsc with you in the Abbey? said Amfer when they had gone.

She was with a group of people passing through, said Qno. They abandoned her, left in the middle of the night. I haven't seen her for twenty years or more. The Abbot made arrangements for her, but I never knew where she went. She hasn't changed.

Twenty years? said Mereg. How old is she?

Who knows? said Qno. And what does it matter?



The farm prospered, and there was no news of the legions. Below, in the Abbey of the Rock, the stream of refugees had dried up. It was said that there was war far away in the West; but there was peace in the Middle World, and particularly here in the Hald.

Qno and the children never tired of their stories of Reagh, and of the other gods. One evening the children wanted to hear the story of the Red God who was their father.

The Red God's name is Rufor, the God of Love and War, said Qno.

He can't be both, said Septimus. Reagh is the Goddess of Love and Peace. Love and peace go together. Love and war don't go together.

Rufor has two shadows, said Qno. A long narrow shadow and a short thick shadow. They don't go together either. With Rufor, you have to choose.

Choose what? said Sextus.

Love or war, said Mereg.

When I was a child, said Amfer, we were told that Rufor had two dogs: a large thin fast dog and a short fat slow dog. They were called Fob and Dim. Sometimes Fob drew his chariot, and the chariot went fast and dangerously, and sometimes Dim, and the chariot went slow and surely. But if they both drew the chariot together they pulled in different

directions and got nowhere. That sounds the same sort of story. Rufor had to choose.

Neither story makes much sense, said Septimus.

Stories are just stories, said Mereg. They don't have rules.

Yes they do, said Sextus. It's our job to find out what the rules are.

Septimus said: The rule is that Reagh is the God of Love and Peace, and she left us and went back to the Region of the Gods. We lost Peace. That's why there are legions. But we didn't lose Love, otherwise the Red God Rufor would not be our father.

I don't think Rufor really was our father, said Sextus. I think Mother was making that up.

And then nobody said anything for quite a while.



Qno often chanted the monks' songs at his work. The children often joined in, having heard them so often. The words were nearly always the same, but the music was different, depending on Qno's mood.

Amfer's chants were very different from Qno's. They were brighter, but their words were more sorrowful. Amfer doesn't chant, said Mereg. She sings.

Why do people sing? asked Septimus.

Long long ago, said Qno, people didn't talk. They only sang. They sang together as they worked, so that everybody knew how to work and in what order to do things. And they sang on the way home, the Song of the Way, so that nobody got lost and everybody came home. And then they sang as they made the food, so that the food was made in the best way, and they were silent while they ate, except that the children sometimes hummed as they chewed, like Sextus and Septimus. And they all sang songs to fall asleep in the evenings.

So do we, said Mereg.

And later when they had horses, said Septimus, they sang to the horses as they rode them, so the horses knew which way to go.

How do you know that? asked Sextus.

I don't, said Septimus. But it sounds right.

When they sang, said Qno, they never said I or Me or Mine. They only said They and Them and Theirs. Those were the words that they used in their songs for themselves and for everything else.

The children were silent, making up sentences in their heads which the people sang.

They stopped singing, said Qno, when they started saying I and Me and Mine. Those are not singing words. They are talking words.

That sounds right, too, said Septimus.



And then the day came when Amfer announced special tea and biscuits. It's ten years today since you came to Upper Crop, she said.

Qno and the children looked at each other in amazement.

Look at you, said Amfer. Ten years older and you never noticed.

Qno is ten years younger, said Mereg.

Or rather it's me who's catching up on him, said Amfer.

No Amfer, said Septimus. You don't change. Qno is really getting younger.

Being a monk makes you old before your time, said Qno. It was a good decision to cross the Bridge.

And to come to Upper Crop, said Amfer, pouring the tea.



Two mornings later a man stood at the gate and watched Mereg, who was swinging the axe and splitting logs. She swung the heavy axe easily, and clove every log exactly down the middle.

Who are you? asked the man.

Who is asking? said Mereg.

This is my farm, said the man. That is my axe.

Amfer came to the door, and spoke his name: Meer.

I came home, like I promised, said Meer.

And Stee, and Maras?

They didn't make it. It was a war, mother.

Amfer ran to the gate, and took his face in her hands.

I did not think to see any of my sons again, she said.

That evening Meer took Amfer's place at the head of the table. Amfer sat opposite Qno. Mereg moved down one place. Amfer and Qno had made special food for Meer's homecoming. But Meer did not look particularly happy, they thought. He gulped his food down, and his mother gave him more.

There are more people at table than I bargained for, said Meer.

It is good company, said Amfer.

They eat well, said Meer.

We all eat well, said Amfer. They are good workers. We eat what they produce.

There was silence around the table. Mereg had stopped eating, and was looking at the heavy bronze ring on Meer's finger.

We have three cows and two horses and sixty sheep, said Amfer, and we send fruit and cheese and roots to Tarrant. The old town is becoming a town again.

I saw that, said Meer.

They are going to appoint a Magistrate, said Amfer. There is trading.
We could take extra hands and raise more sheep.

The old man must go, said Meer.

I shall leave tomorrow morning, said Qno.

You will not leave, said Amfer. You live here.

It is for me to decide whom we keep on the farm, said Meer.

No Meer, said his mother. It is for me to decide.

And Meer stood, and raised his arm to strike: but his mother looked
at him without flinching.

Sextus and and Septimus leapt to their feet and held Meer between
them.

Let go of him, said his mother. He is my son.

Meer shook himself free of the brothers and strode out into the
evening.

Amfer gripped Qno's arm. You will not leave, she said. Meer will come
to understand.

We are going nowhere, said Mereg. You have given us a home for ten
years. You are our mother.

He still has the war in him, said Amfer. He will mend.

Qno said nothing.

The next morning Meer was sitting at his place at the table when
Mereg and the boys came down to heat water for coffee. His clothes were
damp and his breeches muddy. He had been walking all night.

I was tired and confused, he said, avoiding their eyes. Of course you
should stay.

Mereg came towards him, but he turned away. Thank you, Meer, she said. Your mother has been very good to us.

Then she said: Why don't you go up and talk to her? We will make coffee and heat the bread. You should change into dry clothes.

He stood irresolutely.

Where is the old man? he said.

Mereg smiled as she understood his question. He is not with Amfer, she said. He has his own room.

Which room? said Meer. Mine?

No. I think I am in your room. I shall move out. I can sleep with the boys.

Meer tried to look at her, but could not hold his gaze.

I was a legionary, he said. He held up his hand, to show the ring.

You were discharged?

He didn't answer. I'll see Mother, he said. And he began to climb the stairs.

I'll bring you up coffee, if you like, said Merreg.

You keep away, said Meer.



An uneasy quiet descended on the farm at Upper Crop. The weather was dry, summer was approaching the hot season, and Merreg and her brothers were haymaking from early morning to late evening. Amfer and Qno helped them in the fields whenever they found time from milking the cows and the ewes and the other chores. Meer did no work on the farm; he kept his room for the most part when he was home, but often disappeared for several nights at a time, and Amfer said he was visiting in the town.

One morning, when Meer was not at home, Hadr with the cleft palate sat and drank morning coffee with Amfer and Qno in the kitchen.

There are refugees on the road again, he said. This time they are from Tuag Beyond. They say the legions are on the march, pressing east. The monks are talking again of breaking the Bridge. They say they will let the townspeople in first then break the Bridge to protect them.

If they are pressing east, said Qno, and the monks have broken the Bridge to save the Abbey, they will have to come up this way, heading north over the Moor to cross the river at Magre.

Then God help them, and us, said Amfer.

Amen, said Qno.

And when Meer came home that evening there was a wild look in his eyes.

They are talking of breaking the Bridge, he said.

Were you in the town? asked Mereg.

Meer sat at the head of the table eating his meal, and did not answer.

Are there many refugees on the road? asked Amfer.

There are none, said Meer.

The boy from Lower Crop was here this morning, said Amfer. He says the legions are on the march.

The legions march faster than refugees can flee, said Meer. They drive no refugees before them. They leave no one alive behind them.

Meer was staring, tight-lipped, at his mother. They are coming east, he said. But they'll not come up into the Hald.

Was that the talk in the town? said Amfer.

They'll never come this way, said Meer.

Qno says that if the monks break the Bridge, they will have to come through the Hald and up the Valley and over the High Moor to Magre.

Or cross further south, said Meer.

That would be a greater detour, said Qno. They're already at Tuag Beyond. It's a long way back and mountains to cross before they reach the road to Tarc.

Meer was staring at his mother again.

They'll never find me, he said. I shall hide in the hills.



Mereg lay and listened to the movements of the night. She heard Meer and Amfer talking together in the kitchen, their voices anxious but muffled. Then Amfer came up the stairs and Mereg heard her bed creak. Shortly afterwards the kitchen door opened and closed, and Mereg heard steps in the yard. The boys were fast asleep together in the big bed under the rafters. Mereg stole past them to the window and looked out.

The stars were bright, the great Span wheeling over the hillside. The spark of Tungel cast shadows in the farmyard. Meer was sitting on the bench outside the cowshed, his hands on his knees, staring at the ground. As she watched him, Mereg saw his shoulders shaking.

She crept down the stairs, carefully avoiding the creaks, and out through the kitchen. The night was warm.

She sat on the bench beside him. After a while Meer raised his head, stretched out his feet and leant back against the cowshed wall. They sat silently together for some time. Opposite them by the woodshed across the yard, the axe stood in the chopping-block.

He raised his hand and made a fist in front of Mereg's face, showing her the heavy bronze ring. There was a ring of green copper under it, around his finger.

I was not discharged, he said. I broke ranks, and ran. I deserted my comrades, and my brothers. That is why I am alive, and they are not. If the legion finds me, they will hang me.

Take off the ring, throw it away, she said. They will not know.

A soldier never takes off his ring, said Meer. When he lies dead in the field there are others who take his ring. Deserters cannot hide from the legions. They are always found.

He turned and stared at her, and she forced herself to meet his gaze. And now I have told you, he said, I should silence you too.

With what? she asked. With the axe? You have seen that I too can swing an axe.

He stretched out his feet again, leaning against the wall. They were both silent for a long time.

I must go to the Holy City, with the refugees, he said. Before the monks break down their Bridge.

I was once on the way there, to be sold, said Mereg. Qno saved me, and the brothers.

Perhaps we should go together, said Meer; or perhaps it was Mereg. She was not sure who had spoken. But the words were there.



They all sat together round the table.

Meer is coming with me to Kirfa, said Qno. I have always wanted to go. Meer will be safe there.

I shall stay here, said Amfer. This is my farm. You shall take Mereg with you.

The children should stay with you, said Qno.

I go where you go, Qno, said Mereg. We are married, if you remember. And I was on the way to Kirfa when I met you.

Amfer said: I don't want Mereg here if the legions come this way. She must go with you. The boys will stay with me. I need them on the farm. We will take the animals up into the hills if necessary.

This is my farm, too, said Qno.

My son needs your help, said Amfer. You must get him to the Holy City.

Meer turned to Mereg. What do you mean, you are married? he said.

We got married ten years ago, said Mereg. Holy inviolable matrimony. Being married to a monk is a serious thing. Ask Qno.

Tell me about it, said Qno.

3

The Bridge is broken! shouted Hadr with the cleft palate as he rode at full gallop into the yard.

Then the Abbey is cut off, said Meer. There's no way east for us.

When was this? said Qno.

They sent out word early this morning that they would pull the keystone at midday. But none of the townsfolk crossed over. They say that if the bridge is down, the legions will avoid the town. It would take them months to bridge the Chasm.

They'll come up here, up the Hald, said Meer, his voice shaking. They'll head up on the moor and round the mountains and cross at Magre. We must take to the hills.

No, said Qno. There is another way into the Abbey. A secret way.

A monks' way? said Sextus. A tunnel in the rock?

A hidden stair down to the floor of the Chasm, the old Water Stair which we used before the Bridge was built. Before my time. The Water Women will show us.

We must go immediately, said Meer, before the legions arrive in the Hald.

I will take you in the cart, if you come now, said the boy from Lower Crop.

Thank you, Hadr, said Amfer.



Jank, the farmer at Lower Crop, was waiting at the farmhouse door as the cart rumbled into the yard. They're here! he called in through the door.

He came forward to hold the horse. Jent! he called again. They're here!

Jank's wife appeared, with Cirsc clinging to her.

We're sending Hadr and Cirsc with you, said Jank. We don't want Cirsc here if the legions come through. Hadr goes with her. They say there are physicians in Kirfa who can mend his face. You'll see to that, Qno?

They handed Cirsc up into the cart, and Hadr embraced his mother. We're going to Kirfa, said Cirsc happily. Me and Hadr and Mereg and Qno.

Jank climbed up into the cart and took the reins. Look after them, Qno! called Jent as they set off.

They drove down the road at a rattling pace. Make sure you bring everyone home, Qno, said Farmer Jank, flicking the reins. We need you all back for the haymaking next summer.

My thoughts exactly, said Qno.

There were no refugees on the road from Tuag Beyond. What did I tell you, said Meer. No refugees means the legions are close, and marching at speed. I can hear the horns blowing.

Then you have better ears than I have, said Cirsc; and I hear better than anybody. Ask Hadr.

And smell, said Hadr.

It's seeing I'm not good at, said Cirsc.



All five of you? said Nuus the Water Lady.

The girls are small, said Qno. They'll be no problem.

It's you who is the problem, old Qno, said Nuus.

I am neither old nor a problem, said Qno.

The younger you get, said Nuus, the bigger the problem.

Nuus and three other Water Women led them through rooms and walkways into the base of the old city walls, through endless side-turnings and down stairways until they came to a large underground hallway with many exits. Nuus went ahead with a lantern, keeping to the stone wall of the hall and passing the entrance to many tunnels. The others followed in single file, followed by the three Water-Women with lanterns.

At the far end of the hall a high tunnel led into the rock. But it did not go far: it was blocked by a huge mound of massive stone blocks and boulders which had fallen from the roof.

It's blocked, said Meer.

That's how it's meant to look, said Nuus.

The Water Women made their way to one of the large round boulders at the edge of the mound. They put their backs to it and heaved. It rolled to one side, revealing a narrow hole in the ground beneath it.

Here's the first problem, said Nuus. We have to get you through that hole, old Qno. She lowered herself down into the hole, taking the lantern with her.

And Qno stroked his reddening beard and smiled cockily at the others. Watch me, he said and disappeared down the hole.

The other followed one by one, and one of the Water Women came down last, leaving the other two to roll the great stone back over the hole.

No going back now, said Nuus.

Are you coming with us? said Mereg.

No going back for you. Water Women go everywhere.

Except into the Abbey, said Qno.

There's no saying, said Nuus.

The passage was narrow, running steeply down into the rock, often curving sharply with long flights of steep stairs hewn into the stone. Nuus went down ahead with a lantern, followed by the others in single file, with the remaining water woman at the rear holding the lantern high to light the tunnel.

On and on they went, deeper and deeper, down the irregular steps hewn into the rock. Several times the passage forked, and twice Nuus made a sudden turn into a well-hidden side tunnel. After a while the far murmur of rushing waters could be heard way below them, and the sound grew louder as they went deeper. They came to a steep and narrow spiral staircase with steps so high that they had to sit on them and slide themselves carefully down.

The descent seemed interminable, but they marked their progress by the steadily increasing roar of the water. Finally the passage levelled out and ran straight for about fifty yards. The roar rose until it was deafening. At last they came out into a small room just large enough for them all to squeeze into.

Another hole in the floor. And over it a massive pulley in the roof, with a heavy rope hanging from it into the centre of the hole, and up again to a massive hook on the pulley. The other end of the rope was wound round a heavy timber winch bolted into the floor. The machinery was heavy, but ancient, the timbers black with age.

We've used it recently, said Nuus. The rope holds. The monks say they'll come over and renew it, now the bridge is down. But you can't trust monks.

Except with your life, said Qno.

You go down last, old Qno, said Nuus. Then if the rope breaks, no harm will be done.

The women manned the winch and the ropes rose from the well-hole. At last a large wicker basket came up the well, big enough to carry a monk at a time.

You Meer, you go down first, said Nuus. If the river is too high the landing-stage may be flooded. Shout up and let us know.

The two Water Women braced themselves against the pull of the winch as Meer climbed into the basket, and then began to lower him down. The rope slid for a long time into the well, and there was little left on the winch before the rope went slack: the basket had reached the bottom.

Meer's voice came up the well, but drowned in the roar of the water.

Louder! bellowed Nuus.

All clear! could be heard from below.

They wound up the basket again, and Nuus sent Mereg and Cirsc down together. Then Hadr went down. Finally it was Qno's turn.

Good-bye, Qno, said Nuus. Safe journey.

Qno took her and hugged her close.

My, said Nuus. You *are* getting younger.

Half-way down the well, the thought was born in Qno's mind: What am I doing in this basket? Am I returning to the Abbey?



Little is known of Qno's history, of his birth and upbringing. His name, Qno, is a traditional monkish name from the language of the writings in the Abbey, an older version of the language of the Hald. His original name is not recorded. Qno's own memory went back to a childhood in which he was already a member of the Abbey. Of the time

before that he had a few broken memories: a mother stirring a pot over a fire; a tree in a yard; a stair to sit on. That was all.

Are you on the way to Kirfa, the Holy City, Qno? Have you always been on the way there? Will you come home again? If so, where is your home? The Abbey? Upper Crop? And who is your family?

Or will you go on from Kirfa, to other worlds, and leave Huld behind?

Qno came down in his basket to the narrow stone platform just a few feet above the roaring torrent, and Mereg helped him out. He shouted up the well: Goodbye, Nuus! He heard no reply, but the basket rose again, up the well, and was gone.



They stood together on a flat platform a few yards wide and only a foot or so above the roaring water. Across the water, hardly more than a few fathoms, there was a similar landing on the opposite rock wall—well within shouting distance, in spite of the noise of the torrent. Behind this other landing was an opening into a tunnel in the rock, and beside it a winch bolted into the ground, lengths of ropes hanging on pegs, and a large wicker basket similar to the one that had hoisted them down. Otherwise the landing was deserted.

Looking up, they could see no sky, only the curving walls of the gorge. The platforms, and the river itself, were hidden from the roadways above, and from the arch of the Abbey Bridge, now a ruin of stones and rubble which had disappeared for ever as it fell, swept away down the chasm floor by the relentless force of the river.

What do we do now? said Mereg.

We wait, said Qno. This is where the Abbey now draws its water. Someone will come.

They sat with their backs to the rock wall and waited. An hour passed, and the light shifted above them: a large section of the opposite wall was lit with yellow sunlight. Qno was dozing, his head on his chest.

