

# Migration and Fugue

## Book 2

### The Decline and Fall of the Holy City of Kirfa

*Seven years later*

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*Það þarf að segja allt, sagði Amfer. Endurtaka á alla mögulega vegu.  
Sérstaklega það sem allir vita.*

Say everything, said Amfer. Say it in every possible way. Especially what everybody already knows.

# 1

The Speaker stood on a small outcrop of rock and looked up the fjord towards the three tiny dots that had appeared on the water from behind the Tangle. They were clearly kayaks, and that itself was not right, for the Inner Settlements were all empty at this time of the year, and no one in the village had gone up into the fjord. And then there was something about these three dots which told her they were not local kayaks. Something about the way they sat in the water. They were in fact not sitting *in* the water; they were sitting *on* it. And they were making fair way: their paddles flashed in the sun as they came down the coastline, some hundred fathoms from the shore.

As they came closer she began to notice further anomalies. Two of the three newcomers sat unusually tall in their vessels, and they appeared to have hairless heads and bare arms: it was clear they were spirits. The third looked more like a man, but his black beard said he was a Northerner. It occurred to the Speaker that they had not spotted the skein of weed that wound out into the fjord from the mouth of the Third Brook. She put out her arms and hung her hands, giving the sign for weed: she knew they would see her well against the snow on the hillside. But they did not change course: they did not understand the sign. She waved her arms and shouted at them, waving them out away from shore, jumping up and down on the rock. They paused their paddling and seemed to commune among themselves. Then they came on.

At the last moment the leading kayaker, the human, seemed to understand the danger: he back-paddled, shouting to the others. But he was too late: the weed had gripped his prow and was dragging it down. Then an uncanny thing happened: the two spirits rose to stand in their

kayaks, and a light seemed to flash from their hands. Their kayaks were steady as rocks under them as they stood. The weed released the prow of the leading kayak, which shot up out of the water. The three kayaks headed out into the fjord, rounded the weed and then paddled towards the Speaker.

They came towards the beach at high speed, and the Speaker watched in amazement as the kayaks lifted over the shingle and glided up onto the grass; and as this happened she saw with wonder that the kayakers had no paddles at all. They stood and climbed out of their boats, apparently not stopping to loosen their watersheets, and the Speaker fell to her knees in deference to the spirits; but the man strode forward and took her arm, raising her to her feet and speaking kindly, words which the Speaker did not understand.

The two spirits were bare-headed and hairless, and their skins were a dark purple, so dark as to be nearly black. Their demeanour was open and friendly, and the Speaker felt no menace. The bearded man spoke again, but the Speaker did not understand. Then one of the spirits spoke, in a way that the Speaker understood.

Thank you for warning us about the weed, it said, and for welcoming us.

I am of the village, said the Speaker. You will be our guests?

We bring you news of imminent calving, said the spirit.

You were up under the glacier? said the Speaker in amazement.

It will be a large calving, said the spirit, perhaps already today. You must warn your people.

We are used to tsunamis, said the Speaker.

This is very large. The whole height of the glacier, and the fissure is a hundred fathoms in from the edge. It widens by a span each hour. The wave will be fifty fathoms high.

The Speaker did not stop to question such benevolent spirits in their flying kayaks. Thank you, and forgive my haste, she said. She turned and sped off towards the village.

Did she understand? said Meer.

She understands, as these people will. They know the ways of the great tsunamis, said Lo. We will continue down the fjord. There are more villages.

They turned their pods and sped out to sea again.

Within an hour the people of the Speaker's village had packed their main belongings onto sleds and harnessed the dog-teams. No one questioned the word of the spirits.

Were they terrible, Speaker? they asked.

No, they were not the Grey Spirits. I have not seen such spirits before. They were tall and good-willed, and showed me courtesy. They are beautiful, and darker than we. They spoke our tongue well and said their greetings the good way. I would like to see them again.

Within three hours the sleds had reached safe ground, the promontory overlooking the village. They raised storm-tents and settled their gear, and the Speaker and eleven others went down into the village to secure the kayaks and salvage stores and utensils that had been left behind. They brought seven of the best kayaks up onto the high ground and penned the rest into the safe pound above the landing, filling them with stones and lashing them to boulders. And while they were at this work, they heard the thunder up in the fjord. They turned and drove back up onto the promontory, arriving in time to see the far wall of water surging down behind Tangle. The villagers wailed as they saw its height.

But the Speaker said: We are safe on the Promontory. Thanks be to the blessed spirits who warned us.

And they out in the fjord in their kayaks, said the villagers.

They will not be overridden, said the Speaker. They stayed the weed.

How did they stay the weed?

They stood in their kayaks and sent out a dazzling light. The weed released them. Their kayaks flew.

Blessed be the good spirits, said the villagers.

As the high wall of water rounded the Tangle and the fjord widened, its force began to dissipate; and yet it washed two-thirds of the way up the steep sides of the promontory. The roar of the water was deafening, and a biting wind was driven before it. The villagers stayed on the top for several days while lesser tsunamis scoured the coastline. Great ice-mountains sailed by, and the fjord was full of slag-ice.

The village was gone, and the shoreline unrecognisable. The villagers set about rebuilding on the rise under the Promontory. Later that spring the Speaker went up into the fjord with a group of villagers. The mountains were changed, the skyline new and broken, and the coastline clear of vegetation up to a hundred fathoms. The fjord had rewritten itself.

Later that summer they had news from the lower villages. There had been widespread damage all the way down the fjord. Everyone spoke of the spirits, how they had saved the lives of the people. There were said to have ridden the great wave as they sped out to sea.



The last three families from Dere, two leagues further down the river, came up through Tarn at the beginning of the summer. They stopped the

night at Tarn. We're the last you'll have to put up for the night, they said to Lesuli. No one left down there. Next year it'll be your turn.

We still have water enough, said Lesuli.

Moves up a league a year, they said. You've got perhaps two years left. Don't leave it too late, like we did.

The river managed to run throughout the summer. Since there was nobody left below them, Lesuli and her husband used it all on the fields. They had a fine crop. It was all sent to Kirfa.

Towards the end of the summer Lesuli and her husband rode down the river to see how far it went. It ran into the sand about fifteen stadia above Dere; the river bed was damp for hardly a stadium further south. They carried on down the dry watercourse to check on the farm at Dere, out of curiosity. There was an alien pod sitting on the sand outside the abandoned farmhouse. A black-bearded man wearing a sun hat was tinkering with a contraption of silver rods bolted together in the middle of the dry watercourse. He stood up as they approached and came forward to greet them. His face was weather-beaten, but his eyes were bright and friendly.

Who are you? said Lesuli.

Kirfa Waterworks, said the man, offering his hand. Meer is my name. Checking on the water table. Are you the people of Tarn? Went by in the night. Didn't want to disturb you.

Water table? said Lesuli.

Finding out how deep the water lies, said the man.

Is there water underneath?

Six fathoms down it's still damp, said Meer.

We could sink a well, said Lesuli.

It would give water for a few seasons, said Meer. Enough for coffee perhaps.

That's an alien pod, said Lesuli, indicating the vehicle parked in the shade of the farmhouse.

The Ambassadors are helping us, said the man. They went on down the water-course to check the lower farms. Doesn't look good, I'm afraid.

Another two years, said Lesuli.

Meer looked up at them on their horses. He saw the eyes of a middle-aged farming couple who were losing their livelihood.

*Again his mind went back to the long winding road in the snow and the dying village where he had lived for many months on Eile's fourth planet, far away beyond thought. The living forest, the howling wolves, and the heartbroken people who healed his mind.*

We need to talk, said Meer. All of you. We need to call a meeting.



Lesuli and her husband Mara had taken over the farm at Tarn from Lesuli's parents who had died some years before. Lesuli had studied agriculture in Kirfa and brought Mara with her to manage the farm; they had no children, but Lesuli had two girls from a previous marriage, both farmers in the Pen valleys south of the road to Crys.

The meeting was convened in the spacious kitchen at Tarn. The farmers from the four farms upriver from Tarn had ridden down for the meeting. Meer and the two Ambassadors shook hands all round and Mara served coffee and sweetbread. There were no children.

So let's hear the bad news, said Lesuli.

You all know the situation, said Meer. The river runs dry a league further north each year. That would give you people ten years at the top of the Drays. But I'm afraid we have bad news for you from Kirfa.

We were waiting for this, said Lesuli.



As you know Kirfa has abandoned the hanging gardens, and uses water only for foodstuffs. The population grows every year: the farms to the south and east are emptying and the migrant population on the East Bank is now far more populous than the people of Old Kirfa. There is severe water-rationing. If the city is not to be abandoned, we shall have to take more water from the river. The plan is to dam it just above the city. We are building cisterns under the city to capture the spring floods. As this project gets under way, the river here in the Drays will disappear.

When will this happen? someone asked.

It will take us another year to finish the dam, said Meer.

And then our river dries up?

I fear so, said Meer.

Kirfa is stealing our water?

There are twenty thousand souls all told in Kirfa, said Meer. Her gates are open to refugees fleeing heat and drought throughout the East and South. In Kirfa they find food and shelter. And Kirfa's gates are open to you. But in order to maintain this situation, Kirfa must take all the water she can.

Kirfa has been taking our water for decades, said a voice. Squandering our water on fountains, hanging gardens, fancy orchards. If Kirfa drank what she needed and no more, there would be no problems here in the Drays. It's Kirfa who is drying up our water. There's enough water in the mountains. I've heard the news from the far north, up by Water Eye—they've got flooding, they have too much water. Rains and flooding! Kirfa is drying up our water, and lying about the changing climate. We see no change. There has always been talk of the sands coming nearer. Panic talk.

There was a babble of assent and dissent.

The woman Ambassador stood up to address them.

You may know me as Halo, she said, pronouncing her Kirfan name with obvious difficulty. We came first to your fair planet many cycles ago, as you know. There is no doubt that there are deep-reaching climactic changes in progress.

Why does this interest you? said one of the farmers. You come from far away. Do you not have you own problems?

We do indeed, said Halo. But our mission here is to gain knowledge from you, and perhaps to offer our expertise. We have been watching your lovely planet for a very long time. All people everywhere can learn from what is happening here.

Nobody knows what is happening, said another voice. The scientists change their minds season by season. Now they say it's the fault of the Span.

The Span? said someone. Our stars?

Your stars indeed, said Halo. My colleague and I come from much further afield, from a star so far away that Thought can barely make the journey. On my home people know nothing of your planet—but everyone has heard of the Span, the fabulous skein of tiny moons that wraps half-way round your planet and steers your seasons. And it is also our conclusion that the Span is altering your patterns of weather. You all know that the Span is ever changing.

They say it is Tenes the yellow star that is causing the trouble, said the first voice.

That too is our analysis, said Halo. The records show that Tenes arrived in the Span only about a hundred cycles ago.

Tenes was a famous Elven mother, said one of the women. There was great sorrow amongst the Elves when she died; and afterwards her star quickened in the Span.

Elves! said one of the farmers, sneering at the word.

What's got into you, Turka? The Birds know about the Elves.

Birds! said Turka.

Let's not argue, said Lesuli. I want to hear what the Ambassadors have got to say.

Whatever the truth about how Tenes arrived in the Span, said Halo, the calculations show that this event put a tiny wobble into your planet's orbit. It has initiated slow but relentless climactic changes.

It's getting warmer, said Lesuli.

Not everywhere. In the south, yes. In the far south the glaciers are melting, and there is greater rainfall. World sea-levels are rising. In the north it is becoming dryer without becoming warmer. The water supply to the Ozu River will continue to decrease. Yes, we know there has been flooding further north—the weather is quite simply unstable, and can go to both extremes. But on average the rainfall is decreasing. At the same time the sands to the east of Kirfa are becoming hotter and more volatile. If nothing is done, we give Kirfa twenty years before it the river dries up and the sand begins to take over. That is why we advise these drastic conservation measures. With them, we can give the city fifty years.

I believe the Ambassador, said Lesuli. The farmlands to the south and east are all suffering from heat and lack of water. It rains less and less. Maybe Kirfa has taken some of our water, but this does not explain the changes in the weather, nor the drought in the east. These aliens are great scientists, and they have nothing to gain from Kirfa by lying to us.

Several voices agreed.

But it's not that simple, said Lesuli. Kirfa is growing too fast. There are more Migroes in the city now than inborn. They have migroes in the Council. The Kirfans are losing control.

What else could they do? Let the migrants die?

Lesuli shrugged. Not my problem, she said. Not my people, neither Migroes nor Inborn. It's not their city to begin with.

You are Anamen? asked Meer.

My family are, said Lesuli. I have daughters and grandchildren out on the plains in Two Pen.

Two Pen? said Meer in amazement. Elri and Ynglà are your daughters? The astronomers?

You know them?

It is from your daughters that we have our information about the Span, said Meer. You should be very proud.

Funny girls, those two, said Lesuli.

Why are you here, and they there? said Meer. Two Pen is much better land.

I was born here, said Lesuli. Things work out that way.

But you will go there when the river dries up?

I won't go to Kirfa, that's for sure. We Anamen call it by its old name, Gosste, before the Kirfans came in from the east and drove us out. It's us Anamen who are the true Inborn, not the Kirfans. And now the same thing is happening to them. They'll be thrown out by the Migroes, just you see.

The Chair of Kirfa has always made it clear that the city is open to all comers, migrants from the east and south, whether Anamen or Southerners, said Meer. Kirfa must conserve her water, for everybody's sake. For yours as well.

For how long? said a voice. Fifty years did you say? What happens then to our grandchildren?

Our scientists are working hard, said Meer. We believe that an answer will be found.

If the Migroes don't wreck everything, said Lesuli.



These lies are painful, said Halo. I am weary at heart.

All we tell them is true, said Lo. The whole truth would disturb them too much. It would cause anger and fear.

All may be good before long, said Halo. If the Alliance can be persuaded to intervene.

The astronomers are her daughters, said Meer. These people will soon know the truth. We should tell them now.

No, said Lo. What you call the truth is still hearsay, and may be untruth. We must wait until the facts are known. We must wait for the data from Pyzan.

Time is running out, said Meer.

## 2

The Chair persevered, and continued to take her morning coffee in Elefant Square, often accompanied by her protégés Eye and Wing. In fact she found herself thoroughly at home amongst the throng of Migrants and their children that now filled Elefant Square. The elegant empty chatter of the pre-rebellion Inborn coffee guests was not something she missed.