Then Hadr gave a shout. He pointed up to the sunlit wall. A reddish-brown object was creeping down the wall, suspended by a rope from above. It looked like a dead animal. What is it? said Mereg.

It's a goatskin, said Qno. For drawing up water. Someone will come down to fill it.

And as he spoke the stooping figure of a portly monk appeared out of the tunnel, stopped and stared as if aghast at the group on the opposite wall of the chasm.

Hallo Cro! called Qno. It's me, Qno.

It was obvious that the monk had mediocre vision.

Me who? he called.

It's us, called Mereg, Mereg and Hic-no!

Is that you, Qno? What are you doing there?

We're coming across, shouted Qno.

How? shouted Cro.

That's what I want to know, shouted Qno.

The goatskin had slithered down the rock wall and now hung at the height of Cro's head. Cro looked at it, and then back at the party on the opposite bank.

Wait, he shouted. He turned and disappeared into the tunnel.

After two or three minutes he reappeared.

Water first! he shouted. He took hold of the dangling goatskin and tugged at it. It continued its descent to the floor of the platform, and a fathom or two of rope curled down after it. Cro took hold of the rope and kicked the goatskin into the water. The current took it immediately and tore the rope out of Cro's hands. He swore, and the party on the opposite

bank watched in horror as he teetered on the brink of the landing, before throwing himself backwards and sitting down suddenly on the stone floor.

Are you all right, Cro? called Mereg.

Who's that? called Cro, peering from a sitting position.

It's me, Mereg, shouted Mereg.

Never, he said. He stood painfully up and stared at them again across the water.

Wait, he shouted. Don't go away.

And he disappeared again into the tunnel.



They watched the goatskin, now almost out of sight downstream from them, being dragged full of water out of the river. It began to creep laboriously up the cliff wall, and finally disappeared. They waited, it seemed for an eternity. Finally the goatskin came slithering down the rock face again, and dangled over the landing, but no one appeared. The sun faded, and evening set in. There was a continual wind in the chasm, as if the air was also pouring down from the high hills, and the travellers began to feel the chill.

What is keeping these monks? muttered Meer. And how are we to cross? Have you come this way before, Qno?

Never, said Qno. We had the Bridge. This was just an old story. But it must be as long a climb up as it was down. Cro is no youngster.

Why don't they have a telephone? said Meer.

Qno looked at him inquisitively.

A speaking tube, said Meer.

Now that's a good idea, said Qno.



Finally, Cro reappeared, accompanied by three younger monks, whom Qno did not recognise. One of them busied himself with the goatskin, which was soon on its way up the rock wall, water slopping out of its brimming flanks. The others were fiddling with the ropes hanging beside the entrance. Finally one of the monks untangled a length of thin cord with a wooden ball attached to one end. He swung it by the rope round his head, narrowly missing his comrades, and slung it over the torrent towards them. It fell into the middle of the waters.

After several tries Hadr managed to grab it before it fell back into the river. They hauled on it and drew over a thicker chord, and finally a hefty rope with a loop on the end. Cro pointed to the rock face above their heads: there was a heavy iron hook in the wall. Hadr climbed onto Meer's shoulders and after several attempts managed to hang the rope on the hook. The monks made the rope fast to a high hook on the other side.

The ball! yelled Cro.

Hadr hurled wooden ball back, and it landed at the monks' feet. Another cord was attached, and this time it took the monks only three attempts to throw it over to the travellers. Finally the wicker basket was attached to a wooden pulley and hung on the rope, and Meer pulled the basket over the foaming water.

Qno crossed last. And half-way over the thought again hit him: What am I doing in this basket? Where am I going?

Cro embraced him as he stepped out of the basket.

You've been starving yourself, said Cro.

Farm work, said Qno.

And you look younger.

Ten years, to be precise, said Qno.

We must take down the rope, lest the legions come, said one of the monks.

You go across and unhook it, Tugg, said Cro.

I may not, said Tugg.

Bother, said Cro.

Cirsc gave them a radiant smile. Use the thin chord, she said.

The monks looked at each other. Then they unhitched the rope from the hook, attached the thin cord, and let the rope into the river, making the cord fast to a peg on the wall.

Clever, said Mereg.

The climb up to the Abbey was endless, and exhausting. It's doing me a world of good, said Cro. Twice a day. Perhaps I shall get younger, too.

The Abbot had aged. He did not stand up as they entered his rooms.

You've been starving yourself, Qno, he said.

So I am told, said Qno.

And your beard is red again.

Mereg said: That is because he washes it.

Cro and the Abbot looked at each other. Their beards were grey with dust.

Who is this young lady? asked the Abbot.

It's Mereg, said Mereg. Don't you recognise me?

The Abbot peered at her for some time over his spectacles.

I warned you, Qno, he said.

You did indeed, said Qno.

The Abbot pondered.

You crossed the Bridge, Qno, he said. You were forbidden to come back.

I have two arguments in my favour, said Qno.

Try them.

In the first place, I am no longer a monk. I am a refugee. You are bound by your orders to welcome refugees.

Refugee my painted arse, said the Abbot.

In the second place, I crossed the bridge, but I did not re-cross it. I came back by a different route.

Sophistry, said the Abbot.

So what do you suggest? said Qno. I can't go back. The Water Women would never open the passage. My only way out is eastwards, to the Holy City.

The Abbot pondered.

It should be clear, he said at last, that you sinned when you crossed the Bridge. On the other hand, you sinned in the opposite direction when you returned. Two opposite directions neutralise each other. Two negatives. There is a precedent.

Yes, I remember, said Qno.

The centurion Oswicus marched at the head of his hundred and twenty men. One hundred and eighteen including himself, to be precise. His sandals needed re-nailing and his knees were cold and his bowels ached. He knew that the same could be said for most of his hundred and seventeen. And for the two hundreds in front of him, and the three hundreds behind. Not to mention the other cohorts. And he felt certain it would get colder the further north they went.

But it'll be hot out on the sands towards Kirfa, he thought.

The semaphore wire in his helmet was tweaking. What's it say, Cent? asked his optio. Give me a chance, said Oswicus.

He listened to the pips. Five more miles, he said. The soldiers around him groaned, and passed the word back. By the time it reached number one hundred and seventeen it had grown to twelve miles.

The cohort marched in silence, ambling rather than marching, not keeping pace, sulking. Their hopes of plunder and the good life in Tarrant Town had been dashed by the order to turn up the Valley of the Hald, to head for the high moors, rain and fog, and to make for the pitiful outpost at Magre. No fat picking there.

They wondered if the following cohorts would be allowed into Tarrant

And the old question arose in the ranks, simultaneously, as it happened, with the similar question in Qno's mind as he sat in the basket: What are we doing here?

Why march on Kirfa? Wasn't everything going well? What was the Tyran thinking?

The semaphore wire was tweaking again. Oswicus shouted down the line: Short halt for the Sixth to catch up!

They broke ranks and stretched out under the bushes on either side of the road, groaning in luxury. Oswicus and his men had stopped by a farm gate: they could see the farm between the bushes up on the brow of the hill. A tall woman and two young men came down the track towards them, the woman carrying a small churn and the young men a large basket between them.

The woman and the boys stopped a fathom or so from the gate and surveyed the supine troops. She said something in the language of the country. Oswicus's optio looked at them balefully. What's in the basket? he asked.

He saw the two boys exchange surprised glances. They said something to the woman. She smiled and spoke a few words. Then the elder boy said clearly in the language of the army: Apples. You want?

I understood him, said Sextus. Did you?

I don't know, said Septimus.

What did he say? said Amfer.

He asked what was in the basket.

Tell him.

And Sextus said, in a language he had not spoken for ten years: Would you like some apples?

The apples were passed round, and the basket soon emptied. A few of the men twisted the apples into halves and passed them to their companions. Most gulped the apples down whole, core and stalk. Amfer dipped a small tin bowl into her churn of milk and it was passed round again and again until the churn was empty. The soldiers nodded and grunted thankfully.

The centurion's semaphore wire tweaked again. Form ranks! he bellowed. The men rose wearily to their feet and returned to the road. The centurion looked at the woman, his eyes misty.

Thank you, mistress. You are very kind, he said.

The men began to march onwards, and the rest of the cohort filed past the farm at Upper Crop.

So now we know where you two come from, said Amfer to the boys as they made their way back to the farmhouse. Septimus looked at Sextus and grinned. Form ranks! he said.

Poor creatures, said Amfer. Some of them were no older than you two.

And she thought of Meer and his brothers.

Everyone will come home, she said.



The company of five ate in the refectory with Qno's old friends Sne and Cro and several others. Since he could not invite the visitors to sit at the High Table, the Abbot came down and joined them.

You are the last of our visitors for a while, I fear, said the Abbot.

I see you are hauling up water from the river, said Qno.

We have plans for a well under the Hill by the First Stone, said the Abbot.

My plans, said Qno.

You never actually drew them up, said Cro.

You don't need to draw up plans for a well, said Qno. You need to dig a hole.

The farmer speaks, said the Abbot.

Qno grunted. There was an eating silence. Then Qno said: And what else has happened, these ten years?

Nothing whatsoever has happened, said Sne, thanks be. Except that some of us have got older. You have got younger, it appears, Qno.

Outdoor work, said Qno.

And how is my Sextus? said Sne. He was a budding apothecary. I hoped he would stay with us.

They would all have stayed, said Qno.

Can't have women in the Abbey, said the Abbot. Except refugees, temporarily of course. He nodded his head towards Mereg and Cirsc.

Mereg is planning on becoming Abbess, said Qno. Mereg grinned at everyone round the table.

Careful, Qno, said the Abbot. No blasphemy in front of the Brothers.

In the temples in the Holy City there will be priestesses, said Qno.

Quod absit, said the Abbot.

So you are all going east? said Cro.

All the way, said Meer.

What is it about Kirfa? said Cro. Why does everybody want to go there?

All roads lead to Kirfa, said the Abbot.

Hadr is going to get his face fixed, said Cirsc happily.

They have fine doctors in Kirfa, said Qno.

If the legions don't get there first, said Cro.

Sne laughed his high apothecary's laugh. The Tyran of Pyzan is strangely deluded, he said. If Kirfa so much as sneezes, the legions will be totally destroyed.

The Holy Army of Kirfa will sweep them away, said Hadr.

Kirfa has no army, said the Abbot. There is no need.

They have impenetrable walls, said Hadr.

They have no walls, said the Abbot. They have gardens.

Then how will they resist the legions? said Meer.

Sne has told you. They need only sneeze. He is talking in tropes, of course.

Tropes? asked Mereg.

Tropes are turns of language, said Cirsc out of her soup. Hadr handed her a napkin, and she carefully wiped the soup from her face.

What did you say, young lady? said the Abbot in astonishment.

When? said Cirsc.

This is quite remarkable, said the Abbot.

As you would have discovered, if you had allowed her to stay twenty years ago, said Qno.

The Abbot was even more surprised. This is the—?

Foundling, said Cirsc, spluttering with laughter.

The Abbot looked sternly at Qno. Qno nodded.

Be careful, Qno, said the Abbot. Three sins would count as positive.

There's Mereg, too, said Qno. That makes four. Even numbers are safe.

The Abbot had been silent for a while, his eyes on Cirsc, who was still carefully eating her soup, concentrating hard to get the spoon up into her mouth without too much splashing. She was aware of his eyes, and looked up every now and then to smile at him, but did not stop eating.

Qno, said the Abbot suddenly. Why do you have to go to Kirfa? Why not stay here until the troubles are over? You are safer here.

Meer's fist crashed into the table, startling everyone.

We are going to Kirfa, he said. We decided.

I was only thinking, said the Abbot mildly, that it is a long and difficult walk for some of you.

I can carry Cirsc on my back, said Hadr. I have taken her up onto the moors many times.

Nevertheless, said the Abbot, the way is difficult, and not without danger. I want to know what you hope to gain there?

Meer will be safe there, said Qno. There is no surety they will not overrun the Abbey on their return journey: nothing would stop them entering at the Backward Gate. They could hole up in safety here and take their time rebuilding the Bridge.

I am a deserter, said Meer, his voice harsh and too loud. The legions will hunt me down.

We have had deserters here before, said the Abbot. And not all merely fleeing from battle. Every deserter has taken the right road, whatever his first impulse. It is the road to peace. There are brothers here in the Abbey who have been in the legions.

They will be killed first, if the legions arrive, said Meer.

First or last, one of three, said the Abbot: old age, sickness, or the sword.

Meer was silent.

Why do you wish to go to Kirfa, Qno? asked the Abbot.

I promised Amfer to take Meer, said Qno. I promised Jank at Lower Crop to take Hadr and Cirsc. And I promised Mereg—

I go where Qno goes, said Mereg. We are joined together in Holy Matrimony.

What? said the Abbot.

The priestess's name was Dwork, said Qno. She has since been called to her ancestors.

Dwork is a cow's name, said the Abbot.

It's an old Mountain name, said Cirsc, wiping her face. It means Plenty. Qno is my brother. Mereg is my sister-in-law.

The Abbot's eyes were wide open.

Marriage by Cow is inviolable, said Mereg.

The Abbot made up his mind. You will carry my greetings to Tesamuesil, or whatever her name is now, he said. The Chair of Kirfa. This is of course a formality: she knows this already. Sne, how is the cart?

Well-greased, said Sne.

Qno, you will take the cart and the donkey with you. Send her back if you find better transport. She will find her way home. You will take food and provisions with you. Perhaps you will fall in with some safe caravan from the South. You will meet the south road at Crys. I believe the Post Wagon takes passengers, if all else fails.

You are very kind, Abbot, said Qno.

Perhaps. But more importantly I plan, and build bridges. That is why I am Abbot.



The next morning Sne and Cro followed them to the Backward Gate. Mereg and Cirsc sat together in the cart, their arms around each other.

I first came to the Abbey in a donkey cart like this, said Mereg. I was going this way. Now it's thirteen years later, and I am continuing my journey. This time with good people.

The wicker gate at Backward stood wide open, as always. The cart rumbled through it, through the border trees that surrounded the Meadow Behind the Rock, and out onto the great grasslands. Sne and Cro stood in the gateway, gradually dwindling until they could no longer be seen under the low green of the trees. The road ran straight over the sparse sandy grasslands that surrounded them like an ocean. By afternoon there was only a featureless, strangely close horizon.

The weather was warm and the breeze light. As the day drew on the high clouds and distant haze dissipated, the breeze fell, and the temperature began to drop.

We must wrap up well tonight, said Qno. It will be cold under clear skies.

The weather stayed clear, with warm days and cool nights. The road was well-trod across the grasslands and the donkey followed it at a steady pace. Here and there along the road were the grim reminders of migration, broken wagon wheels, rusted tools and utensils, and everywhere were the shallow graves that marked the ends of so many voyages, great and small. Every so often the road crossed small winding watercourses where the goatskins could be filled and the donkey could browse for a while among the sweet water-grasses. They turned the donkey free every evening and she roamed around them as they slept, tearing up the sparse prairie herbs.

After five days of uneventful travel they came to the small cross-road settlement of Crys.



Everybody gets their deserts in Gosste, said the old woman as she ladled out a soup of grain and roots. Depends what you're looking for.

We're not going to Gosste, said Qno. We're going to Kirfa, the Holy City.

Holy City my old man's painted arse in heaven, said the woman. We are Anamen here in Crys, and all the way north. We remember the time when Gosste was the Holy City, walled and stored, and the Holy River Ozu ran through it swift and strong and full of fish.—Now they have a

Lady Chair and the walls are fallen and the people eat fruit from the hanging gardens and nobody calls the city Gosste any longer.

She looked up at the wall above the cooker. There was a small hanging bell on a coil of spring, and beside it a long row of what looked like tiny trapdoors, each fastened with a silver clip. As she watched, the bell moved and gave a little tinkle, and one of the clips said Click and the little trap fell open revealing a yellow card.

Thought so, felt it coming, said the old woman. The Lady Chair is on the move.

You mean the Lady Tesamuesil? asked Mereg, remembering the name that the Abbot had mentioned.

The woman snorted. You Hald people are hopeless with names, she said.

What are the trapdoors? asked Hadr.

Telegrid, said the woman. The Chair had it set up.

And as she spoke the bell rang again and another trap fell open, revealing a red card.

Everything happens at once, said the woman. Post has set out from Tarc. He'll be coming through in a day or so.

Does he go to Kirfa? said Qno.

Gosste, said the woman.

Can we travel with him?

You'll have to ask, said the woman. She reached into a drawer, pulled out a napkin and carefully wiped the soup off Cirsc's face. Cirsc smiled at her gratefully.

You're not too good with the spoon, my love, she said.

The soup is wet, said Cirsc. But I can knit, she added proudly. I knitted a hat for Hadr. We forgot to bring it.

No flies on you, I can see that. She looked at Mereg. Is this young lady your sister?

Sister-in-law, said Cirsc.



The five companions sat on the steps outside the hostel in the evening sun. The donkey munched hay from a manger outside the hostel. There were four or five low houses around the hostel, and three children playing in the sand between them.

They shaded their eyes against the sun setting in the west and gazed down the long road south to Tarc, where Post would be coming. There was no movement on the road. Apart from the playing children and the munching donkey, there was no movement anywhere.

But after a while they heard a distant low rumble behind them. They turned and looked up the road to the north: on the far flat horizon a black blob had come into sight, dancing in the haze over the sandy grasslands. A thin column of smoke rose from the blob, straight up in the still air. The rumble started to become a noise, a sort of rhythmical drumming. The blob grew, and its outlines became more distinct. It was a massive black wagon with four huge wheels, and a high funnel spewing black smoke and silver steam. And as it grew closer they saw a man walking in front of it with a red flag, and several men walking on either side carrying spades and pick-axes. The thunderous drumming increased. Cirsc decided she did not want this to happen, clambered up the steps and stood in the door. Mereg went to her and put her hands over Cirsc's ears to keep out the terrible noise.

The huge black machine came to a halt in front of the hostel, smelling of hot tar. A great jet of steam came suddenly screaming from a pipe beside the funnel, and everybody stood up and backed away. The steam

subsided, and the smoke from the funnel turned a lighter grey and began to thin. A sort of calm descended again. The travellers noticed that the children had not stopped playing in the sand, completely ignoring the hideous machine.

The men threw down their spades and pickaxes and filed into the hostel, nodding to the travellers with friendly smiles. A large red-faced man was to be seen pulling levers and turning tap-wheels high up in the machine. As silence finally settled he climbed down and came towards them. Qno, is it? he said to Meer.

Meer indicated Qno, and the man offered him his hand cheerfully. Welcome to Crys, he said.

How did you know my name? asked Qno.

The Abbot told us, said the man. My name is 78.

You've seen the Abbot? said Qno, amazed.

Telegrid, said the man whose name was 78. Message came through five days ago. You're on the way to Gosste?

Kirfa, said Qno.

Perhaps Post will be able to take you, said 78. Come in and have a white water with us. Have you eaten?

We have indeed.

She makes good soup, my old 37, said 78.



Steam engine, said 78 as they sat round the table and the goblet went round. Never seen one before?

They have steam engines in Kirfa? asked Meer.

Never. Got this one down south in Tarc. They don't use steam in Gosste. They use Imagination. And a lot of good that'll do them, if the sands start moving again. They say the Ozu dries up ten leagues south of

Gosste. Hanging gardens my painted arse. They'll not stop the sands, once they start. I told the Chair. Walls, I said. That's what the walls were for. That and the legions. But she has her own ideas.

Imagination, said Cirsc, means making images real.

Everyone looked at her. Nobody knew what to say. But Cirsc's happy face calmed all doubts. There was a comfortable silence.

What do you use the steam engine for? said Qno.

Mending the road. We're mending the road up by Green Pan.

Instructions from the Chair. No idea what she's thinking. They say the legions have sacked Magre, they'll be coming down that road, driving the refugees in front of them. Best to leave it unmended, I'd say. But the Chair thinks differently. I reckon she's mending the road for refugees. She has a thing about refugees. Pays all their expenses with us. Good trade.

What happens here when the legions come? asked Meer.

Can't see them coming this way, said 78. It's the easiest route for refugees, they meet up with migrants from the south, they all walk together, safety in numbers. But the legions won't be coming down here. They see to themselves. If I were the Tyran I'd take the fastest route, head east when the party's over in Magre. I'd cut across east, straight over the grass up beyond, straight to Kirfa. The Tyran of Pyzan knows what he's doing.

He thinks he knows, said the old lady. The Chair knows better.

5

The town of Magre, north over the Moor from the Hald, was burning. In his tent, at a comfortable distance from the smoke and flames, the Tyran and his generals poured over a map of the great grasslands. The Tyran took a heavy ruler and drew a straight line over the featureless stretch between Magre and Kirfa, a large unmarked white area on the map.

This is our route, he said.

Straight, said one of the generals.

Ten days' march, said the Tyran.

Depends on terrain, said another general.

No water, said a third.

No settlements, no pickings, said the first.

We have ample meat and grain, said the Tyran. Every man carries his own water.

Unmitigated heat, said the third general.

Unmitigated drivel, said the Tyran. My legions know how to follow their Tyran's orders, even if my generals don't.

What, said the third general, do we do with those soldiers who succumb to the heat?

Nobody will succumb to the heat, said the Tyran of Pyzan. Those are my orders.



The third hundred of the first cohort under the centurion Oswicus had excelled themselves at Magre. The settlement had been larger and richer than expected, and the pickings abundant. Oswicus's hundred had

perhaps been hungrier than some of the others, or possibly they had men in the ranks who knew how to herd cattle. A rumour went around that they had been visited by a young and beautiful witch in the Valley of the Hald, who had given them enchanted apples to eat. At any rate the cattle of Magre had roasted well and tasted good, and Oswicus's men were rewarded by promotion from third to second hundred of the cohort. The local wine had turned out to be potable. Admittedly the women had been disappointing, but nevertheless the legion's spirits were up, and the newly promoted second hundred marched with a spring to their nailed sandals, and sang marching songs about Rur for the God of the legions, the personal friend of the Tyran. Before was the easy trek over the grasslands, and the great prize of the Holy City's gold. The Tyran knew his stuff, clearly. A good Tyran.

And then the good Tyran himself arrived at the head of a fine troop of cavalry. Forward to Kirfa! he said. For glory and the fatherland! And the legions sang Rurorian songs of battle as they marched in the wake of the cavalry.



In Crys, the company of five waited for Post to arrive. But before that, the Chair was due to appear. Some time mid-morning, said the old woman whose name was 37.

They sat out on the steps again, watching the road east. The same three children played in the sand; 78 and the other men had left with the steam engine. It was warm and windless, there was a high haze in the sky and the sun was indistinct. But as the morning wore on the sky became copper-grey; there were far flashes of lightening in the east and the distant rumble of thunder. And then it was as if a new sunrise were brewing far in the east where the road led, staining the low dark clouds

with colour that spread and grew from red to orange and gold, until it filled half the sky. Gradually, at the centre of the rising light, a silhouette came into being: three prancing horses and a chariot driven by a small standing figure, with two others seated behind her, a young man and a young woman with grave expressions on their faces. The playing children stopped to watch as the chariot drew up by the steps of the hostel. The dust settled.

You would be Qno and his companions? said the driver, removing goggles from her eyes. She was hardly taller than Mereg, and not much older, thought Qno. But he could not deny the astonishing fact: this was the Chair of Kirfa.

Yes, ma'am, he said.

The old woman of the hostel appeared in the doorway. Stopping for tea, ma'am? she asked.

Sorry, 37, said the young woman. Next time perhaps. Got a meeting with the Tyran, and I'm thinking of looking at 78's roadwork on the way north. We'll be coming south again as soon as we can.

She adjusted the goggles over her eyes again.

We'll talk together when we next meet, Brother Qno, she called. I hope soon to offer the hospitality of Kirfa to you and your companions.— And the horses sprang forward, wheeled right onto the north road, and disappeared in a pall of dust.

There were no wheels on the chariot, said Hadr. How did it keep up? Imagination, said Mereg and Cirsc together.



Post arrived in the night. Only Cirsc noticed, and sat upright, listening to the voices in the yard; but after a while she snuggled down under the

skins again and threw her arm over the sleeping Mereg. Mereg spoke in her sleep: I have the axe, Meer, she said.

Cirsc chuckled to herself, and Mereg chuckled too, without waking.

The next morning there was a family of four sitting at the breakfast table: a small man and an even smaller wife, and two minute girls.

Qno bade them good morning and introduced himself and his companions. Cwints, said the little man, standing and bowing and shaking hands with himself. My family Cwints, he said, indicating his family. The woman stood and bowed and shook hands with herself and said Cwints. The two little girls said something small and indistinct.

Delighted to meet you, said Qno. Are you refugees?

Migrants, said Cwints, smiling at his porridge.

Porridge? said the old woman 37. Without waiting for a reply, she began ladling porridge into bowls for Qno and his companions. As she did so, a tall gaunt man with a slightly worried expression came down the stairs and took his place at the table, nodding briefly to the company.

This gentleman is Post, said 37. He has room for you in the wagon.

That is very kind of you. Of him, said Qno.

You are coming to Kirfa? asked Cwints, his eyes lighting up.

Yes, said Qno. We are refugees from the Hald.

Migrants, said Cwints, smiling.

After porridge there was bread and coffee. Mereg broke the silence: Are you from Tarc? she said.

Cwints named a place which Mereg did not catch. Cirsc repeated clearly for everyone: Kotimangu. None of the others had heard the name before.

Work in Kirfa, said Mr Cwints from Kotimangu.

That's nice, said Mereg. And what is your work?

Medic, said Cwints. He made movements over his plate as if he were sewing with needle and thread; then he pointed to his upper lip, smiled and pointed to Hadr. Mend face, he said brightly.

You are a surgeon?

Cwints shook his head and pointed to his wife. Husband of Surgeon, he said. His wife smiled without looking up and made the same sewing movements. Wife of husband, she said.

I'm having trouble with my knees, said 37, who was fetching a napkin to wipe Cirsc's face. Been waiting for a doctor to come through for some time.

Mrs Cwints stood and bowed. Inspection, she said.

Lovely, said 37, wiping Cirsc's face. Please come with me. And she lead the surgeon into another room, wiping her hands on the napkin.



Post's wagon was another horseless vehicle—presumably the people of Tarc did not use horses. It had four rather flimsy-looking wheels and steering levers protruding up from a large black box bolted down between the two front wheels. It drew behind it a second more robust-looking wagon with ten or a dozen wooden seats for passengers under a fluttering white awning, and behind that was a red box-like trailer for luggage and post.

Hadr was captivated. Is there a motor in the box? he asked Post.

Don't know, said the gaunt man cheerfully.

Can I look inside?

Certainly not, said Post. It is never opened.

What do you do if it needs repairing? asked Hadr.

Never needs repairing, said Post. Mechanics in Tarc and in Kirfa.
Forbid me to tinker.

Where is the fire? asked Hadr.

No fire, said Post. No water. Air, I think.

Qno and Mereg found the donkey busy with a bale of hay behind the hostel. They led it round the hostel and attached it to the cart. It won't be able to lie down at night, said Mereg.

It won't need to, said Qno. It'll just keep going until it gets back to the Abbey. It's an Abbey donkey. They understand these things. And he whispered into the donkey's ear: Back to Cro, old lady. Safe journey.

The donkey pressed its muzzle briefly into Qno's shoulder. He stroked its neck for a moment; then he released it, and it turned without a backward glance and set off at a lively trot down the long road west.



37 was exuberant. She showed me a sign! she said. Works in an instant! She hitched up her skirt and made a sign over her knee with her middle finger. It looked like an O with a Z in it.

Not to use too often, said Mrs Cwints. Once a day before main meal, once for each knee.

Post loaded their belongings into the box-trailer, and Qno and his companions clambered up into the passenger wagon after the family from Kotimangu. Hadr was allowed to sit in the one passenger's seat beside Post in the motor-car. Mereg lowered her brows but said nothing.

On the side of the box over the front wheels was a small hole with a string protruding through it attached to a wooden handle. Post lent forward, grasped the handle and pulled a few span of string out of the hole. He turned and smiled meaningfully at Hadr.

So you see how it's done, he said.

Then with a flourish he released the handle and the string trundled importantly back into the hole. A low buzzing sound was heard from the box.

Hold tight, said the Post. He engaged a lever and the car gave a shudder. Then he pushed another lever, pressed his foot on a small knob in the floor, moved another lever two clicks up and to the left, took his foot gently off the knob, and the cavalcade moved majestically forward.

37 waved at them from the steps. She blew a kiss, and Cirsc blew a kiss back.

Our regards to 78, called Qno.

Post, I forgot! shouted 37. The Huns are on the warpath!

Splendid, shouted Post. The car and its carriages rumbled past the playing children who looked up and waved at the passengers.

What are Huns? asked Hadr.

Harmless idiots, said Post.



Almost a stadium apart from the encampment of the legions, alone out in the grasslands, a small white pavilion had been pitched. Inside were two chairs each side of a low table with a pot of tea and two blue drinking-bowls. The Tyran, seated on one of the chairs, poured the tea. The Chair of Kirfa, seated opposite him, raised her steaming bowl in salute and took a sip.

The Tyran had proclaimed a radius of a hundred fathoms around the tent reserved for himself and the Chair only. The Tyran did not like to be overheard.

You're looking gorgeous, Sam, he said.

Good of you to receive me, James, said the Chair.

A neat little idea, don't you think? said the Tyran. Just you and me.
And afterwards, my word against your word.

In Kirfa, we consider informal unrecorded meetings merely dysfunctional, said the Chair. If anything material is to come of them, they will have to be repeated in the company of witnesses. I would have preferred to have my two advisors with me.

You have such young advisors, said the Tyran. This is perhaps a consequence of your own youth.

My old advisors do not travel at my speed, said the Chair.

A foolhardy journey, if I may say so. Alone on the grasslands to sue for peace from my legions?

Yes, I suppose that would be the right term: to sue for peace. But *for* your legions, James, not from them.

He raised his eyebrows. Peace? For my legions? What have legions to do with peace?

What has our world to do with war?

Don't be hypocritical, Sam. You know you need our wars. How could you run your precious city without the refugees I send you?

The refugees that come to us are the lucky few, James. How many die on the road? How many die by your swords? How many traumatised souls do you send wandering over my grasslands?

There was a smile on the Tyran's face. Whose grasslands? he asked softly.

Kirfa's grasslands, said the Chair. A slip of speech. I fell into your mode of discourse.

So it seems, said the Tyran. It must be difficult to maintain that level of hypocrisy without the truth slipping out occasionally. Admit it, Sam. You need me.

How can you say such a thing? What use have I or you and your soldiers for terror in this world?

Without terror, there would be no fight for the good. You know that. That is a meaningless circular argument, James. You know that.

We are getting nowhere, Sam. Just as you need me, so I need you. I do not rule over a nation of effeminate pleasure-loving noble-blooded democrats, as you do. My people are proud, free individuals, who know they have to fight for their small comforts. If I am to persuade the people of Pyzan to pay me taxes to run the State, I must show them I can lead them to victory. You have an open city of gold and spices; you have contacts with other worlds. My people expect me to bring back to them a share in such treasures. I shall be at the walls of your holy city within the fortnight. Do I have to take what I need by fire and sword? The choice is yours. Give me fair bounty, grant me noble hostages, and my people and my legions will gladly forgo the labour of plunder and rapine. You yourself would be a fair hostage to show to my people. You understand that you are already in my power?

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders, a sad smile on her mouth.

You should understand, Sam, that I am the only person in this camp who can save you from my soldiers. Luckily for you, that is what I intend to do. It is my pleasure to grant you safe passage home to your Kirfa, you and your advisors. There you will give your people orders to lay down their arms and open the gates for me. And then when I see you next I shall explain what my further plans are for you.

She did not answer, but the smile remained. Her eyes wandered from his and moved over the wall of the tent behind him, as if meditating on what to say next. Then she looked down at her bowl, sighed again, and put it down on the table.

She stood up.

The Tyran rose immediately to his feet. They looked at each other over the table.

Sit down, James, she said.

To his surprise, he sat down.

My people have no arms, and no gates to open, James. I thought you understood that. I came here to explain to you how you can avoid sending your soldiers to their deaths. Since you will not listen to me, I shall now go back to your soldiers and explain the same thing to them. You will remain seated here the while.

And she left the tent, and walked back to the waiting troops.

There was jeering from the ranks as they saw her approaching.

Had a nice little talk with the Old Man, lady?

She stopped a few fathoms inside the proscribed circle around the pavilion.

I fear your Tyran is a little indisposed, she said. One or two of you will have to brave his wrath and disobey his orders by going to the tent to assist him back to his quarters. Who is willing to take up the challenge?

There was silence.

Nobody? That is unfortunate. While you are considering the matter, I would be obliged if you would call my aides and my horses and chariot.

Still there was silence.

I really must insist, she said.

There was a movement in the press. After a while the troops parted ranks to allow the chariot through, backing nervously away from the hovering wheel-less vehicle. The Chair climbed up into the car. You OK you two? she asked the aides.

More or less, they replied.

She took the reins and arranged the goggles on her forehead. Then she turned and addressed the troops.

Unfortunately your Tyran would take no advice from me, she said, her voice carrying well over the silent crowd. I shall therefore give you this advice instead, so that you may judge accordingly.

I want you to know that I would not willingly harm a single hair on your heads. But you should be clear that all of you who persist in this stupidity will die of hunger and thirst on these grasslands. I advise you all to retrace your steps and return to your homes while you can still walk. The choice is yours.

She placed her goggles over her eyes and flicked the reins. The troops again split ranks to give the wonderful chariot passage, backing in superstitious awe away from the mysterious vehicle and its beautiful driver.

The horses headed for the long road south to Crys.

6

The motor buzzed cheerfully, and the post-train sped over the grasslands, much faster and quieter than 78's steam engine.

How long will it take to get to Kirfa? asked Hadr.

Ten days, said Post.

Surely it's not as far as that? At this speed?

We don't go straight, said Post. I have goods for various places. And the road gets worse. And I fear the Huns will slow us down.

Are they dangerous, these Huns?

No more to us than to themselves, said Post. Moderately dangerous, I suppose.

They stopped at two isolated farms that day, and the travellers began to realise why the journey would take ten days. The detours were considerable and the talk rambling and prolonged. The coffee was good, however, and the farm-people friendly. The younger inhabitants watched Mereg with fascination and Hadr with awe, while the very young stared at the Cwints girls, who stared dutifully back. By nightfall, Qno reckoned that they had progressed a little more than four hours in the proper direction.

Post took out a large tent from the box-wagon and pitched it on the grass. An eating-tent for the evening, and a night-tent for the women, he said. Mereg said she would prefer to sleep out under the stars. Doubtless, said Post, but I make the rules here on this train. And anyway there will be no stars tonight.

He was right. As the evening wore on a light rain began to fall in the still air. The men lay together under the middle carriage, wrapped in

skins. The darkness was absolute. Qno lay on his back, and soon began snoring. Meer poked him. Lay on your side, old man, he said. Or we'll send you to sleep with the women. Qno rolled over, and the gentle sound of falling rain carried them all into the night.

The next day they made better progress, although the rain continued. Hadr moved back to the second wagon, whose awning kept the passengers fairly dry. Post sat alone at the levers and seemed not to notice the rain. They made no stops or detours during the day and Qno reckoned they had progressed some three leagues by evening. The skies cleared and they watched the sunset as they ate outside the tent.

Hopeless scenery, said Post. Nothing but horizon. Claustrophobic.

Some would say otherwise, said Qno.

I know who, said Post. We may well meet up with them before long.

You mean the refugees? asked Hadr.

No refugees between us and Kirfa, said Post. Not since the monks pulled their bridge. They'll come round the top through Magre soon enough. And they will be fleeing from Magre down the south road to Crys. I'll have extra wagons on my next trip.

Why don't they go straight over the grasslands east to Kirfa? Why head down to Crys first? asked Mereg.

They go where there's food and water, said Post.

But the legions will head straight east?

The Tyran expects his legions to march anywhere, any time, said Post. That is his mistake. Unless the Chair has got him to see reason. Which I doubt.



The following days were fine, and they made good progress, stopping fairly briefly at only three farmsteads in as many days.

Qno was singing the First Verse:¹

ever first Between °
ever between Two \
Two beside One °
Two beside Three \

Does that actually mean anything? asked Mereg.

Opinions differ, said Qno. A hermeneutical quagmire. The Abbot says it tells of the Beginning of Everything.

Much later Cirsc asked: Are the capital letters necessary?

On the fifth day at around midday they came to a crossroads, where a narrower track ran north and south over the level grasslands.

Post switched off the engine and sat gazing solemnly to his right down the southerly turning.

Are we waiting for anything? asked Qno.

We are waiting for me, said Post. I am making a decision.

To go down this road or not? asked Mereg.

Exactly, said Post.

Everybody sat and waited.

This road goes to Two Pen, said Post after some time, as if reasoning aloud. The Astronomers have left no sign.