And then one morning Meer and the two Ambassadors, Lo and Halo, joined them at the coffee table. Welcome, my friends, said the Chair. We are happy to see you at last! No sooner did you return from Eile than you disappeared again! What have you been doing? She waved for more coffee and sweetbread.

We have been looking at the southern glaciers, said Meer. They are breaking up fast. In the northern reaches of the South Continent the people are turning to farming. The grasslands of the Shoulder are supporting sheep, and they are talking of trying grain-crops.

And there is room to spare?

Not as yet. The land is meagre.

And the Archipelago?

Trade is booming, said Meer. People are returning. They're burning the forests.

Yet the Migrants keep coming to Kirfa, said Wing.

From closer at hand, said Meer. From the Ozu valley mostly, now that the East is empty. The river has dried up below Tarn. Down towards the Great Sea the river channel is tidal, and in the Southern Reaches they have some humidity from the sea, but they have to work hard for their water.

Do they know that the situation in the Archipelago is improving?

The Archipelago has a bad name. No one wants to go south.

And the people of the Drays?

They were not happy to hear of our plans for water conservation in Kirfa, but they understood there was no other way. They will be arriving as refugees by the end of the summer.

We will all be refugees if this continues, said Wing.

You must not fear change, Wing, said the Chair. Look at Meer. Look what Change has done to him. No life without Change.

Change will also be the name for the end of life on this planet, said Eye. The Chair looked at her, but said nothing.

Meer, said the Chair, turning to him, when will you go to the Hald? Your people have not seen you. And I want news of Mereg. I need her here.

She will not come, Sam. In Eile, I learnt to see into her heart. It is not here in Kirfa. Her eyes are set to the West, to Pyzan, even to Har. That is the road that she will take.

The Chair's eyes flashed at Meer, and at the Ambassadors. They said: We must convene, we four. She turned to Eye and Wing, who were holding hands under the table.

No duties today, my Aides, she said. The Council will not be sitting—they have scheduled committee work on the waterworks. Take the day off, you can have the Chariot.

Eye and Wing looked at each other and grinned.



In the Chair's rooms, Samuesil poured rush-water. So tell me the real news, she said.

You mean the Span, said Meer.

I mean Tenes in the Span, said Samuesil. I mean the miners. I mean the long-term effects.

We visited the astronomers in Two Pen, said Meer.

Tell me about them, said Samuesil.



At Two Pen, Meer had asked: How significant?

The sisters exchanged glances over the table.

One point three seconds early, said Elri.

I had one point three one, Elri had one point two seven, said Ynglà.

And the trajectory? asked Meer.

I saw no anomaly, said Elri.

Nor did I, said Ynglà. But it's far too soon to say. We need a whole cycle. If Tenes is really speeding up, then other effects will kick in. We will be able to say more come harvest.

Did you see anything else? asked Halo.

No. We will look closer tonight. The Span will be above the brow of the hill by midnight. But now we must eat. The children will be getting hungry.

Do you ever sleep? asked Meer.

Hardly, in times like these, said Elri.

There were children's voices calling outside. Ynglà moved to the door and let in the sunlight and the murmur of the trees below the observatory. Meer and the Ambassadors came out through the low doorway and climbed down the narrow swaying ladder onto the gravel path that led up from the farm.

Mama! came the call from further down the path. Post is coming! And we're hungry!



They all came down the path from the observatory just in time to see Post's wagon coming to a halt in the courtyard. The five children were clamouring around Post as he rummaged in the box trailer. Parcel, parcel! they chanted. Not for you, said Post gruffly. For your mothers. Take care. He handed them a large package. From Pyzan, he called to the sisters.

Be careful with that package! shouted Elri to the children. Maybe it's the data, she said to her sister.

Then they were quick, said Ynglà. When did we send them? Springtide? Look, it's Antus's handwriting. It's the data. She scabbled at the brown paper package.

No, wait, said Elri. Dinner first. Hungry, Post? You know Meer and the Ambassadors?

Mr Meer? said Post, his face almost breaking into a smile. How long has it been?

Seven years, said Meer.

My my, said Post. Genuine pleasure, Mr Meer sir. I am honoured. Nice beard.

You haven't changed, Post, said Meer, clasping his hand.

Why should I? said Post. He made a stiff bow to the two Ambassadors. Nice of you to bring Mr Meer back, he said. Saw your pods down in the trees. Oho, I thought. Oho.

It was not a grand meal, roots and grain with rush-water, but the children fell to with a will. Meer ate well, and so did Post. The Ambassadors drank only rush-water, as was their custom. The sisters picked at their food.

And then the table was cleared, the children went to bed, and Ynglà opened the package.

It was a thick roll of paper covered in ciphers. Data for Tenes, said Ynglà, going back—she unrolled the whole scroll and put her finger on the bottom—Going back fifteen years. It's all in Antus's handwriting. Antus is incredible. As if he hadn't anything else to do.

Antus recognises what you're doing here in Two Pen, said Halo. And he knows its importance.

We'll start tomorrow. But it'll take weeks to break it down. We can let you know by harvest.

And who will gather your harvest, while you're working on this? asked Meer.

Asi, said Elri. The Blue Boys.



So what is the prognosis? said the Chair. How much time have we got?

Less and less, I fear, said Lo. I have no doubt that the mining operations on Tenes will continue at an increased rate. They are taking too much. The sisters in Two Pen are measuring changes in its orbit, and they believe these are consistent with a massive decrease of volume. Tenes is composed of almost 80% pure rift ore, for which the Bases pay enormous prices. If this continues, the moon will eventually collapse.

When will these astronomers know for sure? asked the Chair.

Possibly this harvest, said Meer.

We have informed Carhault, said Halo. They expect a visit from us as the data becomes available. Before the end of the year, I hope.

Will the Alliance step in? asked the Chair.

They could put pressure on the Bases, said Halo. But they will hardly intervene in person. They see this as our problem. In any case, they are still sceptical.

We have no definitive data yet on the relationship between the Span and the climactic changes here on the planet, said Meer. Without sound evidence the Alliance will not act.

What of the legality? said the Chair. Who owns the Span?

Your laws of ownership is peculiar to your species, said Lo.

Don't patronize, snapped Samuesil.

I beg forgiveness, said Lo. A grave mistake.

Samuesil's gaze wandered. She seemed to be gathering her thoughts. The fault is mine, she said after a silence. Thank you for pointing out the danger. But might I say that plundering the Span of its resources, appropriating them before the inhabitants of this system have any idea of their value, is surely unacceptable.

Lo said: I would say you can be sure that there are interested parties on the ground here, said Lo.

Here where?

Pyzan is the obvious guess, said Lo. Something tells me that mining operations on Tenes would need ground support here, and only the Pyzan territories with their market economy would be able to supply this support.

In any case it makes little difference who destroys Tenes if its destruction threatens life on this planet.

It seems then that we must look to Pyzan, said Samuesil.



The Kind Revolution had been a rude awakening for the Inborn. Some said it was sparked by the rounding up of the Migrant rebels by the Guard, and their departure in chains as hostages with the legions. Tesil the dancer's husband Ella was remembered as the hero of the story. Ella

had been Director of the Kind Garden, where Inborn children were cared for by Migrant workers, and the Kind Garden was the focus of the Great Migrant Strike that initiated the revolution which in turn paved the way for Migrant representation in the City Council.

Less than a year after the Revolution, the Migrant population had overflowed from the East Bank into the quarter surrounding Elefant Square. The beginnings of an informal Migrant Parliament began to appear in Elefant, and soon it was as if there were two governing bodies in Kirfa. The Migrant Parliament held its informal and noisy sessions every morning in the Square, during which the Chair listened and sometimes participated in the debates; and two afternoons each week the Council of Kirfa, over which the Chair presided formally, was held in the Council Hall in old Gosste Square. The two bodies were closely connected: since the two parliaments never sat simultaneously, the new Migrant councillors of Kirfa were also vociferous in the more informal free-for-all of the Migrant Parliament Elefant Square, so that questions were carried back and forth between the two bodies.

Thus it was that two days after the return of Meer and the Ambassadors to Kirfa, the Anamen Declaration of Sovereignty came to the attention of both the Council of Kirfa and the Parliament in Elefant Square.



#### Declaration of Sovereignty.

WE, THE ANAMEN PEOPLE of the Great Plains from Magre in the North, Crys in the South, and Gosste in the East, here assembled at the Moot at Asi, do herewith send word to the government and inhabitants of Gosste, by some known as Kirfa:

WHEREAS we have remarked the deterioration of climate in the regions north, east and south of the Holy City, growing drought, dwindling of the Holy River Ozu, and encroachment of the sands from the Eastern Desert;

and WHEREAS we have observed the dangerous rise in the Migro population of the Holy City for some many years;

and WHEREAS we have noted the increasing representation of Migro interests in the Council of the Holy City;

and WHEREAS we have had word of designs by the said Council to initiate Migro settlement of the Great Plains west of the City;

We do HEREBY make known to the Council of Gosste, by some known as Kirfa, our solemn resolution:

THAT all lands of the Anamen south of Magre, east of Crys, and west of Gosste shall be for ever under the sovereign rule of the Anamen Moot at Asi;

and THAT the Anamen People will resist and obstruct by ALL AND EVERY MEANS any Migro or Inborn encroachment on the territories aforementioned under their rule.

WITNESS my hand at this Plenary Moot at Asi this Foreday of the thirty-second week of the year 409 from the Fall of Gosste,

Joel of Asi, Speaker.



Dear Joel,

Thank you for your letter, with its enclosed declaration. I am impressed and heartened by your clear resolve to protect the interests of the Anamen People. Your declaration will be discussed in the Council of Kirfa and doubtless also in the Migrant Parliament, and I shall be sending you news of these discussions and any formal communications which the Council and the Parliament may see fit to draw up. In the meantime I send my greetings to you and your family, with special congratulations on the birth of your little granddaughter. I hope to have the opportunity before long to visit you privately at Asi, where I hope we can discuss these matters more fully and exchange points of view.

Your sincere friend and colleague,

Samuesil,  
Kirfa



The Anamen at least as far as Asi have always been under Kirfan rule, said First Secretary Pullentem (whose name proclaimed his Northern origin). This so-called Declaration of Sovereignty is simply treason.

And what does Tarc say of this? I had always thought Crys and the surrounding territories were under the rule of Tarc, said the Fifth Secretary, whose name nobody ever remembered.

The Anamen have never forgiven us for taking back from them our ancient City, said a young Inborn councillor. Now they want to take our lands on the Western Plain.

This ancient squabble with the Anamen has nothing to do with us, said the leader of the Migrant Representatives. We came to Kirfa to keep alive. If it becomes necessary for us to move out into the Plains to keep alive, that is what we will do.

The Chair took the podium. As usual, her address to the Council was calculated to wind down the tension:

The Speaker in Asi and I are on excellent terms, she said. He and his men were our valuable allies in the war against Pyzan aggression: they deprived the legions of their water. I think it most unlikely that he has confrontation with Kirfa in mind, now seven years later. May I make a suggestion?

The councillors all had their eyes on her.

I suggest I visit Asi, she said. I think we need to understand better the currents that may be flowing on the Plains. Do I have your assent?

The councillors exchanged glances, stony-faced. Eventually the almost imperceptible nods began.



As usual, the Chair had greater difficulty making her voice heard in Elefant Square.

The Inborn listened when we demanded our rights in the Rebellion, said a young red-haired man, his words almost drowned in a huge chorus of agreement. We can deal with the Anamen in exactly the same way.

The Anamen have always known how to tie their breeches, said another. They destroyed the legions' water for us. They are no fools. We won't deal with them as easily as we dealt with the Inborn.

They are raving idiots, shouted another. That's what Post calls them.

Dangerous raving idiots, called a woman's voice.

My friends! called the Chair.

If it wasn't for us the Anamen would have taken Kirfa over years ago! shouted another.

My friends!

I'm not ready to die of thirst in Kirfa!

My friends, may I make a suggestion?

Let Sam speak!

My friends!

She's always saying that, My Friends, My Friends! Whenever were we friends with the Inborn?

Calm down, Migro. Let Sam have her say!

Don't you call me a Migro. Migro yourself.

Sam is no Inborn. She's a Migro like us!

East Bankers! shouted the Chair at the top of her voice, standing up on her chair. I have a plan!

No flies on Sam. Calm down and listen to her.

East Bankers, hear me! You have nothing to fear from the Anamen, shouted the Chair. They're shit scared of you, no less than the Inborn. Calm down and trust me.

Trust you with what, Sam? What are you cooking up?

I'm going to Asi to talk to Joel, said the Chair. But there was still too much noise for her to be heard.

Shut up everybody and let her speak! She's got a Plan.

She's always got plans—

Quiet! Quiet, everybody!

Finally there was relative quiet, with some children wailing.

I'm going to Asi to talk to Joel, repeated the Chair. I think we can work something out.

You think he'll give us land on his precious Plains? You must be joking, Sam. If we are going to get any land out on the Plains, we are going to have to take it ourselves. This was from a large grim-looking man who had so far kept quiet. Looking at him, the Chair remembered his name. Borl.

There was uproar in the square.

The Chair stepped from her seat up onto the table. She squared herself and gazed out over the shouting crowd. Then she raised her hand, as only the Chair knew how to do.

The silence spread gradually through the crowd. Even the children stopped wailing, and looked up at her standing alone on her coffee table.

There is ample space on the Plains for both Joel and his people and for us, she said, slowly and calmly. And we are running out of space and time here in Kirfa. Joel is no fool; he knows this, and knows that the inevitable will always happen. But of course the Anamen are anxious—that is only to be expected. We must help Joel to get the message across: we are not enemies, we have the same problems.

We'll come with you, shouted a voice. We'll show them what their problems are! There was a roar of assent.

No, my friends, said the Chair; and her No was final. They watched her raised hand in silence.

My message to you is that you wait until I bring you news of my parley with Joel. Then we shall know where we stand: then we can decide our next move. Until then, patience.



Throughout the crowd, there were knots of discussion.  
You go give him a piece of your mind, Sam, said a voice.  
We'll back you up, Sam.  
Every time.



Meer, said the Chair. I would like you to come with me to Asi.  
Meer nodded.  
Wing and Eye stay in Kirfa as Acting Chairs.  
And? said Meer.  
After Asi, you will take your pod over the grasslands north-west to Magre to collect weather data there.  
And? said Meer.  
Then you will go down down over the moor to see your mother in the Hald. She is waiting for you.  
Why not come with me? said Meer. You want to see Mereg. She would not come back to Kirfa with me—but perhaps with you.  
The Chair looked at him in silence. Finally she said, I am the Chair of Kirfa. This is not a time for holiday. People of the Hald who want to see me must come to Kirfa to see me.