Mereg could not contain herself. Who are the Astronomers? she said.

Elri and Ynglà, said Post, as if to himself.

Do they usually leave signs? asked Mereg.

¹ See Appendix

Once in a while. Sometimes letters to the Observatory in Pyzan.
Sounds interesting. Let's go down and see them, said Mereg.
No sign, said Post. A long detour. They know we're here, but they're not answering. No letters for them either. We'll give it a miss.
I should like to meet astronomers, said Cirsc.
Not this time, said Post. We have to go to Asi.
How would you know if they answered? asked Hadr.
Depends on the answer, said Post.
Where is Asi? asked Qno.
This way, said Post, starting the engine and turning sharp left up the northerly road.
Astronomers, said Mereg, savouring the word.



Long ride to Asi, I'm afraid, said Post. Several packages for them. It'll take the rest of the day, barring accidents. I'd leave you here to camp at the crossroads if there weren't Huns about. They may not understand.

By mid-afternoon they had made little progress. The road was heavily rutted: the rains had clearly been heavier here further north, and in places the hooves of a large number of horses had trodden deep into the road. But the porous subsoil had dried rapidly in the sun, and the ruts had turned hard and difficult for the fine wheels of the motor-car. Several times Post had had to stop the car and attack the road with a pick-axe and spade. Qno leant a hand, and put his back to it, much to Post's admiration.

Not bad for a monk, he said.

Migrant, said Qno.

The gaunt Post could not match Qno's stamina. Mereg watched his flailing with the pickaxe until she could stand no more: she jumped down

from the passengers' carriage and relieved him of the pickaxe. She and Qno were used to working as a team with pickaxe and spade, and they levelled and smoothed the poor stretch of road as if they were a human steam engine.

My, said Post. You'll do well in Kirfa. Just the sort of migrants they're looking for.

The post train continued its painful passage north up the track to Asi. We'll be lucky if we get there by sundown, said Qno.

And even as he spoke, Post leant forward and switched off the engine. The buzz of the motor subsided and the wagon ground to a halt. Post sat upright in his seat, his head erect on his long neck, his arms folded, his face expressionless, his eyes focused on the road ahead.

Down the road towards them, at full gallop, came a troop of some hundred horses ridden bare-back by fearful looking warriors yelling and screeching with appalling yodels and brandishing long spears hung with banners and feathers in one hand and long bows in the other, their reins free on their horses' necks. They were nearly naked except for small skin loincloths, and their bodies, faces and long flowing hair were dyed vivid blue. They rode full gallop two abreast towards the post train; as they came nearer they swerved into two phalanxes, encircling the stationary vehicles in two yelping and whooping rings of galloping warriors, one sunwise and the other widdershins, weaving in and out of each other with terrifying dexterity. The family from Kotimangu were cowering in their seats in terror. Cirsc had stood up and was hopping delightedly from one foot to the other, clapping her hands and doing her best to screech with the riders. The others looked rather perplexed. Post stared rigidly ahead, his jaw set, his arms folded.

Suddenly the riders took aim with their bows and let fly a thick volley of arrows. The arrows thudded into the ground in a perfect ring surrounding the post train.

Pathetic, muttered Post to himself.

And then an arrow struck the box-wagon with a thud and stood there quivering. Post sprang to his feet and swung round to look fiercely at the box-wagon.

Hey! he yelled. Who did that?

Sorry, called a rider. I got carried away.

The horses slowed down and broke ranks. The blue-skinned warriors jumped to the ground and started pulling up their arrows, squabbling together over ownership. One of the riders climbed up on the wheels of the box-car and tried to pull the arrow out of the woodwork, but it sat fast. Post had jumped down to view the damage.

No, wait, Batty! he called. Leave it there. It looks pretty good. Show the folks back in Tarc what sort of danger I have to put up with.

One arrow won't give the right impression, said Batty.

You're right, said Post. How about a few more?

Post ducked as five or six more arrows thudded into the woodwork of the box cart. He stood back to admire the effect. Not bad, he said.

Post, said Qno. Will this take long?

Post turned from the still quivering arrows and focused his eyes on Qno. He neither nodded nor smiled, and his mouth was a thin line; but his eye said clearly Qno, you are right. He looked around at the milling horsemen.

Went! he barked.

A man who so clearly bore the name Went turned and made his way towards them.

Help us unload? said Post. And he turned his eyes again to Qno.

They unloaded six wooden boxes from the box wagon. Went slipped a heavy knife under the lid of one of the boxes and prized it open.

Two hundred to a box, said Post. Should be enough.

Iron-tipped, red and blue and green fletched arrows, a good three span in length, lay neatly arranged in the boxes.

All the way from Gebbon, said Post.

Twelve hundred? said Went. She sent no more?

That's what I said. But no killing, she said. You are to target their water. Make every arrow count.

The Chair doesn't know an arrow from a toothpick, said Went.

She knows you lads inside out, said Post. So do I.

Went grinned. Staying for a parley? he asked.

Post looked at Qno. Not this time, he said. You can tell your stories when the legions are gone.



As they came at last to Asi the light was failing, and the travellers could not make out whether the settlement was a large farm or a small village. There were lights in the windows of several buildings. As Post drew up in front of the farmhouse a large man appeared in the yard, followed by two men with lanterns. You're late, Post, he said. Grid said you'd be here this afternoon.

Pesky Huns, said Post.

Huns? said the man, winking towards his companions. No Huns round here.

Of course not, said Post.

You got my packages? said the man.

Two boxes, said Post. In the box-car. No idea what's in them.

The travellers were led into a large kitchen where four or five young women were clearing dishes off a long table.

Come in, Post, called a bustling woman from the great stove. How many with you?

Seven, said Post. And two kiddies.

Leftovers, said the woman, bringing a large pot to the table. Oh dear, she said, surveying the travellers. A monk. Let's hope there's enough.

You're very kind, said Qno.

And a soldier, said the woman. Sure you're in the right place, dearie?

Meer glowered, but said nothing.

They're both farmers, said Mereg.

Maybe that too, said the woman. Does the foundling speak?

There was silence. Hadr opened his mouth to speak, but Cirsc was quicker:

Only when it has something to say, she said.

New bowls were laid out on the table, and the woman ladled an aromatic mash into each bowl. She stopped when she came to the Cwints family.

Well well well, she said. Migroes. We don't waste stew on migroes. Migroes eat porridge. She took the mash back to the hob and returned with a pot of gruel. The Cwints adults received small portions; the two little girls even smaller.

There's bread with it, said the woman. No need to starve.

They ate in silence. Cirsc lifted her spoon, and then put it down again and sat still, gazing unseeing into the distance. Hadr's eyes were on her: there was a sadness in her face that he had not seen for a long time. After eating they drank a milky tea, also in silence. The atmosphere was

oppressive. The woman and one of the girls busied themselves at the sink. After a while the woman said: Jenna, show the migroes their beds. They'll be tired.

The girl dried her hands. I'll show you where you sleep, she said to the Cwints family. They rose and bowed to her. Come this way, she said. They followed her out.

Mereg looked at Qno. His eyes were troubled.

The Cwints are doctors, said Merreg aloud. They are very good people.

We don't have much time for migroes in these parts, said the woman.

We are migrants too, said Merreg.

Post is no migro. And you folks are from the Hald, if I'm not mistaken. I know my people.

She raised her voice. Joel! she called. They've gone to bed. Come in and talk to our guests.

The door opened and Joel came in, large and beaming. He slapped Post on the back and sat at the head of the table. Bring the flask, old girl, he said to the woman. So you good people will be staying the night?

We were unfortunately delayed on the way, said Qno.

So we heard. Strange business. A goblet of the white, gentlemen? Do the women drink?

Not the white, said Merreg. Not for Hadr either.

Very sensible, said Joel, raising his glass. No point in starting too early. Your healths, gentlemen. On the way to Gosste, are you?

That's right, said Qno, raising his glass.

Must say I don't rightly understand what's going on in Gosste, said Joel. Don't know what she's thinking, that Chair. It's said she was parleying with the legions.

The lads will deal with the legions, said the woman.

Hush, woman, said Joel.

Mereg noticed that he had streaks of blue dye here and there under his hairline and behind his ears.

She's filling Gosste with migroes, said the woman. Hanging gardens instead of walls. They live the good life in Gosste.

Is it Gosste or is it Kirfa? said Hadr.

We Anamen call it Gosste, said the woman. It's our city. We were here all over the north before the Easterners came.

That was long ago, old girl, said Joel.

That Chair has you on a string, Joel, said the woman. You and the lads think of nothing but the dancing-girls of Kirfa. You won't see what's really happening. She's got a whole city of migroes building on the East Bank. It'll be a takeover. They'll drive us off our lands, mark my words. Unbelievers. No respect for our gods.

I've heard there are temples of both Reagh and Rufor in Kirfa, said Qno.

All bluff, said the woman. She knows what she's doing, that Chair. She wants to wipe us Anamen out.

She's right about the migrants, my old girl, said Joel. Gosste is thick with them. They do all the work. Those Easterners live lives of luxury, sipping their wine in the sun. Hanging gardens. You'll see. Why are you going to Gosste?

Variety of reasons, said Qno.

I'm going to have my face fixed, said Hadr.

Good doctors in Gosste, said Joel. Sewed up my Bartle they did. Give them that. They'll fix the little lady no doubt.

I don't need fixing, said Cirsc.

And the other gentleman? said Joel. I see by your ring you were in the legions.

Meer's face had an ugly expression on it.

No offense meant, said Joel.

We have a long day in front of us tomorrow, said Post. Where are you putting them, Joel?

Where are we putting them, old girl?

Jenna! called the women. Show them to their beds!

Cirsc turned to the woman as they left the kitchen.

How are your knees? she asked.

Terrible, love, said the woman.

You should talk to the lady you sent to sleep in the barn, said Cirsc. She mended 37's knees.

Mereg woke in the night. Cirsc's face was wet with tears. Mereg put her arms around her.

Don't cry, Cirsc, she said. They're not bad people. They're just worried about the future. They don't understand what's happening.

That's why I'm crying, said Cirsc.



They set off early the next morning, after a brief porridge breakfast. The Cwints were waiting in the yard as they came out. Cirsc ran up to them and hugged first Mr Cwints, then Mrs Cwints, then the two girls both at once, and finally Mr Cwints again. In spite of their surprise and consternation at this attack on their personal space the adults joined in her laughter, held their hands clasped on their breasts and bowed repeatedly. They had not succeeded in brushing all the straw out of their clothes.

The ride down the Asi road was swifter than the journey up, thanks to the roadwork they had undertaken the day before. By late morning they

had reached the Kirfa road, had turned right and were heading at a good pace for Kirfa. The spirits of the company began to pick up.

There were isolated farms, a few small hamlets, and nights under the stars on the way to the Holy City. The weather was mostly fine, with two wet afternoons, pleasantly warm but chilly at nights. After a while the tiny Cwints girls lost their shyness and began clambering over everyone, much to their parents' consternation. They tended to fall asleep in Mereg's and Cirsc's arms.

After five days of travelling the spires of Kirfa began to rise in the far haze.



The legionaries had stopped singing, and were marching in silence, four abreast. The cavalry had gone, and there were rumours that the Tyran had left the column and gone south to take ship at Tarc. The sparse grasslands with their hard-packed sandy soil made for easy marching, but the heat was oppressive. Attached to each century was a supply wagon for impedimenta, and the centurions had agreed to the troops' loading their personal packs onto the carts, and hanging their goatskins of water over the sideboards. It became necessary to call halts several times a day for the troops to drink. Before long the optios were rationing the water. The road to Kirfa began to stretch interminably into the distance.

By mid-morning on the eighth day, after an unbroken four-hour march, Oswicus began to wonder whether the semaphore wire in his helmet had lost contact. Certain of the men around him were beginning to show signs of fatigue, their pace laboured and unsteady. The call for a water-break was overdue.

And then the wire tweaked in emergency mode. Stand and face raiders on both flanks! he bellowed down the line.

The second hundred halted as one man and turned shields and spears outwards. Behind them, down the ruler-straight column of troops, they heard a cacophony of whoops and yodels, and they watched as a cloud of dust billowed over the troops behind them, kicked up by the thundering hooves of horsemen on both flanks of the column. As the yells increased they saw the bare-backed naked blue riders bending their bows and sending volley after volley of arrows into the line of troops. The thunder of the horses' hooves and the raucous howls of their riders grew to a crescendo; Oswicus's hundred crouched behind their shields and braced themselves against the arrows. They heard the thump of the strings and the rush of the arrows and the rattle of percussion as they struck; and the howling horsemen swept past them up the line to inflict the same punishment on the leading hundred. As they overtook the front of the cohort the two flanks of horsemen wheeled as one to the right and rapidly disappeared in a cloud of dust south into the heart of the grasslands.

Oswicus stood up from his shield and called down the line: Who's down?

There was no response. The troops lowered their shields and stood looking at each other in wonder. Not a single arrow had hit the shields. No one down! came the call from the rear optio of the hundred. Oswicus took five steps out of line to the right and looked up and down the legions, raising his arm to the other centurions who had all done the same. His semaphore wire began tweaking. All clear. Remain prepared. Resume advance.

Thirty paces further he felt the water in his sandals. The wet grass brushed his shins and the grey soil was dark with moisture.

Keep your ranks, he bellowed as he left the column and ran forward to the supply wagon of the first hundred. Every single water-goatskin hanging over the sideboards was pinned to the wagon with at least one arrow. Many of the goatskins were already empty. He stood back and watched as the troops trudged past him, waiting for the wagon of his own hundred. When it reached him it was leaking no longer.

After a hundred more paces the troops were marching on dry ground as before. The sun was a disk of gold over the helmets of the legions.

The column had lost nine tenths of its water. The Huns' precision was a thing of wonder: most of the skins had been pierced low down, if not at the very bottom, and they had leaked dry. And to make matters worse the grasslands were giving way to hot black sands which were soft under foot, hampering progress and filling their sandals with grit.

The water-rations were cut, and cut again. Makes no difference, lads, said Oswicus. We have our orders. To Kirfa!

The Tyran's orders were clear. No faltering. No succumbing to thirst. No death, only glory.

The spires of Kirfa took the best part of a day to rise out of the mist. The travellers had repeatedly heard that Kirfa had no walls; but the hanging gardens that began to take shape as the post-wagons trundled closer were mightier than walls, mightier than ramparts. They rose into the sky, tier upon tier, trailing green and purple, red and yellow with great swathes of mighty trees and cascading foliage. The road led straight towards the base of the gardens and disappeared into a mighty archway in the foliage. As they entered the travellers could see no gates, no portcullis, no hindrance to entry. The tunnel they entered was lit by unflickering pale lights at road level, and it continued for some two hundred paces under the gardens before opening suddenly into a wide plaza milling with people, surrounded by columns and walkways and many-storeyed yellowstone buildings. Post honked his horn and edged through the colourful crowd, and many called and waved to him. Finally he drew up in front of an imposing building with the stone figure of a winged being flying over the doorway, a horn to its lips. Kirfa Post Office, said Post. This is as far as we go.

A troop of six guards were positioned on the steps, three on each side of the doorway; and between them appeared two young people hardly older it seemed than Mereg, who came down the steps towards them as the wagons came to a halt. The travellers recognised them as the two aides who had sat behind the Chair of Kirfa in her chariot.

Welcome to Kirfa, said the woman. This is Wing, and I am Eye; we are personal aides to the Chair. The Chair sends her apologies for not meeting you herself. She is unfortunately not free from her duties this morning, and has asked us to see to your needs.

Two guards came down the steps and positioned themselves on either side of Qno and his companions. Qno turned and saw two other guards leading the Cwints family away from them across the front of the building and down a small alley to the right. Mereg turned too, and saw the two children waving to them as they disappeared round the corner. She gave low cry of distress and turned to look at Qno, but the young woman whose name was Eye intervened:

Have no fears for these good people, she said. They are migrants seeking a new home with us, and they will be received as all our immigrant are received. They will be given lodgings and the wherewithal to support themselves. The children will attend school, and the adults will be offered work according to their abilities and the needs of the City. I think you will find that they are well looked after.

In what way are we different? asked Qno.

We thought your Abbot had explained, said Wing. He sent you to us for a variety of reasons. Hadr and Meer will receive medical care. And you are all our honoured guests, who have made this pilgrimage to our Holy City. The Chair has asked Eye and me to see to your comfort here.

We did not know the Abbot had such good contacts, said Qno.

It is a recent development. We have learnt in recent times to expand the telegrid as far as Tarc and the Abbey of the Rock, with the help of our friends the Ambassadors from Eile. Your Abbot has been on our Council for many years, but since he does not leave the Abbey we communicated at first by courier. For two years now we have communicated by telegrid.

He keeps very quiet about this, said Qno.

Of course. As for the medical treatment, we have good doctors; but the ambassadors from Eile have medical abilities far beyond ours, and they have expressed a wish to meet you.

Indeed we are deeply grateful, said Qno, wondering where Eile was.

Wing will accompany you to your lodgings, said Eye; I shall meet you again tomorrow.

Qno bowed self-consciously, feeling that this was the right thing to do in Kirfa. Wing led them across the plaza, followed by three guards carrying their belongings. Post had disappeared, presumably into the Post Office. They took a narrow street leading east, further into the heart of the city, and after a short walk they came to a high yellowstone building of four storeys. Wing pulled a bell-rope at the heavy door in the centre of the building, opened it without waiting for a reply and ushered the company in.

Two women in aprons and headscarves appeared in response to the bell, standing and bobbing at the arrivals.

The City maintains this house for its guests, said Wing. These ladies will show you your rooms and leave you to wash and rest after your journey. The evening meal will be ready shortly. Please let the staff know if there is anything you need. Eye will be here to see you tomorrow morning after morning coffee. I think she will ask you to come to a meeting with the Chair. Meanwhile, you may like to take a walk this evening in the City; if you continue down this road you will come to the river and the City Centre. I think that covers everything. Is there anything you would like to ask?

The travellers looked at each other. Mereg said: We are a little confused, Wing. Perhaps we will have questions to ask tomorrow morning.

Wing smiled. I'm sure you will, he said. He put his hands together at his breast and gave a short bow.

I hope you will be comfortable tonight, he said.

The guards had put the travellers' few bundles down in the hallway. They bowed and followed Wing up the road.

The ladies bobbed again. You come up, please, said one of them. They took their bundles and followed her up the stairs.



Eye was waiting for them in the dining room the next morning as they came down for morning coffee.

The Chair would like to offer you breakfast, she said. Do you mind a short walk?

Just give us time to make our beds and clear up before we leave, said Qno.

That will of course be seen to, said Eye. Please come with me.

The weather was dry and warm. Eye led them along wide streets lined with imposing buildings and thronged with people: there was a holiday atmosphere everywhere. They came to a pleasant open plaza giving on to the river that ran below between high narrow banks.

Elefant Square, said Eye. The is where the Chair takes breakfast.

The square was teeming with a colourfully-dressed populace who appeared to have nothing particular to do other than talk and laugh together. There were a number of restaurants and coffee-houses round the sides of the square, with tables and chairs out on the paving stones with awnings hung over them to provide shade from the sun. There were hundreds of people, couples, friends and families at the tables, drinking coffee or herbal infusion and eating bread or sweetmeats. Waiters and waitresses bustled between the tables, clearing them as soon as any party stood up and sweeping the copious leftovers into baskets which were carried away into the cafés.

Mereg realised suddenly what was troubling her. There were no children to be seen.

Eye led them to where the small figure of the Chair sat at a large table deep in discussion with Wing. There were seats for six more at the table. As Eye and the companions approached they both stood up to welcome the guests.

Sorry I couldn't wait, said the Chair. I needed my coffee. In a bit of a hurry I'm afraid. I have a meeting in a short while at the Theatre. Please sit down. She poured coffee for the companions and passed round the wicker bowls of breads and dried fruit.

I hope you rested well, she said. It's a long journey by post-wagon.

We feel very privileged, said Qno. We had not expected a reception like this.

We are all privileged here in Kirfa, said the Chair. We have a large work-force of immigrants to see to our every need. In return, we see that they are well fed and housed, and are not overworked.

We had a migrant family with us in the post-wagon, said Mereg. I would like to see them again, and make sure they are well. Their two girls are delightful.

The Chair looked at Mereg, and their eyes met. Neither spoke.

I imagine that could be arranged, said the Chair at length. You are Mereg, is that right?

It is, ma'am, said Mereg.

My friends call me Sam, said the Chair. Is it true you are married to Qno?

Mereg felt the colour come to her face. It was a child's game, she said.

Marriage by cow is inviolable, said the Chair.

Where did you hear that? asked Mereg in astonishment.

I have ears everywhere, Mereg my friend, said the Chair.

It would seem, said Qno, that the Chair of Kirfa can hear as far as the Abbey of the Rock.

The Chair gave a cheerful smile. I have an informer in the Abbey, she said. You know him as the Abbot. We often talk together.

No Chair of Kirfa ever visited the Abbey while I was a monk there, said Qno.

Nor since, said the Chair. But now we have had the telegrid for some time. My predecessor often communicated with your Abbot, and I try to keep contact.

Qno saw as he looked at her that she was probably a little older than her girlish movements and youthful attire suggested. How long had she been Chair? And what powers had put her there? She looked up smiling and caught Qno's eye, and Qno had the feeling he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

The Chair of Kirfa leant over to help Cirsc with her bread, which was not behaving properly. Cirsc looked at her fondly.

You drive a lovely chariot, said Cirsc.

Yes, isn't it? agreed the Chair.

And you talked to the legions?

The Chair was surprised. You heard where I was going at Crys? she said. Yes, I talked to the legions.

Is it true they are on their way here? asked Meer. Everyone heard the anxiety in his voice.

It seems so, said the Chair. I am worried for them. The Tyran insisted on their taking the desert route because it looked shorter on the map. But the terrain makes it much longer. And the legions will run out of water.

You are worried for them? said Meer in astonishment. They are coming to sack the City!

No, said the Chair. That will not happen.

How can you be sure?

Trust me, Meer. Their pitiful army will not sack Kirfa. —But now, my dear friends, I am getting late for my meeting with the dancers.

Her eyes fell on Mereg again. There was a pause.

Mereg, she said, I rather feel you should come with me. She drew a ring from the many on her fingers and put it into Mereg's hand. Wear it, she said. You will see why.

And now, she said, standing up, Mereg and I must hurry to the Theatre. Wing and Eye have arranged a meeting for you with the Ambassadors. I apologise for this haste; the Chair of Kirfa can rarely relax. We shall no doubt have time to speak again later. Come, Mereg.

The two women looked like sisters as they made their way together into the crowd and disappeared.



The ambassadors from Eile were two tall, stately persons, both with the same stature and demeanour, and they were attired alike in light grey robes; yet Qno thought he saw in their faces that they were man and woman. But their faces spoke too of an otherness which Qno could not name. Their skin was darker than he had ever seen, a deep purple shade of black. There was no white in their round, dark, smiling eyes. Their heads were hairless.

I fear I cannot introduce you properly, said Eye, for I do not know the ambassador's names: if we ask them we receive the strangest of answers, and never the same. So we have given them names: this is Lo, and this is Halo.

The aliens laughed. Have you not thought, dear Eye, said Lo, that when you tell us your names, we have the same trouble?

Then may we ask where your home is? asked Qno.

Halo looked up at the sun as if to check her bearings, and seemed to be thinking. Her finger traced a line across the horizon before dipping and pointing down almost at Meer's feet.

Meer was aghast. You live in the ground?

Cirsc gave her happy laugh. Meer! she said.

Cirsc understands, said Halo. I was pointing *through* your planet. We live a long, long way away in the sky, in a place too far away for you to see. But your world revolves, and our home at this hour is beneath your feet.

You live in the Span? asked Hadr eagerly.

We live so far beyond the Span, said Halo, that Thought itself needs a long season to travel there.

And how did you come here? asked Hadr.

On the wings of Thought, of course, said Halo. It was a beautiful journey.

Could we travel with you? asked Meer, to his own surprise. He had experienced a surge of emotion on meeting the aliens, a new variation on the familiar textures of anger which composed his feelings. He dropped his eyes as Lo turned to him.

It seems to me that you could travel with us, Meer, if you truly wished to.

And me? And Cirsc and Mereg? asked Hadr.

Both the aliens gave a low, merry laugh, not unlike Cirsc's laughter.

You have no such plans, Hadr—nor does Cirsc, nor Mereg. This is your world, at least for the next many years. Isn't that a just reply?

And the three of them nodded.

What about Qno? asked Cirsc.

Brother Qno would be very welcome. But his greatest wish is to return home to the farm at Upper Crop.

You see into us, said Qno.

There is nothing else to see of you, said Halo, smiling gently. I do not see the red beard and the noble belly that you think is you, Brother Qno.

They all looked at Qno, seeing as if for the first time his red beard and noble belly.

Cirsc, said Lo, what was it you wished to ask?

Can you mend Hadr's face for him? said Cirsc. Mrs Cwints said she could sew his lip.

Yes, we could sew his lip, said Lo. We could perhaps do it as well as Mrs Cwints. But it would still be his broken face, although repaired. He would still have lost his real face, the face that was waiting for him.

What happened to that face? asked Cirsc.

Hadr lost it as he was growing in Jent's womb.

Mother has told me, said Hadr. One day she knew something had happened. She said I had lost my way. Then I found it again, but the damage was done.

Your mother is a wise woman, said Lo. It is my guess that she brought you back to the right way again. The damage could have been much greater.

I have seen Hadr's beautiful face, said Cirsc, his real face.

Cirsc! said Hadr laughing. When did you see my real face?

Once. You were asleep. Your mouth was really closed. It was thinking.

That is the face you can find again, Hadr, said Lo. It is still with you.

How can I find it?

It will take some time. But you have already started.

And can you find Meer's real mind? said Cirsc.

That should also be possible, said Halo, but it will take longer. The mind is a far greater mystery than the body. That is why you must travel

with us, Meer, to our home world. On our journey you will touch true Thinking. You will begin to know your real mind. Will you come with us?

Thank you, said Meer, if you will have me. I have no place in this world.

Not while you are on this path, said Halo.

And can you cure my sister Cirsc? asked Hadr.

The two aliens looked at Cirsc and smiled.

This young lady needs no doctors, they said.

Hadr explained: Her hands and feet don't always do what she wants.

That has taught her great powers of concentration, said Lo. But you have a point. Perhaps her body has finished teaching her what it has to teach.

Can you mend her hands and feet? asked Hadr.

Lo smiled. That would be a very simple operation, he said. His eyes narrowed slightly. There, he said, as if to himself. That does it, I think.

He looked down at Cirsc, smiled and nodded. She lifted her hands as if to examine them, turning them over slowly and gently, flexing her fingers. Qno watched her in amazement, as if seeing her for the first time. She raised her hands to her mouth, and to her nose, and to her eyes, and to her ears, her movements sure and steady. She laughed a low, soft laugh, a short laugh. Then she took two steps to the right, and two to the left, watching her feet.

That's clever, she said. She looked up at the two alien figures and allowed herself to laugh her long chuckling laugh. Thank you! she said. So simple! Why didn't I think of that?

You would have thought of it before long, said Lo. The time had come. But it's often difficult to find the easiest path.

Halo said: But now, dear Cirsc, you have work to do. Your job will be to teach others to find this path.

What a good idea! said Cirsc, looking round happily. And Qno's face was streaming with tears again.

Now I fear we have duties to attend to, said Lo. But we would ask Meer and Hadr to come to see us at the Spital tomorrow morning, when you have had breakfast. Then we can begin your treatment.

How long will they be in the Spital? asked Cirsc.

Meer will stay with us, if he so wishes, said Halo. But we need not detain Hadr long. He will soon see the way forward.

And they bowed and left.



The Chair led Mereg at a brisk pace through the streets of Kirfa. Everywhere people nodded to the Chair as if to a friend; sometimes she stopped to exchange a few words. At length they came to an imposing circular building dominating a wide plaza with many statues of men, women and animals in various heroic postures.

This is the Plaza of the Gods, said the Chair. And this is the Theatre. We have come to see a rehearsal. I need your opinion.

Why my opinion? asked Mereg.

I rely on people's opinions, said the Chair. I'm running out of my own.

But why mine?

I like you, Mereg. I trust you.

I suppose I like you too, thought Mereg.

It was a great amphitheatre, open to the skies, surrounding a spacious central stage on three sides. The theatre was empty of spectators, but the

stage was crowded: men and women in black, grey and blue costumes, turning and swaying, running and leaping to unseen music, in twos, sixes, twenties, their graceful bodies in perfect accord. And Mereg saw that they were soldiers: soldiers without weapons, armed only with the tide of their own movements.

A group of five people sat together in the centre of the amphitheatre facing the stage, and the Chair led Mereg down the stone steps towards them. As they were descending, one of the group, presumably the director, stood suddenly and called something in a language which Mereg did not understand. The music ceased, the dancers re-arranged themselves, then at a call the music and dancers resumed. Mereg and the Chair took seats in the row behind the director. Two of the group looked round, smiled and nodded. The dance flowed on, like a sea of racing waves. Mereg watched spellbound.

The rehearsal continued with frequent pauses during which the director sometimes leapt up onto the stage and danced with the performers. Mereg was utterly lost: she felt as if she were under attack, but not from some enemy, not from any evil. She *wished* to be conquered, to be overrun and remade.

She became aware that the Chair was watching her. There will be lights, said the Chair. It is an evening performance.

When will it be ready?

When the legions arrive, said the Chair.

This is your army?

And the Chair smiled, a smile of deep happiness.

I knew you were a friend, said the Chair.

The rehearsal seemed to be finished. The Chair stood up and addressed the performers, speaking a dialect which Mereg could only follow imperfectly; but the references to the approaching army were obvious, and the speech seemed to end with the promise that the dancers would always be remembered as Saviours of the City. The listeners whistled and clapped.

The director jumped up onto the stage and began to give the dancers his notes. The Chair sat down again and leant forward over the backs of the seats to talk to the production group. I brought a critic with me, she said.

Mereg started to protest, but the Chair silenced her with a wave. Mereg, she said, this is Cretar, my general, my chief strategist.

Critic? said Cretar. Not too harsh, I hope.

Mereg felt the colour come to her face, and said: I liked it a lot. I think you will win.

The battle? said Cretar. I think so too. But let me hear your criticism.

Nothing really—

Something not really? asked Cretar. Mereg could not tell whether he was a man or a woman.

There's the part where some of them pretend to shoot arrows.

It worried you?

I thought—it's the only really warlike metaphor, said Mereg, using a term she had learnt from Cirsc.

Cretar and the Chair looked at each other.

They were shooting love-arrows, said the Chair.

I didn't see that, said Mereg.

Cretar said nothing, but looked long at Mereg and then at the Chair.

The Chair was grinning. I told you so, she said.

I'll sleep on it, said Cretar.

The director had finished with his review, and the dancers were drifting back to the changing-rooms. The Chair called: Tesil? Are you in a hurry?

A tall, graceful young woman jumped down from the stage and came towards them. Mereg recognised the dancer who had often been at the centre of the action.

Mereg, you must meet Tesil, my first dancer, said the Chair. Tesil, I want you to take Mereg with you to show her how you live. Mereg is my spy.

Tesil is a Migrant, she explained, turning to Mereg.

There was silence as she watched them both. They were staring at each other without moving, and the Chair began to count the heartbeats. After a while she allowed herself a smile.

I might have guessed, she said to Cretar as the two girls clung to each other. They are very alike.

They have met before, said Cretar.

My Tesil, said the Chair, as if to herself. And now my Mereg.

She looked up at Cretar and met her gaze. You will say nothing, my Cretar.



Tesil and Mereg walked together through the Old Town. They walked close together, but there was a deep shyness between them.

I don't remember you very well, said Mereg. Your name reminded me. I can remember Mother crying after you left.

I was sold to Kirfa, said Tesil. Mother sold me.

No she didn't, said Mereg. She wailed and wailed. I thought she would never stop.

Tesil took Mereg's hand.

She sold me, Mereg. They all sold me. I was the only thing they had. They would have sold you, too, if you had been older.

They who? Father?

He had gone before. With the legions. The clan sold me. They had no choice. And I was lucky, I was sold to Kirfa. To a high family, for a son who does not desire women. So I went to school. And now I dance. For Sam. Why are you here? How does Sam know you? What happened?

We were taken, me and Sextus and Septimus. I don't remember very well. We were saved by a monk, It's a long story. You must come and meet him. He's my monk.

Where are Sextus and Septimus? asked Tesil.

At home. In Upper Crop in the Hald. It's a long story.

Mereg led the way back to the Hostel, where Qno and Cirsc were beginning the midday meal alone, with Hadr and Meer away at the Spital.

Of course you have a sister, said Cirsc. You had to have one.

Qno's eyes were watery. Always bigger and better, he said.

They ate together, but Tesil was quiet, and the others did not press their burning questions. Finally Tesil said her family were waiting for her.

You have not told us about your family, said Qno.

Mereg must come with me now to meet them, said Tesil. Your nephews and your brother-in-law. We live on the East Bank.

The family is turning into a tribe, said Qno.

The two girls made their way towards the river, Tesil clasping Mereg's hand tight in hers.

They came to the plaza by the river. I want to sit with you and drink coffee, said Tesil. In celebration.

They found an empty table close to the river. Mereg noticed several of the guests eyeing them.

Why are they staring? asked Mereg in a low voice.

Migrants don't sit at tables in Elefant Square, said Tesil. But don't worry, I've got a pass. And I know the guys here.

A waiter stood beside them. Tesil, he said. Don't make it difficult.

I'm thirsty, Dicuil, she said. And I have my pass.

They'll still kick up a fuss, said the waiter. And who's this?

Friend of Sam's, said Tesil. Show him your ring, Mereg.

Dicuil sighed.

Two shorts without, said Tesil. And dates.

Don't blame me if it rains, said the waiter.

What does he mean? asked Mereg. Why do I have to show him the ring?

Everyone can see you are not Inborn. Me neither.

Inborn?

Good family. You and me, we are servants who do not sit at table with Inborn.

But the waiter knows you? You come here often?

He lives in my street on the East Bank. His wife looks after my boys after school when I'm rehearsing.

My nephews?

Two boys. I'm a dancer, I've got a pass with my picture on it, I'm sitting with someone who wears Sam's ring, I'm special. I can sit here. Ella can't.

Ella?

Their father. He's from the South. He's good, you'll like him. We're good together. I'm very lucky. I'm one of the lead dancers.

Dicuil brought the coffees and the dates. Don't make a scene, Tesil, he said.

It won't be me, said Tesil.

A scrawny hand, five fingers and no thumb, appeared from under the table. It seemed to be able to smell; it slithered towards the dates, took one and disappeared under the table.

Mereg looked at Tesil. They both looked under the table. A small dappled monkey was gnawing the stone out of the date. It looked at them and Mereg was sure it smiled.

Silver! came a woman's voice from a nearby table. Naughty boy! Stealing! The monkey ran to its owner and leapt to her shoulder, waving the date.

I'm so sorry, said the woman. He doesn't usually steal.

He can have another, if he likes, said Tesil.

Not that I have any objection to migrants, said the woman. But Silver is not used to them here.

Understandably, said Tesil.

I'm so happy you understand, said the woman. Please enjoy your coffee.

Mereg and Tesil exchanged glances and sipped their coffee. A thought returned to Mereg:

Where are all the children? she said.

At school.

Yes but the little children, the babies. I haven't seen any.

Being looked after, said Tesil. That's what Ella does. He loves his job.

The woman had risen to leave. As she passed their table she stopped briefly and said in a low voice: I dress myself, you know. Always have. I'm so glad, said Tesil.



They made their way to the river, stood by the embankment wall and looked over at the water, many fathoms below, running swiftly between narrow banks. The further bank was considerably lower, and from the wall they looked out onto another city, a maze of small terra cotta brick dwelling-places, swarming here and there in whirls and swathes with narrow winding streets between them. There were larger, taller buildings here and there, but most were small and only partially roofed, open to the sky. The city stretched many stadia out towards the horizon.

And beyond lay a yellow plain of featureless sand as far as the eye could see, with rolling dunes of yellow sand in the far distance, and beyond that a golden haze which became yellow and then silver as it merged into the deep blue of the sky. And the spark of Tungel rising, outshining even the blaze of the midday sun.

There is our city, the Migrants' city, said Tesil. The East Bank. This is where I raise my family. Come.

They made their way south along the embankment, coming after a few minutes to a rope bridge slung over the river.

This is our bridge, said Tesil. The main bridge is down round the bend, where you can take a wagon over. But this is ours. It's not supposed to be safe, and the Inborn are always threatening to pull it down. But it's a longer way down to the bridge if you live in the East Bank and work in the city.

They waited until a party of laughing migrants had come over from the other bank, several calling and waving to Tesil. As they waited, a

queue formed behind them, also waiting. And then Mereg saw that the pedestrians on the other side had stopped, and given way to Tesil and Mereg and those behind them. There was no traffic control, no signals: people simply gave way. They stepped out onto the rough planking of the swaying rope bridge.