### 3

Some five leagues west of Kirfa a gate had appeared on the road. Beside it stood a small wooden shack; a thin stream of smoke issued from a pipe chimney in the roof. On a board nailed above the door of the shack the Chair recognised the old Anamen word for Border. The last native Anamen speaker had passed away many cycles ago, but language is stronger than blood, even when defunct.

The Eile pod that Meer had used on his journeys with Lo and Halo was hitched to the tailpiece of the Chair's gliding chariot, so that it glided behind at the same height. Meer stood with the Chair in the chariot.

They had come to the gate early in the morning. It was wide open, clearly as a result of the probing muzzles of the herd of Anamen horses milling around it. Not that it mattered whether the gate was open or closed, since there was no fence adjoining it on either side, and it was clear from the tracks in the sandy grassland that several vehicles had recently simply driven around it.

But the Chair was averse to leaving the road and allowing her three white mares to trample the grasslands, even if her chariot did not actually touch the ground. Meer jumped down and strode towards the milling horses, clapping his hands and shooing them out of the way. They were not cooperative, but he persevered and finally his human will-power prevailed. The gate was a good deal narrower than the road, and the Chair had some difficulty manoeuvring her spirited team through it; nor was she helped by several of the Anamen horses who saw fit to accompany their Kirfan cousins across the border.

The door of the shack was flung open as this was going on, and out ran two young men, buttoning their jackets and hitching up their

trousers. Hey, you there, they shouted. The border is closed. Where do you think you're going?

The gate was open, said Meer.

Good morning, gentlemen, called the Chair. I presume we are entering Anamen territory?

Not without permission you're not.

Of course. May we ask you for permission?

Name, address, purpose of visit, said one of the guards, producing a pencil and a black note-book. Meer realised she was a woman.

Samuesil, Chair of Kirfa, said the Chair. On a state visit to Speaker Joel at Asi.

The two guards snapped to attention, their faces taut.

And this is Meer, my personal aide, said the Chair.

I shall write you both an official pass, ma'am, said the guard who had spoken before. She gave another salute and marched stiffly back into the shack.

The horses crowded round Meer, snorting and shaking their manes. Lovely animals, he said. Whose are they?

Anamen horses are not owned, said the guard. They are our comrades.

The first guard reappeared with two small sheets of paper apparently torn from a notebook, which she presented to the Chair and to Meer. Then the guards stood aside and saluted. On the papers the word PASS had been written in pencil.

Meer climbed into the chariot as it moved forward. The three white mares broke into their usual gallop. Spanning out on both sides of them, at full tilt across the grasslands, the Anamen herd kept pace with them half the way to Asi.



Asi was larger than Meer remembered; it had grown into a small settlement of long, low houses surrounded by horse-pens and corrals, all empty of horses and apparently also of people. The summit meeting between the Chair of Kirfa and Speaker Joel of Asi took place in the kitchen at Asi. It was evening. There seemed to be nobody about in the farmyard; Farmer Joel greeted the Chair outside the farmhouse and ushered them into the kitchen, where his wife, whose name has not yet been spoken and who will be referred to for the time being as Mrs Joel, poured them tea and offered biscuits.

Not much to offer, she said. The men and the girls are all away. Does my knees something awful making dinner. Lots of biscuits, though.

Gone away? said Meer. Some sort of holiday?

Mrs Joel looked uncertainly at her husband. He said nothing.

Hunting trip, said Mrs Joel. There was an uncomfortable silence.

Safari, she added.

Haven't had much rain, said Farmer Joel, examining his fingernails.

I was going to ask about the weather, said Meer. We've been collecting data in the South. Drier and warmer. Been the same here, has it?

Oh so we're going to talk about the weather are we, said Mrs Joel. Well of course. Blame everything on the weather.

Those who live off the land have to watch the weather, said Meer.

Mrs Joel looked pointedly at Meer, as if to silence him. Then she turned to the Chair:

Your first time at Asi, isn't it? We're very honoured. Quite unexpected.

The Chair gave her a reassuring smile. We are here to discuss matters of mutual interest, she said. We come to offer you our cooperation in these changed circumstances.

Circumstances? There are no circumstances around here, that I can assure you, said Mrs Joel. No change and no circumstances.

The Chair's smile remained bright. That's good to hear, Mrs Joel, she said. Nothing like a stable economy.

Nothing wrong with our stables neither, said Mrs Joel.

Meer realised that the summit meeting had begun. He took out his notebook and pencil, turned to a new page and wrote:

Asi, twenty-seventh Senday, 409th Year of Kirfa. Summit meeting between Kirfa and Anamen. Present at the meeting are Samuesil Chair of Kirfa, Joel Speaker of Asi, Mrs Joel, and Meer, aide to the Chair.

He looked at the Chair and nodded. There was an uncertain silence.

Very honoured indeed, repeated Mrs Joel, goaded by the silence. Not every day the Lady Chair of Gosste comes to Asi.

That is all too true, Mrs Joel, said the Chair. Thank you for mentioning it. It's high time we made a regular habit of exchanging visits.

Who's talking about exchanging? said Mrs Joel indignantly. You won't see me visiting that city of yours thank you very much. Den of iniquity it is. Den Of. I told Joel last time he went, I could smell the perfume on him. That's the last time you get leave from me to go to the city, I said. Since whence we trade with Tarc, we do, through Crys. Good woman, Mrs 37. Knows her place, behind her husband. He's a dark one that 78.

The Chair hazarded a suggestion: I wonder, Mrs Joel, whether—

Mrs Speaker Joel to you, young lady, snapped Mrs Speaker Joel.

Mrs Speaker Joel, forgive me. I was going to ask whether we shouldn't discuss your excellent declaration of Sovereignty.

Nothing to discuss. It's all there in the Declaration. You should read it.

I'll speak, woman, said Speaker Joel suddenly, without looking up from his nails. The Chair and me, this meeting is between us. The Speaker and the Chair. What exactly does the Lady Chair wish to discuss?

Sovereignty is the natural right of all peoples, said the Chair. I was gladdened by your Declaration.

But?

There is the small matter of territories, said the Chair.

The Declaration puts things right about the territories, said Speaker Joel.

I have always thought of the city and the grasslands as one territory, said the Chair. We have always been good allies. We fought the invading legions together.

Our boys won the war, said Mrs Joel. On the fly. Not a drop of water left.

They were brilliant, said the Chair. Now *that* was a co-operative endeavour. We worked together. It has always been my wish to continue along that path.

Territory means ownership, said Speaker Joel. Ownership of the grasslands. Cut and dried.

We met some men of yours on the way here who told us that no one owns the horses on the grasslands. Surely the same applies to the grasslands?

It did until your Migroes started turning up out here on our grasses, said Mrs Joel.

Hush woman, said the Speaker.

Migrants? Here on the grasslands?

Not on my watch, said Mrs Joel.

No ton anybody's watch, said Speaker Joel. That's what the Declaration says. No Migroes.

No Migroes, said his wife.

You came through our Border Station, said Speaker Joel. Ten leagues. We grant you a ten league radius around the City.

Why ten leagues? said the Chair.

The speaker looked up from examining his finger nails and met the Chair's gaze—for the first time.

You don't want then? he said.

I voted against it, said his wife. Not one league, I said. They took our city, but they won't take our grasslands!

Let's not get into that, old girl, said Joel. That was hundreds of years ago.

There are many stories of the fall of Gosste and the rise of Kirfa, said the Chair. One says that the Anamen abandoned the city in a time of drought, and moved out onto the grasslands. The people of Kirfa came from the East, out of the waterless desert, and found an empty city. They channelled the Holy River and remade Kirfa.

That's a brazen lie, said Mrs Joel. We never abandoned our city.

No one knows what really happened, said the Chair. But there are many stories.

Makes no odds, said Joel. We're here now.

Well said, Speaker, said the Chair. This must be our point of departure.

Ten leagues, said Joel.

The Declaration makes no mention of ten leagues, said the Chair. Whose decision is ten leagues?

Nice round number, said Joel. Ten leagues around the city, that's what you get.

Do we have no say in the matter? This is surely a matter of negotiation?

Ten leagues, said Joel.

It was my intention, said the Chair, to come here and offer you assurances that the Council of Kirfa will not allow our Migrants to wander into your territories. But ten leagues is a tight boundary. There are twenty thousand souls in Kirfa, twelve thousand of them Migrants. There is no farmable land within ten leagues from Kirfa.

Your Council can give no assurances, said Joel. You have no say over the rabble in Elefant Square.

I am the Chair of both Parliaments, said the Chair. If I give assurances, I give them then for the whole of Kirfa, including the East Bank.

A slip of a girl like you, said Mrs Joel.

Maybe we should talk woman to woman, said the Chair, taking the bait in spite of herself. You seem to have quite a voice here in Asi, Mrs Speaker Joel.

Mrs Speaker Joel stood up.

My Joel can do the negotiating, she said. I have more important work to do. She stormed out into the evening, closing the door behind her with a bang.

Farm work, said Speaker Joel. Seeing to the horses. Works hard, my old girl.

They sat for a few moments in silence. Mrs Joel's voice could be heard on the other side of the yard, conversing with someone.

Our starting point should be a line half-way between Kirfa and Asi, said the Chair. Both the Council and the Migrant Parliament would be able to give solid assurances based on such a border.

Out of the question, said Speaker Joel.

We were thinking of, say, ten leagues towards Kirfa from the half-way line, said the Chair.

Twenty, said Speaker Joel, after a long silence.



Twelve, said the Chair.

There was a noise of hooves clattering in the yard, a single horse heading out at a gallop down the Asi road.

Eighteen, said Speaker Joel.

The Chair held her hand out to Joel over the table. Fifteen, she said. Or do you need to discuss this with Mrs Joel?

Speaker Joel grunted and took her hand.

A few moments later his wife opened the door and came in with a satisfied smile on her face.

We're negotiating a half-way line, my love, said Joel.

That's lovely, she said cheerfully. Having a nice negotiation are you?

I think we may have reached an agreement, said the Chair.

Lovely, said Mrs Joel. You'll be staying the night? I'll make some nice hot chocolate.

I had thought to return tonight, said the Chair. My chariot would make home before dawn.

I've got lovely rooms and beds for you my dearies, said Mrs Joel. You'll be worn out if you drive all night. Best to make an early start tomorrow.

That's true, said the Chair. Thank you kindly, Mrs Joel.



Meer and the Chair were up at first light the next morning. Joel was entranced by Meer's pod.

Looks like a kayak, he said. How quick are you to Magre?

Fifteen hours or so, said Meer.

And the famous chariot, said Joel. Home by this evening, you say? That's some gallop. Gosste horses?

From the East, said the Chair.

Chariot don't drag, said Joel, eyeing the floating car warily.

Takes the wind a little, said the Chair.

Fair weather today, said Mrs Joel.

The Chair was watching Joel. Beautiful weather, she said. The Span is bright this morning. Tungal will be rising ere long.

Joel's eyes went up to the Span.

When does Tenes rise? asked Meer.

Joel looked at Meer, then at the Chair, and then back at Meer.

You should know that, he said.

Just speaking my thoughts out loud, said Meer. Beautiful star, Tenes. A real jewel.

Joel's eyes were locked into the Chair's.

Dare say, he said.



They shook hands all round, and the Chair took both Meer's hands in hers. We'll talk later, she said. My love to Mereg and the others. And then she added, in spite of herself: Bring her back if she wants to come.

We'll see, said Meer. Safe journey! He waved as the pod sped away, heading north-west to Magre, some two fathom above the grasses.

Could do with one of those, said Joel admiringly.

I'll speak to the Ambassadors if you wish. They too will be happy we came to an agreement.

She climbed into the chariot. I have Meer's notes, she said. I'll have the agreement written up and send you a copy to present to the Moot. We'll meet again in state to ratify, once our councils have agreed.

Drive carefully, said Mrs Joel. Not too fast.

They waved as the horses headed off down the road.

Brave young lady, all alone in that chariot, she said. Driving home to Gosste all alone.

Joel looked at his wife, his eyes narrowing.

You been speaking to the boys, Mrs Joel? he said.

Could be, she said.

None too soon, it seems, said Joel.



Seven leagues down the Asi road the Chair of Kirfa was intercepted by a hundred howling half-naked blue-painted warriors on Anamen horses. She pulled up and set the chariot down on the road as they formed a ring around her, bows drawn and arrows aimed at the chariot.

Good morning, Huns, she said amicably.

A warrior wearing a hair-band adorned with four or five coloured feathers came out of the ring and rode towards her, followed by five horsemen.

Nice wagon, he said. Just what we want out here on the grasses.

The Chair said nothing as they took her from the chariot and bound her hands behind her back. She was lifted up onto a horse in front of one of the warriors.

Look after that bag! she shouted as they climbed about in the chariot, trying to understand how it worked.

This bag? called a warrior, waving it around his head.

Yes, said the Chair.

Important document? called the warrior.

Yes, said the Chair.

Joel's signature on it yet?

Not yet, said the Chair.

Unlucky, shouted the warrior, amid raucous laughter.

How do we lift the chariot? shouted one of the warriors.

Take the reins, said the Chair. They did, and the chariot rose to its gliding position. The warriors howled with delight.

Forward! called the man with the feathers in his hair.

The whole party wheeled and set a north-easterly course at a canter over the grasslands, with the chariot careering uncertainly in its wake.

## 4

The Water Ladies, as Qno had always called them, walked solemnly two by two over the new timber bridge across the Chasm. They were wearing their finest dresses, and for the first time in the history of the Abbey, they did not stop at the Abbey Gate to put down their heavy goatskins of water. They were, in fact, not carrying any water. They filed on under the gate and came into the sacred precincts, where no women other than bona fide refugees had set foot for centuries.

It's beautiful, they said to each other. And it was.

The Abbot lay on his death-bed. His face was pale and sunken, but it had been pale and sunken for several years now, and no one would have guessed that this was his death-bed had he not himself said it was. He lay propped up on his cushions and a wan smile broke in his face as the Water Ladies filed into the Abbot's Hall, which for the past year and a half had become his sacred bedroom. Welcome my dears, he said in an ancient voice. And thank you for all your kind water throughout the years. Now we have our well, but we shall never forget your services.

The Ladies bobbed and blushed, not least abashed at the sight of so many handsome smiling monks standing around the bed.

But that is not the reason why we invited you into the Abbey this miraculous day. I want you to be present when I name my successor on this the last day of my life in this world. And I especially need you Ladies to be present, as we shall see if I manage to live a little longer. Where is Qno?

He seems to have been slightly delayed, my Lord.

He always was an inconsiderate man, said the Abbot. Do I really have to delay my death for an unpunctual monk?

There will be no need, my Lord, said a monk who was standing by the open door and shading his eyes against the westering sun. Here he is now.

Through the gate and into the beautiful courtyard came the large round figure of Qno at a slow walk, and by his side, holding his hand as usual whenever they were together, walked the small round figure of Cirsc, his protégé, confidante, and adopted sister. They came slowly over the cobblestones towards the Abbot's Hall. Their faces were grave, which was highly unusual.

Ah, said the Abbot, as they appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the evening sun. And you have brought the little lady with you. Good.

I assumed you meant Cirsc rather than Mereg, said Qno.

I left that assumption to you, said the Abbot. But you were right, of course. In spite of your unpunctuality and lack of self-discipline you are probably the wisest of my monks. On the other hand Mereg would have been welcome, too. Where is she?

She was busy with a cow, my Lord, said Qno. She promised to come as soon as she could.

She always had faith in cows, said the Abbot. Faith is a rare quality. Is everyone else here? I haven't much time, you know.

Everyone is here, my Lord, said Sne the monk-apothecary.

There was a pause while the Abbot finished a little coughing. Then he lay back on his cushions and seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

As I have already explained, he said, I intend to die today around sunset. But I have a couple of pronouncements to make before that time. They are both momentous, as behoves my tenure, and both intimately connected. I have the feeling that they will cause my name to be remembered for as long as this Abbey stands.

It occurred to Qno that he had no idea what the Abbot's real name was. He wondered if anyone else knew. Perhaps it was recorded somewhere.

As you may expect, continued the Abbot, there will be radical changes after my death. Change, as we know, is another name for Life, as my friends from Eile say.

We have already seen changes. We have been obliged to relax the rules about leaving and returning to the Abbey. But greater changes are to come. Here is the first of our pronouncements.

We have ascertained that there is room in the Abbey, and room in the articles of our faith, for monks of both sexes.

All, murmured Sne.

For monks of all sexes, said the Abbot.

There was a stunned silence. No one breathed. A small bubble of happiness came from Cirsc. Qno and the Abbot were both looking critically at each other.

That is why we invited the Water Ladies today, said the Abbot. I have a feeling that there are strong candidates for the contemplative life amongst them. What say you, comrade Nuus?

Small matter of celibacy, my Lord, said Nuus the Water Lady.

Small matter, my dear, said the Abbot. Reagh is the Goddess of both Peace and Love. Nothing is chiselled in stone.

You're on, then, said Nuus.

Splendid, said the Abbot. There was enthusiastic clapping all round.

The Abbot lay back against his cushions, and appeared to be gathering his strength.

There was a movement in the courtyard. Mereg came in through the door leading her nephews Oswic and Ulpec from Middle Crop on either

side. The fragrance of the cowshed flowed into the sacred bedroom. The Abbot inhaled, and smiled. Good, he said.

Mereg, my dear. Brother Qno once told me you had plans to become Abbess.

That is true, my lord Abbot, said Merreg. But I have since made other plans.

Very right too, said the Abbot. It had always been my resolve to name the wisest person amongst us as my successor. You have many superb qualities, dear Merreg. They will serve you well for the plans you have made. But I shall not insist you become Abbess. You have, I think, greater things awaiting you.

Thank you, my lord Abbot, said Merreg. But now I am uneasy. You have sometimes said that Brother Qno is the wisest of your monks. Brother Qno is my closest friend, the companion of my days. I know his mind well, my lord Abbot. If you call him to the Abbot's seat he will obey, but he will be miserable, and a miserable Abbot is not what the Abbey needs.

That is very true, said the Abbot. And I have indeed said that Qno is the wisest of my monks; but I have not said he is the wisest person amongst us. I have not needed to ponder this matter deeply. It is clear to everyone here who is to be my successor.

And again there was a stunned silence. For everyone knew who was the wisest amongst them. But nobody dared to believe the Abbot's words.

Circs shall be the Abbess upon my death, said the old man. If she can see her way to shouldering the burden.

Circs stood on one foot, and then on the other. Finally she said: Now you mention it, my Lord, that might be a good idea. At least I'll do my best.



Everybody expelled their breaths together. The sun shone through the open door into the Lodge.

What is the time? said the Abbot.

Ten minutes to sunset, my Lord, said Sne.

No point in hanging around, then, said the Abbot. And he closed his eyes, and also his mouth, and arranged his hands carefully upon his breast, and died.



Thank you, Mereg, said Qno, as they made their way home in the Upper Crop cart pulled by the Upper Crop horse.

I couldn't bear losing you, said Mereg.

Nor I you, said Qno.

Oswic and Ulpec giggled in the back of the cart. Mr and Mrs Qno, said Ulpec.

Don't make fun of us, Ulpec, said Qno without looking round. You know we're not really married. I am married to Reagh, Goddess of Peace and Love.

Mrs Qno, said Mereg. I like it.

Dwork would have liked it, said Qno.

Who's Dwork? said Ulpec.

The cow, said Qno.



They stopped at Lower Crop. Jank came out expecting to help Cirsc down.

Where's Cirsc? he said.

Jent put her head out of the door. Where's Cirsc? she said.

Hadr came out of the stables. What's up? he said.

Let's come in and sit down, said Qno.



Half-way between Lower Crop and Upper Crop Qno took a turning up to Middle Crop, the farm which Tesil and Ella had built. The boys climbed down and ran into the farmhouse, calling for their parents.

We were in the Abbey! they called. The Abbot died.

Where's Qno? said Tesil, suddenly anxious.

Mr and Mrs Qno, said Ulpec.

Tesil rushed out. What happened? she called.

Circs is the new Abbess, said Mereg.

Tesil turned back to the farmhouse, but continued her turn like the dancer she was and faced her sister again.

I was worried it would be Qno, she said.

So was I, said Mereg. Can you think of anyone worse?

Humph, said Qno, sounding like Amfer.

Ella came out. What's happened? he said.

Circs is the new Abbess, said Tesil.

Of course, said Ella. At least it's not Qno.

Would that have been so bad? asked Qno.

Worse, said Ella.

True, said Qno.



Was it a real marriage, in your mind? said Qno. I mean, back then?

I think I knew it was a game. But I loved you so much, and you weren't at all like a father. What else could you be?

Uncle? said Qno.

No way. Not family enough.

Never thought of you as a niece, either, said Qno.

They were silent for a while as the old horse plodded up the track to Upper Crop.

When are you leaving? said Qno.

Not yet, said Mereg. Not this year. Tesil needs me still.



The tenure of Cirsc as Abbess in the Abbey of the Rock ushered in changes that even the old Abbot had not foreseen. The Sunday Service in the Great Hall was thrown open to the public, and the townspeople of Tarrant flocked to hear the monks singing. Abbess Cirsc gave a speech of welcome to the townsfolk on the first Sunday, and ended by telling a short story which has sadly not been recorded; but the congregation was so delighted that the custom arose of telling stories at every Sunday service. Often it was the Abbess herself who told the story, but others often took her place, particularly Qno.

Some of these stories have been written down, usually by Sextus who had developed his own system of shorthand. Many of them are kept in the library in the Abbey of the Rock. Here is one of Abbess Cirsc's stories from the early years of her tenure, as recorded by Sextus:

Dearly beloved. Many years ago I was cured of jumping by a doctor from far away. Before that time everything around me had always been jumping around, so that I found it difficult to walk straight, or feed myself without covering my face with soup. This was not all bad, because it trained me to concentrate very hard on everything I did, although I didn't realise this at the time. In Kirfa I met a doctor from another world who saw that I had trained enough, and he showed me how to feel deeper into my mind, so that the jumping stopped, and has never come back. But the important point in this story is that I had never noticed this continual

jumping until it stopped. And I had never noticed how erratically my mind was working, until suddenly it was no longer erratic.

My brother Qno, whom we all know, but who cannot be here today because he is busy with a cow, was present at the time, and afterwards he told me a story he had read about some people who lived by the side of a great waterfall, and had never noticed its mighty roar. But then one day it stopped. Perhaps there had been an earthquake far away in the mountains, and the course of the river had changed. Whatever the reason, they all woke up in the middle of the night and listened to the silence.

The next morning they saw that the waterfall had become a tiny trickle down the great cliff, and to their amazement the mouth of a huge cave had been revealed in the rock. In the entrance to the cave sat an old hag, stirring a pot over a fire.

Who are you and how long have you been there? asked the people.

I am the Old Hag of the Waterfall, whom you have never seen, said the Old Hag. I have been here a very long time, ever since the Dragon died.

And how long had the Dragon been there? asked the people.

Since the time of the Kings, said the Old Hag.

Did the Dragon lie on a mound of treasure? asked the people.

All the Kings' gold, said the Old Hag.

May we see it?

By all means, and take it if you have any use for it. It's no use to me, said the Old Hag.

So the people took the gold, most of which turned out to be tin and copper, which is much more useful than gold, and the Old Hag moved out of the cave behind the waterfall and lived among them for many years, and attended all the childbirths and all the weddings and everything went very well, and eventually the river came back, full of fish, and the people who lived by the river were very happy, and remembered the Old Hag with warmth in their hearts.

That is the end of the story for this week. Perhaps some of you may have always been jumping around, or roaring like a mighty waterfall, at least in your thoughts, without ever noticing. If you think that might be so, you are welcome to come and talk to me any time, except not too late in the evening. Perhaps I can show you how to stop the jumping: it's quite easy really, once you notice it, and it's always exciting to find Dragon's gold, although it may not be worth much on the market.

And underneath this story, in another hand, are the words:

The Abbess Cirsc says: Know the Span. Watch when Tenes rises. No man can tell the value of the Span.



Ella has gone, said Tesil, her voice distraught, and I don't know where the boys are.

The boys were here early this morning, said Mereg as she led Tesil into the kitchen at Upper Crop. Sextus and Septimus went down to Lower with them, Jank and Hadr are going up to check the horses in the high pastures under Hough and Jank wanted outriders. What do you mean, Ella has gone?

He was up early, and now he's gone, wailed Tesil.

You know where he goes, said Amfer. He's talking to the lads in Tarrant. It's Finday, isn't it? He'll be back for dinner.

I always wonder, said Tesil, sniffing, and accepting the mug of coffee from Amfer. He never tells me. One of these days he'll join some party on the way to Kirfa and he won't be back. You know what he's like.

No, said Mereg. Not Ella. He won't go to Kirfa. He hates the place even more than you do. Just let Cirsc talk to him. She knows what's wrong.

We all know what's wrong, said Tesil, and it can't be righted. He can't forgive himself. All my comrades hacked to pieces in the Theatre in Pyzan, he says. And I was pardoned because my wife was a favourite of the Chair's! Pardoned, he says! As if he ever did anything wrong! And Tesil fell to wailing again, reaching for Amfer's basket of bannocks and the pot of honey. It's not his fault the Chair sent them to their deaths.

She stuffed a honeyed bannock into her mouth, tears streaming down her face, wailing and munching.

Why did Oswicus have to go? she asked, spouting crumbs. Ella liked Oswicus. The boys liked Oswicus. Sextus and Septimus talked to him in Pyzan. I heard them talking, Oswicus and Ella. He said the right things to Ella. I heard him. He made sense. He knew how to deal with guilt. He was a soldier.

He was a deserter, our father, said Mereg. He was given the chance to live like a king in the bosom of his family, children and grandchildren. Of course he deserted. He always deserted. But Ella is not like that. Ella is not a deserter. Ella was saved, and he searched you out. Ella will never leave.

Amfer said nothing as she refilled Tesil's coffee-mug. Tesil stood up and put her arms round her. Amfer, she said. Oh Amfer.

Men, said Amfer.

## 5

Lesuli and Mara had sold their harvest to Kirfa, and their stock upriver in the Drays. They had packed their belongings onto their wagon and set off with two horses between the shafts and the three remaining horses hitched to the tail. They were three days on the road up the west bank of the Ozu, still with green fields here and there on either side, but smaller and fewer than they remembered from their last visit to Kirfa, ten years before.

The road left the river as they approached Kirfa, and ran round to join the western road out of the city below the Hanging Gardens, now leafless and dry, with the old stonework revealed behind them, tier above tier.

There were encampments here and there on the plains in front of the city. Mara went alone into the City to visit his brother Borl on the East Bank, while Lesuli joined a party of Anamen travellers sitting round a camp fire on grasslands in front of the city.

Moving west? they asked.

No water, said Lesuli.

You got family where you're going?

Two daughters south in Two Pen, she said.

You're Lesuli, then?

She nodded.

You'll be OK. But your man's a Migro, right?

He came up from the Great Sea, said Lesuli.

They won't like him, said the travellers. Get rid of him.

He's my man, said Lesuli. It was our farm.



Mara threaded the well-remembered alleys of the East Bank to his brother's house. No one was at home.

Parliament in Elefant, said a neighbour. You're Mara, yes? Lesuli's man?

Yes, said Mara.

Your brother Borl's a big man around here, said the neighbour. I'd go to Elefant, if I were you, find out why.

Elefant Square? said Mara. Borl in Elefant Square?

We took it over, said the neighbour. No Inborn there any more. Go and have a look.



The Square was packed. Standing on a podium of stacked tables in the south-west corner, outside the coffee shop where the Chair had taken breakfast for many years, Mara's younger brother Borl stood haranguing the crowd, and the crowd harangued back, as was their wont. Speeches from the podium tended to be dialogues.

We want the Lady Chair, said the crowd.

Migroes, shouted Borl. She ain't coming back. It's been a week.

We'll wait, retorted the crowd. No flies on Sam.

She's been taken by the Huns, shouted Borl. You saw it, didn't you Hatch? Listen to Hatch.

They took her, shouted Hatch, standing on a table on Borl's right. I was with them.

What were you doing with them, Hatch? called the crowd.

I'm a Hun, shouted Hatch.

You're a bloody Migro, Hatch!



I'm both, shouted Hatch. My Granny married out on the plains, long before anyone spoke of Migroes. You all know me. I come and I go. I ride with the Huns. I'm a Migro Hun.