And again, calls and greetings on the other side. Tesil led Mereg through the maze of narrow winding streets, full of children, dogs and chicken, and yet all clean and swept; and everywhere men and women toiling with goatskins of water slung over their shoulders.

Finally Tesil said: Here we are. You are my sister: this too is your home.

A young man with an apron round his middle looked up from stirring a pot on a stove. He smiled as they came in, but there was a distant, harassed look in his eyes. This is your sister-in-law, Mereg, said Tesil. This is Ella.

Ella laughed, and briefly embraced his guest. Sister-in-law! Where did you find her?

She's just arrived, said Tesil. Look, she's special: she has Sam's ring. Where are the boys?

Ella shrugged. Out, he said. With Tuuk I think. They came home early from school.

When did you come home?

This morning. I'm off until tomorrow early.—Mereg? Little sister? You never said!

Never saw her again, said Tesil.

How did you find her?

Sam found her.

Will she stay with us? said Ella, with a catch in his voice.

I'm in the City with friends, said Mereg.

Ah, said Ella.



And then the two boys came tumbling in, with a small friend. Hallo Tuuk, said Ella. Staying for dinner?

This is your Aunt Mereg, said Tesil. This is One and this is Two.

Hallo One and Two, said Mereg. They reminded her of her brothers when they first came to the Abbey of the Rock. Except that these boys were happy and hungry, not simply hungry.

They haven't got names yet, said Tesil. We can't make up our minds. What do you call them, Tuuk?

You and you, said Tuuk.

Hope that doesn't stick, said Tesil. I'm thinking of their grandfather's names, Rufor and Oswic, but Ella's not happy with them.

Ready for dinner? said Ella.

Yes! Yes!

The meal was a delicious pea soup, with herbs and bread to dip in oil. It seemed to Mereg far more delicious than the dinner they had taken the evening before at the hostel. The two boys and their diminutive friend Tuuk asked for more, and were given more.

You'll stay the night, said Tesil. I'm at home tomorrow until the afternoon rehearsal. You can go back to town with me or with Ella, he goes in early tomorrow morning.



Time for bed, said Ella. Story! Story! they shouted.

Auntie Mereg will tell you a story as soon as you're in bed, said Tesil.

Mereg told them the story of how she and her brothers came to the Monastery of the Rock, and how they were saved by Brother Qno, and of the farm at Upper Crop and Amfer and Meer and Hadr and Cirsc. The boys soon gave up and fell asleep; but Mereg went on with the story, and Tesil and Ella listened.

Will you go back? said Tesil.

I hope so, said Mereg.

Sounds lovely, said Tesil.

You could come with us, said Mereg. The more people on the farm, the more we can grow. You would love Amfer. And Qno is my husband. We got married by Cow.

Tesil and Ella looked at each other.

Sort of joke, said Mereg.

I'm a dancer, said Tesil. I couldn't leave Sam. She needs her friends.

Mereg settled herself into the big bed beside the sleeping boys, and looked up through the open roof at the stars. She could hear the murmur of neighbouring families talking together, laughter, and the occasional dog barking.

What do you do when it rains? she asked.

It doesn't rain, said Tesil. But we have had sandstorms. Two last year. The dunes are coming closer. If they reach us, we'll need more than a roof. Nothing can stop the dunes.

Not the river? The embankment? The Chair?

Not the Inborn, that's for sure. They are like children.

What did the woman mean when she said she dressed herself?

Some of them do, said Tesil. It's a new trend. Some of them can even boil eggs.

8

Mereg woke with the cock-crow; with many cock-crows. And Tesil and Ella's morning coffee was as wonderful as the morning sun.

Mereg decided to return with Ella. I shall see you soon, she said to Tesil.

They joined the morning queue of workers making their way over the rope bridge. Ella seemed anxious. Do you have your ring from the Chair? he asked.

Will I need it?

There are eyes everywhere, said Ella. Surprised, Merereg looked round.

Behave normally, said Ella.

They moved on into the city. Ella relaxed as they began threading the streets of the old town.

I saw someone, he said. Sorry, I got nervous.

Who did you see?

Just a face. Not everyone is a friend in the East Bank. There's a lot going on.

Such as what?

Ask the Chair.—No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't talk like this. Tesil would not like it. She has a good job, she works with the Inborn, she's close to the Chair and she's not the suspicious type. She keeps out of trouble.

They had come to a quarter of the city where large private houses spread over the south side of a gentle hillside. Ella opened a gate leading into a large garden surrounding an imposing old house, of white-painted stone. This is where I work, he said. This is the Kind Garden. This is where we look after the children of the Inborn.

The spacious grounds were surrounded by a high stone wall. The lawns were green, and clearly lacked no water; in the shade under spreading trees were groups of small children playing, with white-robed adults moving among them. The children seemed happy and active. Ella waved as they moved up to the house, and children called and waved back.

Do you look after many children? asked Mereg.

A couple of dozen at a time, said Ella. Come in and see.

Do they come early in the morning? asked Mereg.

It's not a day-school, said Ella. The children live here with us. Many of the parents come and visit them from time to time, and even take them home for visits. But they live with us.

Don't they miss their parents?

A few do. But we are their real parents. Few of the Inborn have time for children. It's not their custom. We bring them up. That is their mistake.

Ella pushed open the door and Mereg followed him in. He took a white robe from a row of pegs and threw it over his shoulders. My group is upstairs, he said. Come on up.

What do you mean by mistake? said Mereg.

He stopped on the stair and looked at her. We bring up their children, he said. Their parents live in a dream-world. The children are brought up in the real world. The situation is not sustainable. Tesil doesn't see this. Nor does the Chair. But it will collapse. Kirfa is the migrant city of the future.

They came up into a bright and spacious open area with groups of children sitting on the floor or at a low table. Greetings were called as they appeared at the stair-well, and several small children ran to Ella and

hugged his legs. An elderly woman in a white robe was clearing a table of the remains of breakfast.

We're late this morning, said the woman. Wen was sick in the night. Her mother brought strawberries again. Who's going to help me wash up?

Me! Me!

This is Mereg, my sister-in-law, said Ella. Mereg, Deles.

What's a sister-in-law? came from one of the children.

Mereg is Tesil's sister. She comes from the Outside. Perhaps she has time to tell you some stories, said Ella.

Outside! Outside! called the children, milling round Mereg. Yes, she had time to tell them stories.

Let's all go out in the garden, said Ella. When we have finished cleaning up.



Mereg told them many stories, some of doubtful provenance, and the children listened open-mouthed. Their urgent questions told her they thirsted to see the outside world.

Will you take us to Elephant Square? Ella says no. Ella, why can't we go to Elephant Square?

Elefant Square, Elefant Square! chanted the children.

Children and migrant workers are not allowed in Elefant Square, said Ella.

But I was there with Tesil, said Mereg.

You wear the Chair's ring, said Ella. And Tesil is the lead dancer and friend of the Chair. There is a class structure among the Migrants, just as there is among the Inborn. The City festers. The children are among the casualties.

You have schools and health-care, said Mereg, and you don't go hungry.

Kirfa does not use overt force, said Ella.

Tell us some more stories, Mereg, said the children.



The ambassadors kept Hadr and Meer in the Spital for two days. They were given comfortable beds in a single bright room with a high ceiling and large windows with light colourless curtains. They bathed and changed into loose smocks that were laid out for them, and they ate a light but refreshing meal. They fell into a relaxed sleep, dimly aware of tall, black attendants sitting quietly beside their beds. They slept throughout the first day, woke briefly in the evening, relieved themselves and took a cooling drink, and then slept an untroubled sleep throughout the night.

They were woken the next morning by a small woman carrying a tray with glasses of the same cooling drink. She gave a little cry of delight as she set the glass down by Hadr's bed. It was Mrs Cwints. Mr Hadr! she said. You come to sew? And she made sewing movements in front of her mouth. And Mr Meer! You sick too?

Good to see you, Mrs Cwints, said Hadr. You have found work at the spital?

She lowered her eyes. Carry drinks, she said. Make beds. In this spital not sew. Just drinks and sleep. Very strange. No blood. You come to me, I sew you, Mr Hadr, she said in a low voice. Very good sew. No scars.

You are very kind, Mrs Cwints, said Hadr. How are Mr Cwints and the girls?

Her face looked sorrowful. Girls in school, East Bank, she said. Cwints carries drinks, make beds.

You must explain to them what a good doctor you are, said Hadr. Tell them about 37's knees.

Migrants, said Mrs Cwints. Safe home in Kirfa.



We have been working with you for two nights, said Lo to Hadr. We feel that the necessary movements have been made. Do you feel any changes?

I don't know, said Hadr. I look the same.

Your body has found your true face, said Lo, and is working to develop it. But you are nearly full-grown. In the womb, this would be quickly done. For you, it will take some time. Perhaps a year, perhaps two. But I think no more than two. We shall be following your progress, although you will not be aware of us. Tell your mother everything we have said. Ask her to sing again the songs she sang when she was carrying you. You will soon see the change begin. And when in doubt, turn to your sister Cirsc. She has a clear understanding.

How can I thank you? said Hadr.

It is we who thank you. We learn and grow from this work with you. We are grateful for this added strength.

But you should come with us, Meer, said Halo. Our work with you will take more time.

So you said, said Meer. But I am surprised. I would have thought Hadr's face was the greater challenge.

We have heard this misunderstanding before from your people, said Halo. But the picture of a mind is not written like a face: it is as vast as Thinking itself. We can encompass the body, more or less; but the mind is that which dwells in both the body and in All that Is. If the mind is troubled, then All that Is is troubled.— Our return to Eile is in fact long

overdue, but we decided to monitor the coming encounter with Pyzan. This will be very soon, and we shall leave soon afterwards, and not return for seven of your years. Are you willing to travel with us?

I am eager to, said Meer.

Then you should go with Hadr now to join your comrades. If you change your mind and return with them to the Hald, that will not be a great misfortune. You have achieved much already. But if you come with us, you will become a whole man, and your return will be beneficial to you and your people. We would be honoured by your company.

Thank you, Lo and Halo, said Meer.



Qno and Cirsc walked hand-in-hand together through the gardens of High Kirfa.

Now you walk straight, said Qno, I can hold your hand without being thrown off balance. I almost miss the old times.

I prefer it this way, said Cirsc. I can focus my eyes better, too. Things have stopped jumping around. I never knew they were jumping around until they stopped.

Interesting, said Qno. Things were jumping around and you never noticed.

I once read a story about people who lived by a mighty waterfall, said Cirsc. They never noticed the roar until one day it dried up.

How did you manage to read, if the books were jumping around? asked Qno.

Well I never actually saw the letters, just the meaning, said Cirsc. Now I can see the letters. I never realised they were so beautiful.

I wonder what sort of things I've never realised I can't see, said Qno.

That's what Lo meant when he said I had to teach people, said Cirsc. People are probably jumping around all the time, without noticing. With me, it was obvious. I was lucky. Now you, Qno, you don't jump around. You're stable. You're a monk.

Am I still a monk? asked Qno.

Inside and out, said Cirsc. You always see the beauty in things and people. That's monkish. Although you may not have noticed.

Well I notice now, said Qno.



Either Wing or Eye came to the hostel every morning at breakfast, ostensibly to check that the company's needs were being catered for, but Mereg had the feeling that they were following orders to ensure that the guests were behaving.

How do you say your name, Qno? said Eye one morning.

Qno, said Qno.

That's impossible. Can you say it slowly?

It cannot be said slowly, said Qno. It's a short name.

Cirsc can say it slowly, said Hadr. Say it, Cirsc.

qñ, said Cirsc, slowly and carefully. q is a velar implosive, and the o is nasalised. That's why there's an n in the spelling.

What spelling? said Hadr.

How do you know all that? said Qno.

There's a public library in Tarrant, said Cirsc. One of the Water Women knew an old man who knew where the key was hidden. It wasn't a very complicated key, just a small iron rod. I use a bit of stick to open the door.

Cirsc keeps the books she borrows on a shelf above her bed, said Hadr.



One morning Eye asked Mereg to meet the Chair for morning coffee in Elefant Square.

Do you always drink morning coffee here? asked Mereg, when she had found the Chair's table.

Of course. It's the best coffee. This is a good place to start the day. The citizens of Kirfa like to know I'm on the job. I hope you don't mind my calling you away from your companions.

As long as they know where I am, said Mereg.

While you are with me, said the Chair, everybody will know where you are.

Mereg sipped the coffee the Chair poured for her, and found she was right: it was very good coffee.

Bread and fruit? said the Chair.

Mereg munched the bread and fruit. The Chair was busy reading papers. After a while she stacked them and put them into her briefcase. She poured more coffee.

Um, said Mereg.

—Why did I call for you? said the Chair.

Um, yes.

I have a free morning, I thought we could talk.

Talk about what?

Their eyes met for a moment. It was a little difficult.

Your eyes, Mereg, said the Chair, gathering herself. You give yourself time to look at things. I don't have such time. I was hoping you might talk to me now and then and point things out to me that I hadn't noticed.

Mereg thought: Either she is very uncertain about what she is doing, or she is very, very certain.

Probably both, said the Chair. That's why I was elected to Chair. Half the Council hoped they could control me, and the other half hoped I would let some fresh air in.

Since you can read my thoughts, said Mereg, why can't I read yours?

Perhaps you can, said the Chair.

Mereg was silent, sipping her coffee.

You want me to spy for you? she said at last.

No need for that. I have better spies than you would ever guess. Do you remember what you told Cretar in the Theatre?

About the arrow-shooting? said Mereg.

That was solid criticism, said the Chair. Cretar saw you were right.

It was obvious, said Mereg.

Exactly. But neither Cretar nor I had seen it. I want you to talk to me about obvious things.

She'll have me assassinated, thought Mereg.

And again their eyes met, again briefly.

Come with me, said the Chair.



The Chair's rooms were simple, almost austere. Nobody comes here, she said.

Then why me? said Mereg.

You and Tesil, said the Chair. Special people.

The Chair poured fruit-juice into small goblets.

Kirfa is dying, she said, after a long silence. The sands are drifting closer year by year, and the river runs lower and lower. Kirfa cannot be sustained.

And where will you go? asked Mereg.

We are debating, said the Chair. Perhaps we will retreat west into the grasslands. Or upriver, to the North. Some of us wish to turn to the Ambassadors, and go to other worlds.

That would be pointless, said Mereg, unless you had learnt to live on this world. There is little to be gained by repeating old mistakes on new worlds.

What mistakes do you have in mind? said the Chair.

There are terrible things happening here in your City, Sam, said Mereg. There, she thought. I can say your name.

We are not blind, said the Chair. The Council debates our difficulties unceasingly.

Your people cannot live like this, said Mereg.

Go on, said the Chair of Kirfa. Say more.

The city is divided. You must change that.

The migrants have food, water, housing, education, health services—
Legal rights? asked Mereg.

Yes, said the Chair.

No, said Mereg.

You are not informed, Mereg.

May the migrants sit with Kirfa-born in the city's cafés?

There are no laws preventing them.

Then why do they not?

You should bear in mind that the people of Kirfa have a long history, and an ancient culture. There are customs in place. Change can only come gradually.

They are your customs, said Mereg. You impose them on the migrants. Their rights are those which the Inborn have chosen to give them. They have no representation in your law-giving.

They come to us and ask for shelter. We grant them shelter. But we cannot give up our own homes for them.

You asked me to tell you what I see.

The Chair was silent for a while. Then she said: You use the word Inborn. You have learnt that from Ella.

Mereg caught the Chair's eye, briefly. Both of them looked away. Merereg waited, and then said: You told me I was not to be a spy.

Again the Chair's eyes wavered.

We met a woman who told us she dressed herself, said Merereg. I think she was proud of the fact.

I have heard similar stories. Isn't that is a step in the right direction? said the Chair.

The Migrants dress themselves, said Merereg. They make their own beds and clean their own houses and cook their own food. They will survive. The Inborn cannot survive.

The Chair was thoughtful, gazing out through the window at the milling crowd of citizens.

There are those in the Council who talk like you, said the Chair.

Mereg said: How will the Inborn cope when the sand dunes come closer?

I don't know, said the Chair.

Will their migrant servants pack for them, and carry their bags for them to the Monastery of the Rock?

The Chair looked at the girl from Upper Crop. And then she said, and her voice was soft and small: Stay with me, Merereg. I want your company.

But Merereg said something which surprised them both.

You could come home with me and Qno, said Merereg.

One by one, the legionaries were disobeying, and dropping out of the column. Mutiny, said the First Centurion; ignominious discharge without pension. Oswicus said nothing, but he had the collapsed bodies arranged in the proper way and the sign of Rufor made over them, the crossed hilt of the sword. Then they were pegged to the ground by their own swords through their breasts, thus putting those still alive out of their misery. Their rings were not taken from them.

The First Centurion called Oswicus up to march with him in the van. They moved apart from the column to talk together.

It's a bad show, Oswic, said the First Centurion. We can't go on like this for long.

Thirty-six hours, said Oswicus.

What I don't like is disobeying orders, said the First Centurion.

Are you likely to do that?

I'm getting too old for this, said the First Centurion.

We've crossed a number of dry watercourses, said Oswicus. I say we camp if we come across a good one, and send a party upstream to find wet and dig for water.

We are a week's march from any water in any direction, said the First Centurion,— except forward. There's water enough in Kirfa. We're there in six days. Maybe five.

Some of us, said Oswicus.

Five days, Oswic. Water and women.

As they trudged mechanically onwards, Oswicus saw in his mind, as often on this march, the woman of the Hald with her milk and apples, and her two boys.

But the First Centurion did not last the five days he had promised. And being a centurion, and First Centurion at that, it was not enough to lay him properly by and make the sign of Rufor over him. The grave was necessarily shallow, for his troops could hardly wield spades. Oswicus took the First Centurion's sword and drove it through his breast to prevent him returning; and they shovelled the dry grey sand over him.

And as they were finishing, the First Centurion's optio straightened his back and looked to the east, shading his eyes with his hands. His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper, but the troops of the van heard it:

Stand and face oncoming enemy, said the optio.

First century wing out to left! called Oswicus. And he raised his great voice and called to his own men, the second century: Second century advance and wing out to right! Close ranks!

The stumbling, disorientated soldiers obeyed his word. Except for three or four who mutinied by falling to the ground. Oswicus and the soldiers of the van strained their eyes to make out the oncoming enemy in the heat haze over the sands.

And then, without word from Oswicus, one by one the soldiers lowered their shields and spears. The enemy came in the form of three large horse-drawn wagons with colourful awnings over them. A small trickle of water from a punctured goatskin leaked over the rear boards of the first wagon. All the other goatskins in the wagons were tight and bulging with water.

The leading driver jumped from his wagon and came forward to meet Oswicus, the *de facto* First Centurion of the First Cohort.

Compliments of the Chair of Kirfa, he said.



Mereg saw little of Tesil, except on the stage. She accompanied the Chair on several occasions to watch the rehearsals. The dancers rehearsed from morning to late at night, And every time Mereg saw them they took her breath away. Twice Mereg visited Ella and the boys, stocking her mind with appropriate stories on her way into the Migrant City. Ella welcomed her visits; he was friendly but preoccupied, for he often sat long into the evenings discussing loudly with a stream of guests. He was happy for Mereg to see to putting the boys to sleep with her ever more preposterous stories of wise cows and recalcitrant sheep and sleepy endings, before making her way back to the hostel through the murmuring evening streets of the East Bank. Many of the people she met on the way greeted her warmly as Tesil's new sister. On her way through Elefant Square and the Old Town of Kirfa late-night strollers looked the other way or moved aside to let her pass, recognising the Chair's new migrant companion.

In Kirfa, time was thickening. Qno and his companions, wandering among the plazas of the Upper City and striving to help Meer forget the burden of his troubled mind and the approach of his mysterious departure to other worlds, felt the coagulation of the hours in the coffee-houses and meeting-places of the City. The free and happy citizens of Kirfa thronged the coffee houses as usual each morning, but the companions felt a mounting sense of expectation in their chatter and laughter, a heightened momentum, a focus in people's eyes.

Eye and Wing arrived together at the travellers' breakfast table one morning, saying they had good news: the Pyzan army was approaching, and the Great Battle of Kirfa was to take place on the plains in front of the city. Qno and his companions would be included in the list of

specially invited spectators with seats reserved for them on a favoured terrace in the Hanging Gardens overlooking the battle field.

Who wants to watch a battle? asked Cirsc.

The Ballet Corps will give an amazing performance, said Mereg.

So will the Pyzan army, by all accounts, said Qno. They have at least been supplying Kirfa with a steady stream of traumatised refugees for many years now.

You will not be disappointed, said Wing. And the music will be wonderful.

I suppose we'll be as safer up on the terraces as anywhere, said Meer.

And by the way, said Eye, would you mind joining the Chair for morning coffee, Mereg?

Of course, said Mereg, uncomfortably aware of the others' glances.



I intend to parley with their new leader, said the Chair. I want him to be proclaimed Tyran. But I need him to come out with his optio for my plan to work. You must come with me as my handmaiden, Mereg; we will approach the army alone. He will respond by approaching us with his optio. This has to be handled properly.

I, the Chair of Kirfa's handmaiden, said Mereg doubtfully.

Please, Mereg, said the Chair.

I can't really refuse, can I? thought Mereg. Or perhaps she said it out loud.



The hanging gardens of Kirfa, mounting ethereally into the sky, had been there on the skyline, disguised as mighty rising clouds, for several

hours before the weary marching legions saw them for what they were. The towers and spires of Kirfa were higher and more beautiful than they had ever imagined. Unarmed, undefended, they were painted pink and yellow by the setting sun that threw long shadows of the soldiers before them.

As the dusk fell and the armies came closer, the gardens began to generate their own light: not the flickering oil-lamps held by the optios to light the army's way, but a clear and dazzling light of many colours shafted down upon them from mighty lamps hanging like so many suns above them, and the legionaries saw that along the terraces between the trees, tier above tier, stood the soldiers of Kirfa shoulder to shoulder without number, resplendent in their bright uniforms, men and women alike. As the column of dusty soldiers drew closer a great shout went up on the walls, and then sudden rising chords of brass and woodwind, and the soldiers of Kirfa raised their arms out and up and swayed their bodies in a breathtaking gesture of welcome. The troops took up their positions in twenty lines before the walls, swords drawn, shields at the ready.

From the open gate in the centre of the citadel there came a shaft of light which angled out in the falling dusk and danced over the watching legionaries. Its brightness increased until a chariot glided gently out onto the plain, walked by three plumed horses abreast and driven by the Chair of Kirfa with her goggles on her forehead. Behind her in the Chariot sat her two aides, Wing and Eye, and beside her stood a slave-girl in a light grey smock. The chariot had no wheels; it glided. The legions had seen it before: they held their breath to a man.

The Chair of Kirfa drew the horses to a halt before the centre of the gathered cohorts, where Oswicus stood at the head of the First Century. The Chair passed the reins to one of her aides, and the chariot lowered itself for the Chair to step out with her slave-girl. The aide turned the

horses back towards the citadel before turning again and facing the legions, leaving the small figures of the Chair and her slave standing alone before the spears of the besieging army.

And within earshot of the nearest troops.

They did not have to wait long. Oswicus rose to the challenge and walked gravely out to join them, his optio at his side. Oswicus and the Chair stood facing each other, bowing briefly to each other, Oswicus with his hand clasped on his breast.

Oswicus, ma'am, First Centurion, at your service, said Oswicus. The army was silent, the soldiers closest to him straining their ears to hear the conversation. He had lowered his voice.

First Centurion? said the Chair. I rather fear you are soon to become Tyran.

The Gods forbid, ma'am, said Oswicus.

Your previous Tyran called me Sam, said the Chair. As do my close friends. Pyzan and Kirfa can only be friends, Oswic.

Previous? said Oswicus.

Your Tyran never returned to Pyzan, said the Chair. He lost his head in Dace.

There was a movement and a murmur among the closest soldiers, which began to ripple out through the cohorts: —They topped the Old Man in Dace!

I am a simple centurion, ma'am, said Oswicus. Even if true, these matters are not on my agenda.

A centurion does his duty, Oswic, said the Chair. As First Centurion, I suspect your duty will be to accept the purple.

Not so, ma'am. My orders are to sack and burn your city.

Are you bound by the orders of a Tyran whose head is on a pole in Dace? You should consider what your orders would be if you were Tyran.

And they both heard the murmur spreading among the cohorts:
Oswicus! Oswicus for Tyran!

Please, Lady, said Oswicus, feeling the panic rising.

May I address your troops, Oswic? Perhaps to invite them all to dinner?

Please, ma'am—

The Chair touched a button on a cord by her throat. A hollow click rang out from the terraces above her. When she spoke, her voice boomed out over the plain as if by some terrible magic:

Soldiers of Pyzan! she said. You will remember that I have spoken to you before, just east of Magre. I advised you then against marching to Kirfa, and told you that you would all die of thirst on the way. As it happened, I changed my mind—although your numbers have indeed shrunk since I spoke to you last. Kirfa realised that it would hardly be fair to leave you to your fate, so she sent you water to wet your throats. It is now our pleasure, mine and Oswicus's—

A great shout went up, drowning even the magic volume of the Chair's voice: Oswicus!

The optio turned and faced the army. He called in a clear voice: —
Long live the Tyran Oswicus!

Oswicus! roared the troops. Long live Oswicus!

The Chair touched the cord at her throat and her voice rang out even louder over the uproar:

Soldiers of Pyzan! It is our pleasure, mine and your Tyran's, to invite you to a special gala performance of the Combined Dance and Music Academies of the City of Kirfa. We hope you will enjoy this one-time only performance, which has been specially crafted for you. After the performance, dinner will be served here in front of the Garden Walls of

the City, and every man is invited to eat his fill and socialise with our lovely dancers. Let the spectacle begin!

Darkness had fallen, and the gardens were alive with moving shafts of light and colour. The Chair's voice clicked off, and instead the night was filled with a music never heard before by the soldiers of Pyzan, a music which thundered in their breasts and flooded their minds. And the enemy army descended on invisible cords from the gardens down onto the plain, wave upon wave of dazzling movement, so that the legions of Pyzan retreated step by step to give space for the breath-taking choreography of the Combined Dance Academies of the Holy City of Kirfa.

The Chair turned to the slave-girl and said: The chariot, Mereg! The girl turned and signalled to the chariot: Eye flicked the reins and the chariot glided forward towards them.

Oswicus, said the Chair. Your optio will return as First Centurion to his men. Mereg, thank you for your services this evening; you will join your fellow-travellers. We will speak together tomorrow, after the Battle.

Oswicus looked at the slave-girl. Mereg? he said. That's a lovely name.

I think so too, said the Chair, as they stepped up into the chariot. To the Council Hall, Eye, she said. The Tyran and I have some important matters to discuss.



These are my rooms, said the Chair, indicating a table set for two. We can talk in private here, and enjoy food and drink. We will not be disturbed.

I am honoured, ma'am, said the First Centurion. They stood silent for a moment surveying each other, Oswicus in his battle gear and she in the

simple blue and grey attire of her dancers. Oswicus had the irrational thought that he should wait for the music to begin.

Tell me the state of your army, Oswic.

My century, ma'am—

Call me Sam, Oswic. You are the Tyran.

Thank you, ma'am—

Sam.

My century, Sam ma'am, survived fairly well. There are eighty-three left of them. The rest mutinied. Throughout the cohorts, we have lost perhaps a third.

And the health of the survivors?

They're exhausted, ma'am. Sam. They need rest and food.

What of their fighting spirit?

Ma'am?

The Chair's eyes caught his, and held them. They were silent for a moment. Then she said:

I suggest you camp on the plain in front of the City. Kirfa will provide food and refreshment. When you are ready, you will allow parties of your soldiers to visit the city under the guidance of the City Guards.

Is that wise, ma'am?

In my opinion yes. I want your men to see as much of Kirfa as possible.

These are legionaries, ma'am. They came here on the promise of plunder and rape. You cannot allow them into your city.

And is that not a strange position for a centurion to take? asked the Chair.

Oswicus stared at her as if in shock.

Yes, he said. It is.

Then why are you taking it?

I - I don't know.

But I do. I fear you are not yourself, Oswic, and neither are your men.

I assure you I am most definitely myself, ma'am, said Oswicus.

The Chair had a curious smile on her face. You were all dying out on the plain, were you not? she asked

We owe our lives to the clemency of Kirfa, ma'am. But soldiers who have spent weeks on the march dreaming of the women of Kirfa will not let such things stand in their way. I am told your people are unarmed.

Tell me, Oswic, said the Chair, do you think there was a single soldier in your cohorts who did not drink of the water I sent you?

Oswicus stared at her.

Did you drink the water?

Of course, ma'am. Dying men will drink an enemy's water.

We have great chemists in Kirfa, Oswic. The water I sent you had a certain mixture of herbs in it. All of it.

Oswicus's eyes were locked into hers.

You feel the effect, Oswic, do you not?

He looked long at her smiling face. Then his eyes traced slowly down the length of her slight body, and stopped at her sandaled feet. Then they moved slowly up to meet her eyes again. His face was slack.

You have done this to all of my troops?

All who drank.

His gaze was level, and steady.

How long will this last?

The question is also, how far will it last, said the Chair. If you stay here, where these herbs are native, it will last for some considerable time. If you withdraw, I expect the effects will be gone by the time you return to Pyzan.

Oswicus swallowed. You have mighty weapons, he said.

I choose not to think of them as weapons. Remedial solutions, perhaps. Careful adjustment of the chemistry of the male body, what we call its energies. It has long been used in Kirfa as treatment for men whose dynamics have become unstable. Their masculinity, as you might say.

And she broke into laughter. Oswicus watched her, and felt his heart lift. Her laughter was beautiful beyond words. He reached out and took her hands in his.

I will allow my troops to visit your city, Sam, he said.

And you will allow them to stay, those who wish?

Would you advise that? What will happen when the effects wear off?

Desire for love will return, she said. But the mind will have learnt the desire for friendship.

Then I will allow them to stay, those who wish, said Oswicus.



One of the many weaknesses of the armies of Pyzan was of course its singular masculinity. The Combined Ballet Corps of Kirfa, on the other hand, boasted a considerable range of genders and sexualities. As the two armies engaged, therefore, and the dance began in earnest, man, as it were, to man, the legionaries of Pyzan found themselves at a considerable disadvantage. The breathtaking beauty of their opponents was a force that nothing could withstand, and large numbers of the soldiers threw down their weapons in hopeless despair, falling to their knees and offering up prayers to Reagh, Goddess of Peace and Love, thus invoking the most disastrous of military taboos on the battle-field. Others, their tears flowing copiously, bestowed kisses of gratitude on their adversaries. Within a very short time all physical engagement on the field of battle had ground to a halt. Combatants of both factions sat together on the

plain in pairs or small groups discussing the relative merits of military and choreological practice, and embarking on lifelong friendships involving all possible cross-gender and intra-gender permutations. After a while everyone began to feel hungry.

On the grass lawns below the gardens appeared great tables, row upon row, and on them a mighty banquet of fruits and breads and sweetmeats, cauldrons of soups and potages, great wobbling cakes of red and green and white and brown, and mighty amphorae of precious liquors.

And thus it was that the vanquished legions of Pyzan were feeling happy and content with their glorious defeat when the First Centurion returned to his beloved men.

Oswicus! Oswicus! called the legions. Oswicus for Tyran! They surrounded him as he walked back to them out of the gate and lifted him on their shoulders. They draped the purple over his shoulders. Oswicus, the legions' man, the new Tyran. The return of the Golden Age.

Meer turned from the scene, unable to watch. Cirsc put out her hand to touch his arm. You are safe here in Kirfa, Meer, she said.

I am safe, said Meer. But the Tyran is not.

The Tyran, not safe? said Qno.

Oswicus was a centurion, said Meer. Now he has left the ranks. He has left his comrades on the field of battle. He is a deserter, no less than I. And when his time comes, the legions will treat him as they treat all deserters. Oswicus will last at most two years. No Tyran willingly accepts the purple. No Tyran in living memory has avoided assassination. This is in Oswicus's mind at this moment.



The ambassador Lo took Mereg's hands in his.

Mereg, he said, will you talk to Meer, if he asks you?

If it is necessary, said Merreg.

For him, it is necessary. And for you it may also be.

For me?

You hurt too, Merreg, said Lo.

She looked at him, and saw his thought.

Yes, she said. I shall tell him about the axe.

But it was some time before Meer could bring himself to speak to her. She knew that time was running out.

Eye had come at breakfast and asked Merreg to take coffee with the Chair. Meer stood up as Merreg stood up and went with her to the door. Merreg knew what was coming.

Halo says we shall be leaving within a few days, he said to her as they came onto the street. I have little time left for what I have to do. Will you walk with me in the gardens?

Now? said Merreg. Sam is waiting for me.

Will you come with me instead? said Meer.

If you wish.



They walked on the terraces, beneath the great foliage of the hanging gardens, with here and there a view out onto the Battle Plain and the tents of the encamped Pyzan army. Beyond, in the far distance, were smudges of mountains that spoke of the way home to Upper Crop.

Meer was silent for a long time. Merreg walked with him and waited.

Halo said I must talk to you before we go, he said at last.

Yes, said Merreg. Lo told me. It's all right.

I have terrible things to say.

Perhaps. But I know them, said Mereg. You can say them to me.

They walked on in silence. Then Meer sat on a low stone wall under mighty trees, and Mereg sat beside him.

Halo has told me my only feelings are hatred, he said. She is right.

We can all see that, Meer.

I have strong feelings towards you. I hate you so much.

Yes, I know.

It is strange to desire something that you hate, said Meer.

You said Something, said Mereg. You did not say Someone.

What I say can only hurt you. But I have already hurt you so much.

He said nothing.

You hate me enough to go on?

Yes, said Meer.

Go on, then.

He was silent for some time. Then he said: In my dreams, I violate you.

Mereg breathed deeply before replying: Yes, I have seen that in your eyes.

Home in Upper Crop, said Meer, I made plans to violate you. Then to do away with you. Then I would have nothing left to hate.

Mereg turned to him, hissing: I was not afraid. She spat the words at him. When I saw you looking at me, I thought of the axe. I thought of myself swinging the axe at your head, at your body. At your ugly face.

Meer's voice was far and small: Forgive me, Mereg.

Never, she said, through clenched teeth.

It was as if she sat on the terrace above them, looking down at Meer and Mereg and the axe.

And then, after a long silence, she said: You must forgive yourself. In time, perhaps I can lay down the axe. But that is a future I cannot yet see.

Meer said: Forgive me for giving you the axe. I do not ask forgiveness for the rest.

And Mereg was silent again for long time, turning this over in her mind.

When, two mornings later, the Ambassadors from Eile came to say farewell and take Meer with them to their far planet, Mereg watched him embracing Qno and Hadr and Cirsc, and she thought of Amfer; but she could not embrace Meer. She took Lo aside and asked him: Can you take the axe with you to Eile?

Only you could do that, said Lo. But it would be better for you to go home to Upper Crop and lay the axe down yourself. It will be difficult, but we think you can do it.

Meer caught her eye at the door. He mouthed at her: Seven years. She wanted to nod, but couldn't. And then he was gone.

In the Council, the debate raged.

We did not agree to this, said an irate Councillor. You took this decision without discussion.

In a state of war, said the Chair, there is little time for discussion. You granted me full authority to manage the defences of the City. I did, and we prevailed. Furthermore, my understanding was that the Council welcomed all migrants.

But this is no normal influx, said the Councillor. These are all soldiers. Moreover, they are all males!

There are no females in the Legions of Pyzan, said the Chair.

Exactly. Male legionaries!

We have discussed this. They are no longer soldiers. They will settle down and marry and increase the migrant population. This is a windfall, not a catastrophe.

Marry whom? There aren't wives for them all! This is an imbalance, ma'am! An imbalance!

Fifty men, said the Chair. That is hardly an imbalance.

Fifty plus, ma'am. What happens when they wake up and remember who they are?

You forget, Councillor, said the Chair, that the East Bank is under our jurisdiction. Problems have arisen before, and have been dealt with efficiently and without hesitation. You will remember the Kind Garden strike. We have watertight surveillance.

Exactly, Ma'am. And we have had to weed out the seeds of unrest. These are soldiers, the scum of the earth. They are raised in violence and have always lived by violence. We are inviting trouble.

The Chair put her hand up for silence.

Very well, she said. We have had to weed out the seeds of unrest, as you say. I would suggest to you that herein lies the solution to the problem. We look to the weeding.

The councillors recognised this tone. They were silent, listening to their Chair.