Worst of both worlds, someone shouted.

She was taken, I tell you. They rode north. I went home to Granny. Then I came here, to tell. They took her, I'm telling you.

Where north? called the crowd.

Dunno, said Hatch. Nobody knows. Joel knows, and his old woman knows. Some of them know. It's not talked about.

Listen to Hatch, comrades! shouted Borl. He's our man, he's a Migro come back to us. There's more to Huns than Huns.

The crowd was not convinced. She'll give them the slip, they said. No one can hold Sam back. She has all the tricks up her sleeve.

Well she's not here now, said Borl. The Inborn Council sits without her. Bar knows. Where are you Bar?

Bar climbed up on the table beside Hatch. He waved to the crowd, who cheered.

Give ear to Bar, leader of our party in the Inborn Council, called Borl. Tell us what's happening, Bar.

Nearly threw us out, said Bar. They say we did it. Kidnapped the Lady Chair. Said we're in cahoots with the Huns.

Hatch is, shouted someone.

I swear I didn't know, shouted Hatch.

There was general uproar.

Comrades! Borl could hardly make himself heard.

Show us where they went, Hatch! We'll go after them!

Comrades! yelled Borl. Calm down, comrades!

Calm down yourself, Borl!

Listen to me, comrades, yelled Borl. I've got the answer! Listen to me!

There were groans in the crowd. But others called: Listen to Borl! Borl knows what's what! Let him speak!

Borl stood on his table, glowering at the crowd, as if daring anyone to take his place. After a while the noise began to die down. It was as if Borl were growing larger. And in some respects he was. He was learning fast.

He waited until he did not need to yell.

Comrades, he said, as the crowd grew quiet, listening and waiting.

Go on, Borl!

Elefant is our Square, said Borl.

This was a new tone. The crowd listened.

We made it our Square. We threw out the Imboes.

There was a short pause as the crowd felt his words. Then there was scattered cheering.

The Imboes are fright of us, said Borl. Since we drove back the Pyzan army, since we took the Kind Garden, we've got them nailed. When did you last see the Watch in the East Bank? We are the real power here in Kirfa. Sam knew this. And now she's gone. My guess is she left. She knew her time was over.

You pitching for Chair, Borl?

If not me, then who? We have to take things into our own hands, my friends. Elefant is our square, Kirfa is our city. The Imboes have got to realise this.

There was a roar of consent. Borl paused and looked round, waiting for the noise to subside.

Listen hard, my friends, he went on. Yes, Kirfa is our city. But Kirfa, my friends, Kirfa is not good enough for us! We want more than Kirfa, my friends! Much, much more!

Again a roar of assent Borl continued: Kirfa is going down, my friends. Kirfa is rotting in the wind. Kirfa is a city of sand. We, the Migroes, deserve better than Kirfa. And what is better than Kirfa?

He paused to let the question sink in, his hands held out to the crowd, handling them, feeling in his fingers his control over the ears and minds of the crowd.

We will move out onto the Plains, my friends, into the grasses and the running waters. The Huns have kept the green grasses for themselves too long!

You're talking, Borl, someone shouted.

I'm talking, you Migro mob, because I know what's good for us, and I know how to get it. We drove the legions back to Pyzan. We'll drive the Huns even further if they try to stop us. We are the Migroes of Kirfa!

Big talk, Borl!

Listen to Borl, he's talking!

She'll eat you alive when she comes back, Borl!

She's not coming back!

We're with you, Borl!

She'll eat him alive, mark my words.



It was mid-morning; the day's labours were waiting. Mara stood and watched the crowd disperse, some back to the East Bank, others to their duties in Kirfa City. He watched as Borl, Hatch, Bar and several others of Borl's inner circle re-arranged the tables and took their seats round the Chair's old breakfast table. Borl waved for coffee and sweetbread. The group put their heads together. Mara stood still, watching.

Borl's eyes saw him.

You here, Mara? Come to join us? What's the news from the Drays?

Mara made his way towards the table.

We left, he said. River's drying up. We're going west. We're settling in Two Pen.

The group stared at the newcomer.

My brother Mara, said Borl. Take a seat, big brother. Did you hear the proceedings?

Mara sat and accepted the coffee cup that was pushed towards him.

You want war, he said.

That depends on the Huns, said Borl. We can't stay here, that's for sure, but they won't like it. You say you're going west to Lesuli's people. You're a Migro, Mara. They'll make it difficult for you. You'll see.

Hatch is both a Hun and a Migro, or so I heard, said Mara.

I have a Granny on the plains, said Hatch. That's blood. All you've got is a wife. It's blood, Mara. Granny is blood. You got no blood.

Mara shrugged. They didn't like me at first in the Drays, he said. But dust settles.

Join us, Mara, said Borl, while the dust is flying. Like you say, if we need to, we're going to war. We Migroes are finished here.

Mara shrugged again.

Maybe it'll come to that, he said. But I'll try my luck with Lesuli first.



The Tarn wagon wound its way west over the grasslands, following the old road to Crys. Towards the end of the day they came to the Anamen Border gate.

The gate was open, but the two border guards stopped them as they made to drive through. The Anamen horses crowded round, snorting.

No Migroes, said the guards together.

I am not a Migro, said Lesuli. I am Anamen. My daughters live down at Two Pen.

You're Lesuli from Tarn?

That's me.

Your man is a Migro. He stays out.

My man is married to an Anamen woman, said Lesuli. Our horses are Anamen: he raised them. He has ridden on the grasses. Show them, Mara.

I'm no circus, said Mara sullenly.

Do it, Mara, said Lesuli coldly.

Mara swung himself down from the wagon and stood on the grass watching the horses. They had shied away as he jumped down, but now they pushed and jostled nearer, nostrils flaring. The guards watched.

Take the Red, said Lesuli.

The guards did not see it happen. Before they could blink, Mara was astride the Red, his hands in the mane. The stallion reared, and then clattered off at full gallop westwards into Anamen territory. See you at Two Pen! called Lesuli.

When I catch him, she said to the guards as she drove through the gate, I promise he'll pay for it.



Lesuli and the Tarn wagon plodded along the road to Crys, the three Tarn horses ever more reluctant as the distance from Tarn increased, and sulking at Mara outriding on the Red. It was four days before they arrived at the Asi crossroads. Mara, who was a mile or two ahead, reined in and waited for the wagon. The road south to Two Pen was a narrow track running south straight over the featureless grasslands.

Straight down the road, is it? he said.

Lesuli gazed down the road, anxious.

I suppose, she said. Looks right.

But she stayed the horses.

What's wrong? asked Mara.

You know what's wrong, she said. I've never seen the children.

And Elri and Ynglà have never seen me, said Mara.

And they don't know we're coming.

Come on, said Mara. Get it over with.

Wait, said Lesuli.



Elri looked up from the scroll and said: Look.

Ynglà came from the sink, wiping her hands on her apron. You found it? she said.

Not sure. But look. She had her finger on a single line of readings.

Thirteen, said Ynglà.

And look what comes next, said Elri.

Ynglà bent over the table. Thirteen, thirteen, thirteen, she read. Four in a row.

Elri scrolled down.

Thirteen, thirteen, thirteen, thirteen, thirteen—

Three days, said Elri. Stood still for three days. Antus has marked it in the margin.

That's when?

Nineteenth week, 399, said Elri.

The earthquake, said Ynglà.

Two days before the earthquake, said Elri.

We must speak to the Ambassadors, said Elri.

There's a cart waiting at the junction, said the larger of the two boys.

Are you sure?

The pink line has dipped, he said, pointing to wire tweaking on the wall.

Ynglà closed her eyes.

Guess, who, she said. It's Grandma and Mara.



The sun will be down in an hour, said Mara. Are you going to stay here all night?

Wait, said Lesuli.

Far down the Two Pen road, a speck was moving.

They've seen us, said Lesuli. She flicked the reins, and the horses snorted and set off down the road towards the speck. The speck wobbled in the haze and finally split into five horsemen. As they grew larger, Lesuli saw they were Huns. She turned her horses off the road, reined in and waited.

Be ready, she said to Mara.



Lesuli? asked the foremost rider.

How did you know? asked Lesuli.

The sisters told us, said the rider. They're waiting for you. Who's the man?

My husband Mara, said Lesuli.

That's the Red he's sitting on, said one of the riders. A Migro riding the Red. Now that won't do at all, at all.

Cut, Mara, said Lesuli.

Mara and the Red leapt forward down the road to Two Pen. With a yell, the five Huns took off after him. Lesuli smiled and flicked the reins, and the wagon continued down the road after the galloping horses.



The deep valleys of Pen are invisible from the road until one comes upon them. The road runs straight as a rod over the sandy grasslands, until there is suddenly a change in the unbroken green, which becomes confused, smudged. Half a mile later the grasslands suddenly expose the lie: not grasslands, not a level plain, but a high heath; and below lies an explosive depth of lush wooded valleys and far winding watercourses. The road plunges like a waterfall over the hillside and down into thick foliage, into echoing birdsong and the rush of waters. And after a long descent into ever deeper greener profusion, suddenly, an open hillside, a farmstead, terraced fields of waving barley, and perched up above them the preposterous cantilevered tower of the Two Pen Observatory.

The red stallion came to a snorting halt in the courtyard, nostrils flaring. The four children stood in a row, gravely regarding the horse and the rider. Hallo, said Mara.

Hallo, said the older boy. Are you our Migro Grandpa?

I think so, said Mara.

The children's mothers appeared from the farmhouse at the same time as the five Huns thundered into the yard in pursuit of the Red.

What are you doing, Hall? asked Elri calmly. Weren't you on the way to Asi?

He's riding the Red, said the leading Hun.

At least someone can, said Elri. And what brought you back?

He's a Migro, said Hall.

He's a grandfather, said Elri.



He's our grandfather, came from the children.

Since you're here, Hall, ride up the road and check on Lesuli. It's a steep road down; she may need help with the wagon.

She's got good brakes, said Mara. She knows what she's doing.



How did you know we were coming? said Lesuli.

The wire tweaked, said a grandchild.

You talk strange down here in Two Pen, said his grandmother.

We had a deserter from the Pyzan army working the farm for us some years back, said Elri. Os, he was called. Set up the wire for us by the crossroads. Tweaks when anyone turns down the road.

Tweaks?

The pink line dips, said the elder boy, indicating the wall.

Pyzan soldier? said Mara. Oswicus? The Tyran?

Wasn't much of a tyran, said Ynglà. Knew about things, though.

We heard he had gone to the Hald, said Lesuli.

Too much family there, he said. So he tried us. Lasted half a year.

Went to Asi. Disappeared, says Joel.

But how did you know it was us coming down the road?

Saw it in the stars, said Ynglà. We don't really need the wire. But Os meant well.

What are we eating? said Lesuli.

Mash, said one of her grandchildren.

Time I took over, said Lesuli. Astronomers make poor cooks.

Seems you have been relying on the Huns to work the farm, said Mara. Corn is matting down in the high meadow across the valley. Should have been cut a week ago.

Asi works the farm for us, said Elri. But they've had a lot on their hands of late.

Huns have no idea of how to farm, said Mara. Up in Asi it's just grass and horses. Good job we turned up.

Joel won't like a Migro riding his Red and harvesting his crop in Two Pen, said Elri.

Doubt if I would like Joel, said Mara.

## 6

The grudging respect shown by the Councillors of Kirfa to Samuesil, their Chair, was not to be shown to anyone else. They howled their derision at her aides.

You are witnesses to the fact that the Chair delegated us as Acting Chairs before she left, shouted Wing above the din.

The First Secretary Pullentem threw his cloak importantly over his shouldered and hustled towards the podium.

Wing remonstrated, his voice a little too high: I have the floor! I speak on behalf of the Chair and the Eile Ambassadors!

Keep the Ambassadors out of this! said a voice.

Bloody aliens. Worse than Migroes.

Wing has the floor! shouted Eye, standing at her desk. He speaks for the Chair!

No one speaks for the Chair, said Pullentem, as the grand momentum of his portly person knocked Wing from his place at the podium like a skittle. There's no Chair I can make out in this assembly, he bellowed.

Wing and Eye speak for her in absentia! shouted several voices from the floor.

She is more than in Absentia! roared Pullentem. She is in Abscondia! She is in Nonexistentia! These two striplings have no idea where she is, no contact with her, no plans, no experience, and this Council has no confidence in them! We need a new Chair urgently, and I put myself forward as candidate!

And who's going to elect you, you pompous old Northerner? came a shout from the floor.

You're no better, Cardick! cried another. What says the Speaker?

The Speaker was speaking from his Speaker's Chair, but as usual nobody could hear his feeble voice. There was uproar on the floor among the benches.

Suddenly the doors were flung open and a large man in Migrant attire strode down the centre of the Council Hall with six doughty Migrants flanking him. The Migrant Representatives in the Council rose to their feet in delight as they saw it was Borl, the self-elected Chair of Elefant Square. Borl! they yelled ecstatically. Borl for Chair! Migrant rights!

Fighting broke out among the seats on the floor. Borl was now at the podium, with Pullentem the Northerner sitting on the steps nursing a bruised lip. Borl was shouting, but nobody heard his words. Eye grabbed Wing's hand and headed for a side-door.

It's finished in here, she said. We did our best.

Outside the hot wind blew in the darkening streets.

There's a storm brewing, said Eye.



The Chair's two aides lodged in a comfortable apartment found for them by the Chair, in a building on the flanks of the highest part of Kirfa, with a magnificent view over the centre of the city and, in the distance, the grasslands to the west and north. On clear days they glimpsed the far mountains in the north. And somewhere in the rolling distance to the west they knew was Asi, whence their Chair had not returned. They stood holding hands and gazing over the vast arena of their troubled minds: the Council Hall, still blazing with light from within, the throng of citizens gathering in the plaza before the Hall, and somewhere beyond over the grasslands their lost Chair in chains, spitting at her enemies. They had no view to the east, and so saw nothing of the angry sky there.

Eye and Wing kept no servants and saw to their own needs, which were simple. Their lives were centred around each other and whatever was the current focus of Samuesil's attention. But now that focus, if there still was one, was withheld from them, and so they only had each other to turn to.

Come to bed, said Eye. Lo and Halo will find her. It's just a question of time. Come to bed.

Wing was staring out over the grasslands to the north. Look, he said.

Far, far away, way beyond the horizon, a far faint gleam of light was moving, reflected by the clouds. It blazed brighter and then turned a brilliant green for a second, before snuffing out.

That was something, said Wing. Something has happened. Something is happening.

Eye's arm was about him. Please, she said. Come to bed.



The ambassadors Lo and Halo, on the road north out of Two Pen, looked at each other in horror as they saw the far green glow dancing in the night over the northern horizon.

The Chariot is defending itself, said Lo. They will need help.

We must make Kirfa before the storm, said Halo. We will pick up the equipment and head north.



Undo the sky, shouted Malarea Cwints angrily to her sister Numeth.

Numeth sighed. Again? she said.

The clouds are eating each other, shouted Malarea. Turn them out, Numeth Cwints lazybones!

Mum! called Numeth. Malarea is being rude!

Mrs Doctor Cwints came in from the surgery wiping her hands on a towel.

Not to interrupt in middle of operation, she said severely. Malarea, remember cloud-sign I teach you. And no angry words.

Sorry, Mum, said Malarea, making the cloud-sign up at the window. The sky rearranged itself.

It's not clouds, it's sand, muttered Numeth. There'll be a storm tonight. More sweeping. I hate Saturdays.

A young man with a huge bandage on his right hand came out of the surgery. Lucky boy, only one finger gone, said Doctor Cwints. You play guitar?

Clarinet, said the young man.

Guitar better now, said Doctor Cwints.

There will be no more music, said the young man. There will only be war.

All the more need for music, Salba, said Malarea. And a close watch on the weather.

I hear you, Mal, said Salba. But why the weather?

You must read the clouds, said Malarea.



Numeth was right. The sandstorm reared like a frozen dark tsunami over the desert, motionless in its gigantic height as it rolled ever nearer. By early evening the yellow sands beyond the far huts on the outskirts of the town had disappeared. In spite of the calm in the air there were tiny movements in the loose dust of the street, as if the dust was quickening to the far unheard howling of the storm. The Cwints women, Malarea, Numeth and Mrs Doctor Cwints, tied down their tarpaulin over the inner

corner of the room under the roof, and huddled together with the water-pot between them and face-cloths ready for dousing in the water. Shortly before mid-evening Mr Cwints arrived from the city with the last of the workers, and crept under the tarpaulin to his wife and daughters.

Did you eat? asked Mrs Doctor Cwints.

No, he said. Is there anything?

A patient brought two apples, she said. The girls ate them.

Good girls, said Mr Cwints.

And then the storm was upon them.

The Huns had ridden fast all night north-east over the plains. By morning they had crossed the old route of the legions on their march to the battle at Kirfa. They did not stop, but rode through the morning.

The heat was oppressive. During the night Samuesil had negotiated a measure of comfort: her hands were untied and she was allowed a horse to ride alone. But the warriors rode in a tight knot around her, and the open terrain afforded no opportunity for escape.

She did not ask where they were going: rather, she logged in her mind both direction and distance. At around midday the troop halted at a small sluggish stream that ran from the north. Water and strips of dried meat were handed round. Samuesil drank, but declined the meat. The apparent leader of the troop, the warrior with the feathered head-band, sat on the sandy grass beside her. Several others sat or lay in the grass close to them.

No Migroes out here on the plains to look to your needs, Lady, he said.

Apparently not, said Samuesil.

In fact you won't be seeing any Migroes for some considerable time, he said. We're going to keep you safe in Luce. You'll like it there.

He's younger than I am, thought Samuesil. She smiled brightly at him, as if to show approval.

Name's Fletch, he said.

My friends call me Sam, said Samuesil.

So you've heard of Luce? he said.

No, she said.

You'll like it, he repeated.



By the evening of the second day the heat was less oppressive. Samuesil could make out high ground in the distance in front of them. They were travelling almost due north, she reckoned. By evening they came to low foothills, and made a halt for the night in a gully where a clear stream tumbled down the hillside. The land was rockier and the vegetation greener, with small shrubs growing up the gulley. The horses grazed thankfully. The air was decidedly colder and the skies clear. The outriders of the Span were rising in the north-east.

The men built up a small campfire and sat around it eating strips of dried meat, draped in blankets which they unrolled from their saddlebags. Again they offered Samuesil their food, but she smiled and declined. Not hungry? they asked. Not hungry enough, she said. They gave Samuesil a large, heavy blanket, and seemed concerned for her comfort. They were hardly more than boys, it seemed to her. They spoke together in the Anamen dialect of the grasslands between Crys and Asi, apparently taking turns to tell stories which Samuesil could not follow, but which made them laugh uproariously.

And then at one point she realised they were talking about the chariot.

It's exhausting, driving that thing, someone translated.

It's tuned to me, said Samuesil. So are the horses.

We're going to have to leave it behind, said the driver. We'll never get it up the gulley tomorrow. Single file.

We're going up there? asked Samuesil, looking up the steep sides of the gulley.

They nodded.

I shall have to drive, she said.

They talked together. If you take off, they said, you're finished. We'll shoot you down.

Samuesil repressed a smile.

If I promise not to take off? she said.

They looked at each other.

The chariot goes to Luce, someone said. Os said so.

We'll sleep on it, said Fletch.



Samuesil's white mares were normally hitched three abreast to the chariot. The next morning Samuesil found the warriors discussing how to hitch them in tandem, in preparation for the narrow ascent up the gulley.

No, said Samuesil. They must be three abreast. The chariot will not stabilize with horses in tandem.

You can't get up the gulley three abreast, they said. It's a single file track as soon as the climb starts. The horses have to be led.

Watch me, she said, taking the reins. The chariot lifted, and then lifted higher.

Wait, I'm coming with you, shouted Fletch.

Too late, she called. See you at the top! And the three mares leapt forward up the track.

Follow her! yelled Fletch. She's making a break for it!

Samuesil was way ahead. Several warriors leapt onto their horses and set off after her, but she was already disappearing round the first bend. She'll kill herself! someone shouted.

The leading warriors wailed in anguish as they rounded the bend. Samuesil had left the track and was careering straight up the rock-strewn side of the hill, her horses flying upwards, the chariot bouncing from side to side. The warriors reined in and watched in horror.

Until Samuesil and her chariot and team disappeared over the brow of the hill.



An hour later the toiling warriors led their horses up the last incline as the track widened and levelled out onto the uplands. They found the three white mares grazing the lush grasses on the shoulders of the canyon, and Samuesil sitting on the tailgate of her chariot, waiting for them.

You could have bolted, said Fletch, stating the obvious.

No, said Samuesil. I promised.



Samuesil took Fletch up into the chariot as the troop set out over the highlands. Fletch was talkative, and Samuesil rather liked him.

The chariot headed out ahead of the horsemen, who struggled to keep up over the uneven ground. Not so fast, said Fletch. It's us captured you. Don't want to give them the wrong impression in Luce.

My mares don't like dawdling, said Samuesil.

You fair frightened us when you set off up that hill, said Fletch.

Thought it might have, said Samuesil.

Thought you would of, said Fletch. How do you train horses to run up an incline like that?

They're not pulling anything, said Samuesil. The chariot is driving them. It finds the way for them.

And then, because she liked him, she at last asked the question on her mind. What is this Luce? she said.

Aha, said Fletch. Wouldn't have know myself a year back. Nor nobody on the Grasses.

But you know now?

Lovely place, Luce. Kept secret for centuries. They say there were rumours in Magre, and even down in the Hald. Outlaws and exiles. We

knew of horse-thieves on the Grasses, mind you. But never of Luce. Joel found them. Made a pact. Smart man, Joel.

Is it a settlement? asked Samuesil.

You'll see, said Fletch. You'll like it there. No choice, as it happens.



They gained height. The sparse bushes gave way to hummocky low grasses, with greater and greater patches of windblown, bare ground. Small flowers of brilliant colours glowed here and there among the grasses.

Looks like there are high winds up here, said Samuesil.

Autumn, winter, early spring. Running snow. Terrible, said Fletch.

They bivouacked for the night by one of the many winding streams. It was a cold night, but Samuesil slept well in the bundle of skins they found for her. The warriors held her in awe, and threw sidelong glances at Fletch, whose status had risen dramatically as he rode with her in the chariot. The next day the climb continued, and they were met by a cold breeze from the north. The skies remained clear.

By mid afternoon on the third day they came over a ridge to see a great expanse of level land in front of them, with here and there bare conical mounds of moraine deposited by retreated glaciers. In the middle distance great swathes of colour lay like a patchwork over the landscape: brilliant shades of blue, red, orange and yellow. The sight was breathtaking.

Coclico, said Samuesil.

Papaver, said Fletch.

Opi, said several of the horsemen behind them.



Before long they found a beaten track, wide enough for Samuesil's mares, that wound through the spreading fields of poppies and round the hillocks of moraine. In the far distance high mountains rose into the sky streaked with snow; and in silhouette against them, still far away, a single prominence, black against the white and grey of the mountains, with cliff-like bulwarks rising to its pointed summit. Looking carefully Samuesil saw that the bulwarks were man-made, tier upon tier of dark grey masonry, walls and towers and high square buildings: the stronghold of Luce.

Pretty, don't you think? said Fletch.

The flowers? said Samuesil.

The citadel, said Fletch.

Not exactly pretty, she said. Impressive, I suppose you could say.

You're going to like it, said Fletch. Whether you like it or not. But I repeat myself.



As they approached the citadel, and the winding road up to its main gateway came into view, Samuesil saw that the high battlements were ancient, and mostly in disrepair. There was no life to be seen except for high, wheeling birds. The stone walls of buildings and the embankments along the tiered roadways were covered everywhere with signs and pictures painted in whitewash, and inscriptions and slogans in a variety of letters and languages most of which Samuesil could not decipher. Along one huge wall she could read PAY ABSOLUTELY NO ATTENTION TO — but the rest of the wall had fallen. Among the runes and crosses she could make out slogans proclaiming the virtues of freedom from military service. One inscription in fathom-high letters read, in the Pyzan language, ANTUS LIVES ON. And then Samuesil caught her breath. The

whole windowless side of one mighty building was adorned with a crude depiction of a wheel-less chariot drawn by three white horses and driven by a small figure with long flowing hair. Underneath was written MIGROES OF THE WORLD UNITE, followed by a string of runes. What do they say? she asked Fletch. No idea, I'm sure, he replied.

And then he said: By the way I forgot. Stop the chariot. Drop the reins.

She did. The chariot swayed uncomfortably as two of the warriors jumped aboard and held her arms behind her back. Fletch bound her hands together with the length of rope they had used before, and tied the other end round his waist. Then he took up the reins.

What do I do? he said.

Give them a flick, said Samuesil. The chariot lurched and moved on again.



On the steps of a massive square-cornered edifice at the summit of the citadel stood a tall lanky man with hunched shoulders. Samuesil recognised him instantly by his stance. Impossible, but undeniable. The walls were lit by the westering sun. The narrative had changed.

His voice rang over the square, a centurion's voice: Do you have any idea who you've got there, you idiots?

Fletch was grinning. Some idea, Os. Premium hostage. Present from Maggie.

How dare you bind the Chair of Kirfa?

Doing what we're told, Os. You know that.

Release her.

Your call, I suppose, said Fletch, untying the prisoner.

Oswicus and Samuesil stood looking at each other. Then Oswicus came down the steps towards her. This is regrettable, he said, holding out his hands.

If you say so, she said, taking his hands in hers. For a brief moment they stood looking at each other. Then he released her, and turned to Fletch.

What is Joel's message with this visitation? His voice was older, thought Samuesil.

Maggie sent no message, said Fletch.

Pity you didn't check with Joel, said Oswicus.

Maggie? said Samuesil.

Joel's wife, said Oswicus.

Samuesil's eyes were always on him. He remembered her gaze. She was reading him.

It seems you have a story to tell, Oswic, she said.

Instead of replying, he turned to Fletch again.

You lot can go and find Cleft, he'll give you food and drink, he said. Then get straight back to Joel, make sure he knows about this.

We're taking the chariot back, said Fletch.

I'm sorry, my friend, said Samuesil. You can try, of course; but the chariot won't leave without me.

Cleft will take care of the horses and the chariot, said Oswicus.

Thank you for your company, Huns, said Samuesil. I enjoyed the ride.

Oswicus turned and put his arm briefly over Samuesil's shoulders, drawing her close; then he released her and ushered her in through the great doors.



Oswicus produced bread and cheese, and a bottle of rather bitter colourless wine. They sat together at a great window looking out over the poppy-fields, Oswicus silent. Samuesil was hungry, eating only the bread.

Where is everybody? asked Samuesil. You seem to be the only person here.

Sleeping, mostly, I expect. They keep irregular hours. Big feast yesterday. Poppies. Look, there's somebody.

He pointed to a far object which the Chair saw as a huge bird, skimming over the poppy-fields.

Looking for hares, said Oswicus.

Flying? said Samuesil.

Gliding, said Oswicus. I don't myself. Vertigo.

Flying people, said the Chair, entranced.

High casualty rate, said Oswicus. Two or three every summer. Doesn't stop them, though.

The gliding human swooped and veered away and down.

He's seen a hare, said Oswicus. The wind is from the west. There may be some of them out over Crown, using the up-draughts. He pointed to a range of hills to the south-east. You'll see when they come home, he said.

Samuesil was silent, watching the far airborne human.

Why am I here, Oswic? she said.

No idea. Joel is bound to send me word.

She looked at him. I was not expecting a lie from you, she said.

He shrugged, and said: If you detect a lie, then that should be information enough for you.

Seven years ago, she said, you spoke only your mind.

Then I became Tyran, he said. And then deserter. And now I am Lord of Luce. I am nothing of what I was seven years ago. Nor are you.

You were going to tell me your story, she said.



Was I? said Oswicus.

You went to the Hald after you deserted?

You heard about that, he said.

Why did you not stay there?

The woman with apples had a family, said Oswicus.

From what I hear, said Samuesil, Amfer is the centre of many narratives.

Not mine, said Oswicus.

Are you sure? You may not have been looking for a family, but you found one nevertheless. You have four children in the Hald, and two grandsons.

They did not need me, said Oswicus. I was an embarrassment to Amfer. I left.

You deserted your wife and children to join the legions. Some say you deserted the legions to become Tyran. You deserted your position as Tyran and fled to the Hald, where you found your children. Then you deserted them again.

No all my children, said Oswicus. Only those who lived.

Tell me, Oswic.

When I marched with the army I took my two boys with me, Oswic and Ulpec. I watched them die.

They died in battle?

Of sickness, said Oswicus. Only the strong survive in the army.