We are not unaccustomed to problems of security in this Council. I would remind you of the report we considered earlier this year from the Watch. We have developed an excellent network of informers in the East Bank, migrants who share our vision for the future prosperity of our City. Now we know of at least a hundred trouble-makers on the East Bank, of which we can expect a half of them to be males. Undesirable male migrants. It so happens that the Tyran Oswicus would happily accept fifty or more male hostages from us to take back to sacrifice to the gods of Pyzan. My understanding is that he would be prepared to accept less material plunder from us in return. Would this not address your doubts as to a gender misbalance in the East Bank? And would you not agree that soldiers who settle down and father children are hardly more dangerous than many others we accept as a migrants? We weed out discontentment and replenish the migrant population with disciplined workers.

The councillors looked at each other.

I shall discuss this with the Watch, if you give me your approval. And report to you on these matters as soon as possible. I put this suggestion to you.

The councillors looked again at each other. There were almost imperceptible nods. The Chair took due notice.



You shall have hostages, and reasonable plunder, to display for your citizens, said the Chair.

It will buy me time, said Oswicus.

You need time?

I am Tyran, said Oswicus. My days are numbered.

You must challenge this dysfunctional tradition, said the Chair.

What happens to you, when your time comes? asked Oswicus.

I shall be outvoted by a new Chair, she said. I shall become a private citizen of Kirfa.

Perhaps I could go into exile, said Oswicus, and you could join me on my estate, in beautiful countryside, with wine and servants.

I shall think on it, said the Chair. But for now, you must muster your legions. When they are ready, you will lead them over the southern grasslands to Crys and from there down to Tarc, where you can take ship to Pyzan. I trust you with this mission, Oswic. I am your conqueror, and these are my orders.

Madam, said Oswicus.



During the night, the City Watch were busy in the East Bank.

And so it was in the morning in Elefant Square that the Chair, waiting for Mereg, looked up from her papers as she heard the wailing. She put her pen down and watched the distraught woman dragging two howling children across the plaza towards the shaded corner where she sat.

What are you doing, Madam Chair of Kirfa? screamed the woman as she caught sight of her. What are you thinking? What madness are you committing?

Three or four gentlemen of the Watch, seated discreetly at neighbouring tables, rose hurriedly and moved towards the woman.

Let her be, said the Chair. She is my guest.

She is a Migrant, ma'am, and she is bringing children into the Square—

The Chair's voice was unusually harsh and high : There is no law against children in this plaza, there is no law against migrant workers in this plaza. Let her come to me! The Chair was on her feet. She turned as she saw Mereg hurrying towards them. Mereg, come! Tesil, tell us what has happened! Sweetbread and fruit for the children! Tesil, what is wrong? Fruit for the children!

Faces on neighbouring tables turned away, becoming absorbed in the breakfasts.

How dare you pretend you don't know! screamed Tesil, her body swaying in grief as she stood before the Chair's table, her two howling boys clinging to her. Listen!

She looked round her, raised her voice to an even higher level and cried across the plaza: Listen, oh wretched citizens of Kirfa! Stop your empty chatter and listen! Do you hear the voices of your faithful servants wailing across the river? Listen, citizens of Kirfa, to the grief of the East Bank!

And in the ensuing silence, they heard indeed.

This is the work of your wretched lady Chair, oh miserable citizens of Kirfa!

This must stop, ma'am, said the serjeant of the Watch. We cannot have this distraction in Elefant.

Tesil, Mereg, boys, boys, said the Chair. Come back to my rooms. Whatever this is, I will put it right. Come, I promise.



They took Ella and beat him, said Tesil, her voice weak and shaking. His face was bloody, they beat him until he lay. Then they chained him and dragged him away. The boys watched. Do you hear, Sam? They watched their father beaten up by four thugs of your Watch! They have been rounding up men all over the East Bank. This is madness!

I had no idea they would take Ella, said the Chair, her face pale. I did not know he was on the list.

Ella! said Tesil, her voice getting out of control again. It's not about Ella! What is this list of yours? How many children will you make fatherless, Chair?

I do not make children fatherless, said the Chair.

You are sending their fathers to Pyzan! To be sacrificed in blood in the Great Theatre in Pyzan! Did you not know what happens to hostages?

I am the Chair of the Council of Kirfa. I do not make decisions alone, I abide by the decisions of the Council. And we are at war, Tesil. My hands are tied.

And I won your war for you, Sam. I led your troops to victory! You called us the saviours of the City! And your precious Council rewards me by killing my husband! What comes first for you, Sam: the elite democracy of the Council or the choice between right or wrong? You have lost control, Sam. Mereg, look at her! This is the Chair!

I had no choice, Tesil. Oswic needed hostages. He has to satisfy his troops and his citizens. If we are to be at peace with Pyzan, we must pay the price.

Then why do you not send real hostages, Sam, from your own high and mighty citizens? Why send only your slaves?

The Chair was silent, staring at Tesil. After a while her eyes lost their focus.

Ella will be safe, I promise, she said. I shall make sure.
I want him safe now! said Tesil. You must release him now!
Not now. Later. This is my word.
Come, said Mereg. We must speak with Qno.



In spite of their anxiety the two boys warmed to Mereg, reassured at seeing her again. But it was Qno who really captivated them.

One and Two, said Qno. Sensible names.

We are coming with you to see Uncle Sextus and Uncle Septimus, said One.

The time seems to have come, said Qno, to prepare for that journey.

Why has Hadr got such a funny face? said Two.

I'm just pretending, said Hadr. It's a disguise. I left my real face at home at Lower Crop.

Can we come and see it? said One.

We'll go, said Tesil. I want to leave this place. Mereg, take me and the boys with you.

We'll come with you to the East Bank to pack your belongings, said Qno.

No belongings! Tesil's voice was high again. I'm not going back!

Of course not, said Qno. Our matters are finished here. It is time I honoured my promise to Jank to return with Hadr and Cirsc. The legions are no longer a threat to the Hald. I want to go home to my farm.

The Chair had said nothing for some time. Now finally she looked up and said: Post arrives today. He leaves for Crys tomorrow morning. That is too early. Stay with us until he comes again.

Kirfa is lost, said Tesil. The East Bank is rising. My family needs to find a place of safety. I do not want to be here.

Madam Chair, said Qno, Kirfa has shown us great hospitality and goodwill. But it is best we leave tomorrow.

Will you go with them, Mereg? said the Chair. Will you not stay with me? We have much work to do together.

I will go with my monk, said Mereg.

And Ella, he will be released to travel with us? Tesil's question to the Chair was a demand.

You must trust me, Tesil, said the Chair. I cannot release him openly. The Chair cannot have favourites. But I will deliver Ella to you. I shall do so myself, if necessary.

Bring him to us in your lovely chariot, said Cirsc. It would look splendid driving up the Valley of the Hald.

The Chair looked at them, silently.

There will be great changes in Kirfa, she said at last. The citizens will not be happy. There are difficult times ahead. Mereg—

They looked hard at each other.

Stay with me, Mereg.

I am sorry, said Mereg softly.



Qno and his company, now seven without Meer but with Tesil and the two boys, took their seats early the next morning in Post's passenger wagon outside the Kirfa Post Office. There were few people abroad, and the streets seemed deserted. Five members of the Watch had escorted them from their hostel. There had been no breakfast, and no meal the evening before, but the Watch had managed to gather provisions for the

journey. The Chair was not to be seen: she was in Council, said the Watch. Mereg thought of Elefant Square, empty of people.

Post seemed to have lost his reticence. And who are these two gentlemen? he asked, bending his lanky body to observe the two boys.

One and Two, said One.

You can sit beside me if you like, said Post.

He reached for the handle and pulled the string out through its small brass collar in the engine-box. He released the handle and the string trundled back into the box. The familiar low buzzing commenced.

A horn sounded over the empty square, blown by a guard of the Watch. Post slipped the clutch and the car and its wagon rattled over the stones and into the tunnel under the great gardens.

Outside on the plain the Pyzan army was taking down its tents. The road west led through the encampment, and the legionaries looked up from their preparations and waved cheerfully. Cirsc and the boys waved back.

78 will be waiting for you at Crys, said Post. You can take a passage with the steam engine to the Rock with him. The monks are rebuilding the bridge. They use the steam-engine to take timber and tackle from Tarc. They made modifications in Tarc, the brakes work now, he told me. He doesn't have a man with a flag in front of him any longer. Fairly rumbles along.

The journey to Crys was without detours. It took them nearly six days. As they finally approached the little group of buildings at Crys, standing alone on the great plains, they saw the thin ribbon of grey smoke rising vertically from the tall funnel of the steam engine parked outside the hostel. As they drew closer they saw the Abbey donkey and cart tethered outside the hostel. Inside the hostel the monk Sne was drinking ale with 78. Qno was aghast. Sne? he said.

Qno, said Sne. At last. Your party has grown I see.

Why are you here? Have you left the Abbey?

I got Special Dispensation to pick up you people, said Sne. Things are much easier now. We found we could not repair the bridge without standing on the other side. The mathematics of directional sin became too complicated. The Abbot changed the rules.

He turned and bent towards the two boys. And who are these gentlemen?

One and Two, said One.

Good names, said Sne.

Our proper names are Oswic and Ulpec, said One.

Ulpec? said Mereg. I was trying to remember that name. Our brother Ulpec!

Ulpec is a lovely name, said Cirsc. It's a constellation you can see in the North. It means Little Fox.

And our father's name was Oswic? said Mereg.

It's a common name, said Qno.

Tesil said: Me, Rufor, Ulpec, you, Sextus and Septimus. Ella didn't like the name Rufor.

Doesn't, not didn't, said Ulpec.

That makes six: but Septimus means there were seven, said Qno.

Mother had a daughter when she was very young, said Tesil, before she met Oswic. I don't remember her very well. She was called Tes. She went away.

37 appeared with a steaming pot. Soup? she said.



By the following morning the legions were ready, drawn up into marching file. The centurions primed their semaphores and held their

men at attention, waiting for the order to march. At the head of the column stood the Tyran's optio, holding the Tyran's horse. Everyone waited for the Tyran.

Eventually the Chair's chariot sped out of the great gate driven by the Chair of Kirfa with the Tyran standing by her side. They drove at a rapid pace down the line of legions and drew up some way in front of the column. The chariot settled gently to the ground, but Oswicus and the Chair did not dismount. They were in deep discussion, which showed no sign of coming to an end. The centurion's semaphore wires clicked, and the troops were directed to stand easy.

No one heard what the Chair and the Tyran said to each other. The legions were becoming impatient. At length the two heads of state stepped out of the chariot and faced each other on the plain. They joined both hands and stood for a while silent, face to face. Then they bent towards each other and kissed four times, twice on each cheek. The Chair took her place in the chariot, which rose obediently from the grass. She turned the horses and sped off at full gallop back into Kirfa, without looking right or left. Oswicus watched until the chariot disappeared under the great hanging gardens.

Then he walked at a measured pace back to his optio and his horse, mounted, and turned his face west. The semaphore wires tweaked, a single horn sounded, and the legions set off on the long road home to Pyzan.



Oswicus rode alone some way ahead of his men, having dismissed his optio. The centurions respected his will to be alone.

His thoughts returned to the woman at the farm in the Valley of the Hald who had given his men milk and apples. Her quiet, equal regard.

And the two boys who could have been his sons, the twins he had left so long before, newborn, as he marched away with the legions. What were their names? There was Tesil, Rufor, Ulpec, Mereg... he could not remember the twins' names.

On the afternoon of the third day he turned aside and reined in his horse to observe the cohorts as they passed.

The hostages marched between the fourth and the fifth cohorts. Their shackles had been removed and they had been provided with sandals for the march; but they were roped together by their collars. As they drew level with the watching Tyran he raised his hand and called a halt. The centurions tweaked their semaphore wires. Ten minute water-break! they bawled. The troops fell out and sat or lay on the dry grassland, passing round the water-gourds.

Oswicus walked his horse towards the hostages. Stand, you vermin! bawled a captain.

Let them sit, said Oswicus. I wish to choose a personal hostage.

Many bore the marks of rough treatment, with dried blood still on them. Why is this? asked Oswicus.

They were delivered to us so, said the captain.

Give them water to wash, said Oswicus.

The hostages crouched without looking up as he surveyed them. One had a red kerchief round his neck.

What is your name? he said.

Ella.

The dancer's husband?

Ella looked him in the eye.

You will be my personal hostage on this march, said Oswicus. Release him, and bring a horse for him.

The hostages all turned their heads away, and would not see.

Thenceforth Ella rode with Oswicus at the head of the column, and slept in the Tyran's tent. No one heard what they spoke together.

It was three weeks' march to Tarc.



The town of Tarc comprised some three hundred houses and a total of over seven hundred families. It was a busy town, some thirty stadia upstream from the harbour at Tarc Haven where ships called from every port in the Southern Archipelago, trading for the Middle World. From it lay the road north to Crys, where it branched west to Tarrant, east to Kirfa, and continued north to Magre. Another road ran westwards out of Tarc across the river to the lowlands of the south, eventually joining the mountain route that led up into Tuag Beyond and the Hald; but the Crys road was the shorter route to the Middle World.

Three fleet-ships lay at anchor in the river at Tarc, each capable of carrying a century with impedimenta. The larger deep-ships for the rest of the army lay at Tarc Haven.

The Tyran and his personal hostage sat their horses on a small hillock above the town and watched the troops boarding.

This is your home town, Ella, said Oswicus.

My brothers are here, said the hostage.

They have been informed, said Oswicus. Stay close to me.

Gradually the troops and their impedimenta were taken aboard the fleet-ships. Oswicus called his optio.

I shall not need you at sea, he said. You will take the leading fleet-ship. I shall continue with the main army to Tarc Haven. We sail at high tide tomorrow at mid-morning.

It is unusual, my lord, said the optio, for the Tyran to take a deep-ship.

I am a poor sailor, said Oswicus. The bigger the ship, the less the motion.

And so Oswicus and Ella rode with the main army south along the east bank of the river to Tarc Haven.

Oswicus summoned the leading Centurion.

The fools have taken my papers and effects on board a fleet-ship, he said. I must return.

I shall arrange a guard to ride with you, my lord, said the centurion.

This is peaceful territory, said Oswicus. I prefer to ride alone. Come, hostage.



The river ran wide and slow and blue from Tarc through rolling wooded countryside to Tarc Haven. The two horsemen rode back north for a short while before turning right onto a rough track leading into the woods. They came to a small cottage among the trees. Two men and a woman stood outside to receive them.

My brothers, and my sister-in-law, said Ella after he had embraced them.

Where will you go now? asked Oswicus.

I shall look for my wife and children, said Ella.

The Chair told me they had gone to the Abbey of the Rock, said Oswicus.

Then I shall go there, said Ella. He held out his hand to Oswicus.

Thank you, my lord, he said.

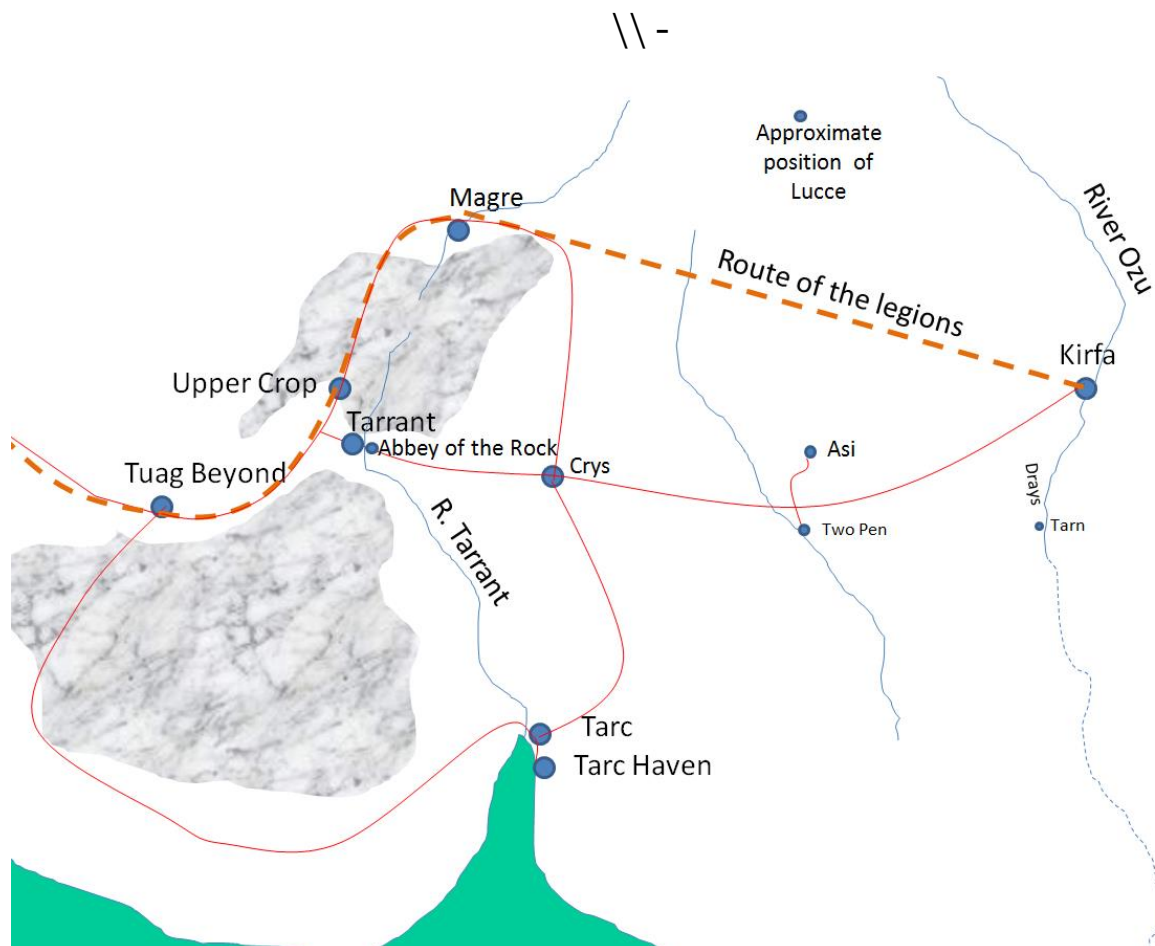
Oswicus did not take his hand. Instead, he said: May I come with you?

They looked at him, wondering.

I am deserting from the Legions of Pyzan, he said. May I come with you to the Rock? I have a strange fancy. I saw a woman in the Valley of the Hald. I wish to see her again. Perhaps she will allow me to work on her farm.

Later that day they watched from the brow of a small hill as the Pyzan ships sailed down the river to join the main fleet at Tarc Haven. From their vantage-point they could see down the river to the Haven and out to sea. The main fleet was hoisting sail and already making way.

Two days later they took seats in Post's wagon, and headed north to Crys.



Map of the Hald and the Anamen Territories