Samuesil was silent, thinking. Then she said: I would like to see the Hald. Perhaps we could go together.

You are going nowhere, said Oswicus.



So that is family matters out of the way, said Samuesil, sounding again like the Chair of Kirfa. Now I want to know about this place. And why have I never heard of it?

You are not a soldier, said Oswicus. Every Pyzan soldier knows about Luce.

Then why don't I know?

It's not a real place, said Oswicus. It's a myth. The legions speak about it in whispers. Nobody knows where it is, nobody speaks its name. Perhaps it is in many places, perhaps it has many names. But its promise is clear: freedom from the battle, freedom from the march, freedom from death. You can be hanged for talking of it.

Nobody knows where it is? said Samuesil.

Myth cannot be traced on a military map, said Oswicus.

Then it is not here? Not Luce?

Luce does not appear on military maps. But now you have found us, Lady Chair. Will we survive your visit?

You talk in riddles, said Samuesil. That at least is progress for a centurion and a tyrant. But your story is still incomplete. How did you get here?

Oswicus was staring into the distance. Slunk away in the night, he said at last. It was too much for me. Mereg and Tesil, Sextus and Septimus, two grandchildren with my dead sons' names. Slunk away.

Did you ever meet Meer? asked Samuesil.

Amfer's son? No.

Now he has returned from seven years in Eile, said Samuesil. He is a changed man. You should meet him. He's proud to be a deserter.

Proud of his shame? He should come here to Luce.

Proud of his courage, his resolve, said Samuesil. He will find me here, very soon, and you will meet him.

We'll deal with that when it happens. If he comes here, he'll stay, like you will. Everyone in Luce is a deserter. A citadel of shame.

They were silent for a while.

Go on, said Samuesil. How did you get here?

I went north to Magre, a road I knew. From there I wandered. I had some idea of returning to Kirfa, of taking your offer to the legions and settling in the East Bank. Tesil and Ella had told me of the East Bank.

I would have welcomed you, said Samuesil.

Somehow I ended up at Asi, with Joel and Maggie. They sent me south to work a farm in Two Pen. Two young widows. More family. I couldn't take it. Joel knew what I wanted. He told me of the Citadel. I knew at once that it was Luce.

And you came here and became its Lord?

Oswicus shrugged. They needed a man at the top, said Oswicus. I had good credentials. Ex-centurion, ex-Tyran. So I took the job.

They sat for a while in silence, sipping their wine.

And what do you do here?

Cheese, said Oswicus. Goats. Horses.

Opi?

Why do you ask? said Oswicus.

Coclico, said Samuesil. The opi in Kirfa and in Pyzan must come from places like this.

There's very little opi in our poppies, said Oswicus. Poppy-seed. Good food. You just ate some.

Are you telling me that there is no opi from Luce in Kirfa and Pyzan?

Oswicus did not reply.

Where do you sell your opi? asked Samuesil.

We do not produce opi, said Oswicus.

You lie like a Tyran, said Samuesil.

Again there was silence.

Look, said Oswicus. They're coming home.

A cluster of dots had appeared over the hills to the southeast, ten or twelve distant winged figures floating over the poppy-fields towards them. Samuesil watched in wonder as they grew, banking and diving over the poppies and finally landing on the level ground beyond the battlements below them. They set about dismantling their great black wings and hoisting them on their shoulders before disappearing below the battlements.

Flying people, said Samuesil. The Ambassadors must see this.

Forget that, said Oswicus.



They watched the sun sliding down over the mountains in the north-west. After sunset, the mountains to the east lit with rising colour, while the poppy-fields darkened.

You will return me my chariot and team, said Samuesil. I cannot stay here. There is work to be done.

No, said Oswicus. It will not be like that. You will give me your word not to leave the citadel.

Never, Oswicus, said Samuesil.

You have a lot to learn, said Oswicus. Do not think of escaping. You will not see your chariot again.

It will be useless to you unless I drive, said Samuesil. Without me, it will not be tamed.

He made no reply, but rose and indicated that she should follow him.

I have rooms for you, he said. The lady who used them last left them in good order, I believe. She went her way. I think you will find them comfortable. They will be yours for the time being.

What way could she go from here? asked Samuesil.

He looked at her. Are you hungry? he said.

Yes.

I think you do not eat meat.

I do not.

Fish? Cheese?

No.

Come, said Oswicus, standing. I shall show you where you eat.



It was a spacious, high-timbered, dusk-filled hall, lined with long tables flanked with benches, empty but for three women sitting together at a table halfway down the hall. The two older women were talking. There was no one else for dinner.

This is the food-hall, said Oswicus.

The refectory, said Samuesil.

One of the older women was still wearing the leather harness of the gliding people. The other wore a grey apron and had her hair tied up in a cloth. The young woman stared straight ahead, not listening to the women, her eyes focused on the wall. Her hair was short and tousled and her features spoke of the far south-east; but her dark eyes said clearly: You cannot see me. Only I can see me.

A women still wearing her flying harness appeared at a side door and called into the hall: No one wanted dinner, she said. They all went down to drink at Groff.

We are hungry, said Oswicus. Me and the prisoner.

So this is Kirfa, said the woman. You're going to like it here in Luce.

So I'm told, said Samuesil.

We've got some soup, said the woman in the apron.

That'll do well, said Oswicus.

Does the prisoner eat here?

She does, said Oswicus.

Soft on her are you, Os?

Of course, said Oswicus.

The woman with the apron made for a far door in the corner of the refectory, muttering something about soup.

This is Hwicce, said Oswicus. Hwicce this is Samuesil.

Nice to meet you, said Hwicce.

Samuesil was looking at the young woman. Her skin was paler than Samuesil had ever seen before, and her shock of hair the colour of straw; but her face was blank, and she stared at the wall. It was as if she were somewhere else.

Who is this? asked Samuesil. Neither Oswicus nor Hwicce replied. Perhaps, thought Samuesil, they were waiting for the girl to answer. But the girl simply stared at the wall.

The soup was salty, with beans and roots, and a distant memory of boiled animal. Samuesil stopped after the first spoonful, and turned to the bread.

Kirfa is going to be hungry here in Luce if she can't eat that, said the woman with the apron. Lovely soup. Freshly slaughtered horse, choice quality.

Do you have any apples? said Oswicus.

One or two, said the woman with the apron, and moved off again.

And cheese, called Oswicus after her.

No cheese thank you, said Samuesil.

What are you going to do with her, Os? said Hwicce.

Keep her out of harm's way, said Oswicus. I'll wait till I hear from Joel. Not sure what's gong on down there.

Flew down over this morning, said Hwicce. Huns galloping around everywhere. As always.

And Kirfa?

Sandstorm brewing, said Hwicce.

In Kirfa? said Samuesil. You fly as far as Kirfa?

As far as Crys, said Hwicce.

We've never seen you, said Samuesil.

Can't see what you don't want to, said Hwicce. Camouflage. Look like birds.

You are the Birds? said Samuesil.

We are not *the* Birds, said Hwicce. We are the Birds of Luce.



What is the girl's name? asked Samuesil, as Oswicus escorted her back to her quarters.

She doesn't like to hear her name, he said.

And what is it?

Klimpt.

If I had a name like Klimpt, perhaps I would not like to hear it, said Samuesil.

Good sharp name, said Oswicus. Can't be bent or shortened.

Samuesil thought: Sam and Os.



A large man in a long threadbare brown cloak was waiting the door of Samuesil's rooms.

This is Cleft, said Oswicus. Cleft, this is the Chair of Kirfa.

The Huns told me, said Cleft. He stood still, staring.

Was there something? said Oswicus.

The boys want a talk, said Cleft, his eyes on Samuesil.

Oswicus opened the door and stood aside for Samuesil to enter.

There should be everything you need, he said. I'll see you tomorrow morning.

Samuesil nodded. She closed the door and stood for a while listening to the two men's footsteps receding. Then there was silence. The door had a heavy bolt on the inside. Samuesil pushed it home.



Did you see to the chariot? said Oswicus.

We culled the mares, said Cleft. They were going crazy.

Good, said Oswicus. And the chariot must be destroyed. It was madness to bring it here. The device that makes it float comes from Eile. The Ambassadors may be able to follow it.

The boys don't want anything to do with it, said Cleft. They don't like its ways.

Burn it, said Oswicus.



The next morning Oswicus did not appear. Samuesil left her rooms and explored the building, but found no one. She found an apple and a jug of water on the table in the refectory where Hwicce and Klimpt had sat. She ate and drank. She called, but there was no reply. She went out and wandered the narrow streets and alleyways of the citadel, moving in and out of chill shadow and white sunshine. The citadel was empty of people. Sometimes she fancied she saw some movement at a window, but there was never a face. She had in mind the idea of finding the place they



called Groff, where the flyers had been drinking, but nothing looked remotely like a tavern.

Now and then she gave a whistle for her mares, but there was no response. The bleak sun shone on bare walls.

She rounded a corner and caught sight of a small figure at the other end of the street, just as it darted into a side alley. For some reason Samuesil stopped, confused. But then the figure reappeared and stood motionless, staring at Samuesil. For a second their eyes met, before the figure looked away, and stood still, looking at nothing. It was the girl Klimpt.

Hallo, said Samuesil, as she came up to her. We seem to be alone on the streets of Luce.

The girl ignored her.

Shall we walk together? said Samuesil. You could show me the town.

Again, no response. Samuesil wondered whether the girl was deaf. She touched the girl's arm to gain her attention, and pointed down the street. The girl fell into step with her, and they walked together.

After a while Klimpt took her hand. Your name Samuesil, she said.

Yes it is, said Samuesil. And what is yours?

Klimpt tugged her suddenly to a halt, turned and looked her in the eye. They stared at each other for a while. Then Klimpt said: My name Calimpeto. And she raised her finger to her lips and said Shush.

I promise not to tell, said Samuesil. It is our secret.

The girl's face betrayed nothing. They walked on, and the girl led her down a side-alley which dropped so steeply that it soon became a long flight of steps. They descended into a small square surrounded on three sides by large closed doorways, big enough for horse-carts. On the fourth a fairly wide cobbled street ran out towards the walls of the citadel, disappearing under an archway. They stood still in the empty courtyard.

This is not a good place, said Samuesil. Where are we?

Abattoir, said Klimpt.

Samuesil waited, her heart beating.

Three white mares, said Klimpt.



Samuesil did not remember the walk back to her rooms. The girl led her by the hand. When she came to herself, Samuesil found herself sitting at the window in her rooms, staring over the citadel in the gathering dusk. She felt numb, unfocused, and looking at the girl she saw that they both felt the same.

There was noise and movement and light down below the high walls. A bonfire was being lit, and there was a drum and flute. They watched the reflected red light.

Do they often light bonfires? asked Samuesil.

The girl did not respond.

Suddenly the red glow became brighter, and they heard a rumbling sound from behind the walls, as if a mighty engine were in motion. They watched as the red glow brightened, and the colour changed. A shaft of green light appeared.

My god, said Samuesil.

She reached for the girl, and turned her away from the window.

You must not watch, she said. It will damage your eyes. She pulled the girl down and made her sit against the wall under the window. Cover your eyes, she said. Oh my god.

There was a great noise, as if a huge animal were shrieking, and the room lit with a brilliant green light which they felt rather than saw. The shrieking seemed to rise in the air, higher and higher above the citadel,

until it could be heard not longer. There was no more music from the drum and flute.

## 8

Father has stopped breathing, whispered Malarea.

Numeth and Mrs Doctor Cwints tried to rise, but failed.

A faint smile flickered on Mr Cwints's mouth. Just resting, he said, without opening his eyes.

Drink some water, Father, said Malarea.

Save water, said Mr Cwints. Water for later.

Mother, make him drink, said Malarea.

Not thirsty, said Mr Cwints.

Water pot underneath, said Mrs Doctor Cwints. Full of sand.

There was a hammering at the door, and noise of shovels hacking at the sand.

Doctor Cwints, called a voice outside. Are you in there? You're needed!

Borl, said Malarea. Help us out, Borl!

Much sand, said Mrs Doctor Cwints.

The lower half of the door was jammed tight by sand inside and outside. The sand flowed down towards it the more they shovelled.

Stand back, shouted the man called Borl. We have to break the door.

The door splintered as he attacked it with an axe. The top panel broke away, and faces peered in.

The Cwints family lay against the far wall, buried up to their chests, blinking at the rescuers.



The Migrants' rope bridge over the River Ozu had lain broken, trailing downriver, since the previous summer. The ropes were severed by the Inborn, said the Migrants; by the Migrants, said the Inborn. Borl and his

rescue team helped the Cwints family downriver to the main stone bridge, half-carrying them over the packed sand across the submerged roofs of the East Bank. Here and there rescue teams were at work, and Numeth saw the tall black figures of the Ambassadors among them.

Borl, where are we going? asked Malarea.

To the Kind Garden, said Borl. We are using it as a shelter.

Where are the children? said Malarea.

Gone, said Borl.

Gone where? said Malarea.

Safe, said Borl.

No worry, Malarea, no worry, said her father.

Your Daddy's got it all worked out, said Borl.

I don't trust you, Borl, shouted Malarea. Where are they, papa?

They are safe, Malarea, muttered Mr Cwints.

Use the cloud-sign, Malarea, said her mother.



The Kind Garden was a large house on a hillside overlooking Elephant Square, in a district abandoned over the past seven years by the shrinking Inborn population. It stood in a spacious garden surrounded by a high wall, making it ideal as a nursery; but since the Kind Rebellion its efficacy as a child-care centre had dwindled. Smaller, independent child-care units had sprung up throughout the city, often run by unskilled migrant groups, and an increasing number of Inborn parents had found it necessary to raise their children at home. But Malarea's question hung in the air: some dozen or more Inborn children were still cared for in the old dilapidated house. They are safe, not to worry, muttered Mr Cwints again and again to his daughter; but the clouds kept mounting in her skies.

The old house was now filling with men, women and children dug out of the sand by rescue teams in the East Bank. Mr and Mrs Doctor Cwints seemed to gain strength from the situation and immediately began to attend to the sick and injured. The rescue teams had brought up water from the river in gourds and goatskins. The Cwintses tore up clothing to bind the wounds. There was no food. The Migrants had roamed from house to house in the Old Town in search of food and utensils. They found little.

They have gone, they said. They have left Kirfa.

How, gone? said Malarea. Gone where? Where could they go?

Away, said Borl. North. Gone.

No worry, muttered her father.



The stream of survivors from the East Bank increased by the minute. After filling the old house in the Kind Garden they began to spill over into the empty, spacious villas in the vicinity. All the food and water that could be salvaged from the East Bank had been brought over and rationed out from the Kind Garden. Water drawn from the river: filthy water, they said. We can't stay here, Borl, they said. We must go west.

Didn't I say so, in Elefant? said Borl.

They threw you out of the Council, Borl.

The Council is finished, said Borl. And when we leave, Kirfa will be finished too. From now on, it's us. Stop making those queer signs, Malarea, you give me the creeps.



Eye slept, curled on her side, and Wing lay against her, his arm flung over her like his name. The two Ambassadors looked down on them.

We must wake them, said Halo.

Poor children, said Lo. Their world is gone.

Wing and Eye opened their eyes almost together, and looked up and the tall figures standing by their bed.

Where were you? said Eye. Did you find her?

Yes and no, said Halo. We think we know where she is. We were busy in the East Bank. You must wake. Time of great change.

I need coffee, said Eye.

There is no coffee, said Lo. There is no water.

Wing rolled out of the bed and stumbled sleepily to the window, looking into the morning light.

My God, he said.

And then: Where is everybody?

Probably standing at their windows and saying My God, said Eye, joining him at the window.

No, I mean the Street Crews, said Wing. Why aren't they out there? It'll take them days to clear that sand.

The street was unrecognizable. There were drifts of sand two metres high.

They won't be clearing it, said Halo. They have other work to do.

What other work?

The East Bank is buried. They're digging for survivors.

Where are the Watch? said Wing. We must send rescue teams.

We are leaving, said Lo. We think we have located the Chair. You must talk to the Watch. We will take you to the station.

You're going to leave us? said Eye. She turned to Wing. We need you here, she said.

You are the Chair's aides, said Lo. You are in command. We are only alien observers; we cannot intervene. We'll take you down to the Station—you could start by covering yourselves. You're making us nervous.

If that is the right word, said Halo.



Outside, the high drifts of sand blocked every door. A few brave souls were attacking them with shovels, but making little progress. Eye and Wing followed the Ambassadors out through the ground-floor window where they had entered; their kayak-pods waited for them on a sand-bank by the window. But there were now three pods. For the equipment, said Lo. It will follow us.

The heat was terrible, and the sand was hot to their feet. The two aides sat astride the third pod which followed the Ambassadors and they sped over the drifts down to the Station of the Watch in Post Office Square.

The main doors of the Watch had been cleared of sand, and the two guards standing irresolutely outside snapped to attention as Wing and Eye climbed out of the pods. But the aides saw that they exchanged glances.

Now we must go, said Halo. We are in haste.

Wing and Eye found no words; they both nodded and tried to look resolute. The Ambassadors swung into their pods and sped away across the drifts of sand, making for the great gate under the walls.

Eye turned to the guards. Has the Commander arrived? she said.

Not sure ma'am. Don't think so ma'am.



Superintendent?

No ma'am. Not sure ma'am. Some of us are in the Briefing Room ma'am.



There were six Guards of the Watch in the Briefing Room, and one sergeant. They had made coffee—there seemed to be some water in the pipes in the Lower Town. They all rose warily to their feet as the aides entered.

Where is everybody? said Eye. Yes please, coffee.

Digging themselves out, I shouldn't wonder, ma'am.

And the Street Crews?

Not a word, ma'am. Nothing from the Migroes.

They need our help, said Wing. The East Bank is under sand. They're digging people out. You must rouse your men and put together a rescue team. We'll go the East Bank together.

Can't do that, sir. Not without orders.

Those were orders, said Eye.

Need orders from First Secretary Pullentem, ma'am.

Pullentem be damned, said Wing.

Be careful, sir, if you get my meaning, said the sergeant.

There are people dying over the river, said Eye.

Not without orders, repeated the sergeant.

Sergeant, said Wing, the orders we give in the Chair's absence are the Chair's orders. You know that.

Sorry, sir. Orders last night from First Secretary Pullentem.

Was that before the storm hit? said Wing.

While it was hitting, sir, said the Sergeant.

We must find Borl, said Eye to Wing. They'll know where he is in the Kind Garden.

The two aides made their way together over the sand-drifts towards the quarter in which the Kind Garden stood. As they grew closer, they became aware of bands of Migrants going house to house, or leaving houses with meagre sacks of provisions and heading the same way as the aides, converging on the Kind House.

Hey, you two! Where do you think you're going?

Leave them, said a voice. It's the Chair's two aides.

We are looking for Borl, said Wing.

You know where the Chair is? Is she coming back?

No, we don't know, said Eye. We are looking for Borl.

Borl will eat you alive, my sweetie pies. Come with us. We'll introduce you.



So it's the Lady Samuesil's bodyguards, is it? said Borl. My word. Now I really am terrified.

There was a roar of laughter.

We came—began Eye; and then stopped. What had they come for?

You came here, little girl, because you haven't a clue what else to do, said Borl. Because this is the only place in Kirfa where anybody knows anything.

We came to help, said Wing.

Nobody comes to me to help, said Borl, speaking over the renewed laughter. You came *for* help, wasn't that it?

No not at all, said Wing.

Yes, said Eye.

The Watch refuses to help, said Wing. They only take orders from Pullentem.

Pullentem is nobody's problem but his own, said Borl. For the present, we gather strength here in Kind. Pullentem can do what he likes. He's finished, like the Imbo Council. You saw me there; I saw you. You did right to leave. They're a crowd of babbling idiots. We left. There were better things to do, my dearies—tell that to your Lady Sam. Where is she?

Wish we knew, said Eye.

What do we do with them, Hatch? said Borl.

Send 'em home to Mama, said Hatch.

Go and show them the doings, said Borl. They can help the little winkie doctors.

Eye and Wing found Mr and Mrs Doctor Cwints in the large room upstairs where the children used to play and listen to Ella's stories. Sick and injured Migrants lay on mattresses arranged like like a mosaic over the expanse of floor.

Nothing to do here, said Mr Cwints. Water bad. No knives, no bandages. Mrs Doctor Cwints use her signs. You want to help?

Yes, we do, said Wing.

Come, said Mr Cwints, pointing out of the window. Tell children stories. I come soon, Mrs Doctor Cwints come soon. Save children.

He took them down the stairs out onto the drifted sand where once was lawn, and pointed up between the trees. In sheds, he said. We come soon.

At the far top of the garden under the massive perimeter wall was a long low shed leaning against the stonework. Here the sand was shallower, blown by the wind, and the aides could see the outlines of a vegetable garden surrounding the shed. The sand had been scraped from one of the doors of the shed: they dragged it open and looked in.

Some fifteen small children huddled together around the Cwints girls, Malarea and Numeth. Numeth was reading from a story book. Malarea had several smaller children huddled around her. Some were asleep, others wide-eyed and anxious.

Numeth recognised them. Has the Chair come back? she asked.

Not yet, said Eye. Are these the Kind children?

Help us, said Malarea, making her signs as she spoke. Food and water.

We have nothing, said Wing.

Yes we do, said Eye. We have shelter and some food. Can they walk?

Some of them, said Numeth.

Eye was beginning to sound like the Chair. We can carry two each, she said. Malarea, you will lead the older ones. We will go to our lodgings, there's room for everybody. Numeth waits here with the rest of the little ones.

We will take one each, said Wing. We won't make it through the sand with two.

They came down between the trees towards the main gate. Borl was standing on the steps of the house.

Where were they? he asked simply.

The Cwints girls had them up in the sheds, said Eye. We're taking them back to our place.

Borl watched without speaking as Eye and Wing floundered past over the packed sand, each carrying a sleeping child on their shoulders. He watched as Malarea followed them, leading seven older children hand in hand behind her.

Good riddance, he said.

Then he turned and barked in through the doorway: Hatch! Call those doctors!

Mr and Mrs Cwints appeared on the doorstep.

You'll go with the kiddies, said Borl. You'll do no more here. Hatch!  
Where are you?—You'll help them with the kiddies, Hatch.

You're joking, Borl.

When did I ever joke? asked Borl.



Most of the children needed to be carried, at least some of the way. Hatch, Wing and Eye made several journeys. The Cwintses moved into the aides' apartment as if they owned it, found mattresses and blankets for the children to lie on, and rifled the Aides' cold store of biscuits and fruit juice.

Eye set off down to the Watch and stormed straight into the Briefing Room, looking neither right nor left.

There is water in your pipes still? she asked.

Yes ma'am. Need to save it for the coffee.

You have buckets?

Ma'am?

Amphorae? Containers?

Gourds, ma'am?

Fill them. Good water, for the children. Kirfa's children. This is priority, and this is an order from the Chair. Have them taken up to our apartment. We have fifteen children from the Kind House who have not smelt water for thirty-six hours. Jump to it!

Yes ma'am, muttered the sergeant on duty. Of course ma'am.

Eye stormed out.

For the children, said the sergeant to his men.



Wing and Eye's store of drink and food was surprisingly substantial. The children ate and drank well and were soon fast asleep in the Aides' spacious bed and on mattresses and blankets strewn over the floor. Malarea and Numeth lay sleeping with them. Their mother and father sat with the Aides in what passed for their kitchen, drinking rush-water brewed from the ten large gourds of water sent up by the guards.

There was a mumble of voices outside, and then a knocking on the door. Eye went to answer. Five young people, perhaps twelve to fifteen years old, stood uncertainly outside the door on the landing. They were filthy, and their clothes were in rags. In their midst stood a girl with cropped red hair. She was the smallest of the group, but Eye saw at once that she was their leader.

Are you the Chair? asked the girl.

I work for the Chair, said Eye.

They said you were looking after the children.

Who's they? asked Eye.

The Watch. They usually give us water and food. This time they sent us here.

Where are your parents? asked Eye. Where do you live?

The girl shrugged.

You'd better come in, said Eye. But keep quiet, try not to wake the children.

The youngsters trooped into the kitchen, looking round hopefully at the cupboards.

You hungry, said Mrs Cwints. It was not a question, and the children did not answer.

Anything left? asked Mrs Cwints. Enough, said Eye. And there is still oil for the stove.

Porridge, said Mrs Cwints, lighting the stove and getting to work.

The children crowded round the table, three boys and two girls. Rush-water? asked Wing. They nodded.

The adults watched them as they ate the porridge.

Where do you live? asked Eye.

Kirfa, mumbled the small girl between spoonfuls.

But where? Where are your parents?

You've already asked that, said the other girl, the largest of the group.

You gave no answer, said Eye.

Where are your parents? said the first girl.

Eye looked at Wing.

Were you children in the Kind Garden? asked Wing.

Yes, said the girl. Ella is our kind-father.

And who were your parents?

Always the same question, said the girl. One of the boys laughed into his porridge, and the others followed suit.

Tell them who we are, Wen, said the larger girl.

We are the Grand Masters of the Order of Ella, said Wen.

And what do you do, besides asking the Watch for food? asked Eye.

We fight for the Honour of Ella who was taken in chains to Pyzan, said Wen. We know he is not dead. We know he will return to Kirfa and become Chair and King and fight back the encroaching sands.

And there will no more Inborn and Migro in Kirfa, said the larger girl, only honest Kirfans who live in peace and don't steal.

The boys were sniggering again into their porridge.

Are there many more of you? asked Wing.

Thousands, said Wen. At least ten.

Ten thousand?

Ten Grand Masters, said the larger girl.

At least ten, Gwendy, said Wen.

Twelve, said Gwendy.

And Barkin, and Cheese, said one of the boys.

Fourteen, then, said Wen.

You want to finish the porridge? asked Wing.

Yes, they said.



Eye arrived early down at the station of the Watch the next morning.

We had a visit from the Grand Masters of the Order of Ella last night, she told the sergeant. He seemed not to understand.

When is the Chair coming back? he asked. It's not too easy to keep this outfit running without orders from above.

I thought you took your orders from Pullentem, said Eye.

The sergeant eyed her. Eye felt anew the surge of the confidence that had kindled in her since her last visit to the Watch.

Well? she asked.

There was a fight in the Council, said the sergeant. You haven't heard?

We have been busy, said Eye.

Pullentem got his head accidentally chopped off, said the sergeant.

The others went.

Went where?

Took off, said the sergeant. Those as could.

Took off where? said Eye.

Borl is taking over, said the sergeant. The Inborn are leaving. Those whose throats aren't slit yet. Most of the Watch have gone, too.

Tell me where they have gone, said Eye.

North. Upriver. Useless. Me and the lads decided to stay here. Loyal to the Chair, and to her Aides, ma'am. At your service.

There is still water in the pipes?



Getting better, ma'am, running clearer.

How many men do you have here in the Watch?

Eighteen, to a man, ma'am.

So there is room in this building for the children?

How many children, ma'am? the sergeant nervously.

Thousands, said Eye.

## 9

Qno was singing in the byre. He intoned the First Verse over and over again, as he did every morning:

Ever first between °  
ever between two \  
Two beside one °  
two beside three \

There was an early morning chill in the air, but Mereg was sweating profusely as she gathered the axe ° to swing in time to Qno's rhythm. She loved the old song, and the ripe click \  
as the big logs split.

As the voice spoke behind her, it was as if she had been expecting it. Lay down your axe, Mereg, said Meer from the gate.

She rested on her axe and looked at him, standing at the gate as he had stood so many years before.

Qno had stopped singing and was standing at the door of the byre. Meer, said Qno. Welcome home.

You're very kind, said Meer as he opened the gate.

It's your farm, said Mereg, her voice shaking a little.

I would say it was your farm, said Meer.

Amfer appeared at the door of the farmhouse. She ran to him and took his face in her hands. Mereg felt the passing of seven years. You're taller, said Amfer.

I straightened out, said Meer. Qno stood looking at him, his eyes bright.

When did you come?

This spring. I have been travelling in the South with the Ambassadors, he said. Working for Kirfa. Gathering data.

How is Kirfa? asked Mereg.

Not too good. Sam sends her warmest greetings, said Meer. She's very busy. She misses you.

I miss her, said Mereg.

Where are the boys? asked Meer.

They're down at Lower Crop with the lambs, said Mereg. Didn't you see them on the way up?

I came down from Magre over the Moor, said Meer. Sam took me with her to parley with Joel at Asi. I came on here instead of returning to Kirfa with Sam.

You must be tired and hungry.

Hungry, said Meer. But it was an easy journey. I rode the pod. He indicated the alien vehicle tethered to a bush on the other side of the lane.

Looks like a kayak, said Qno.

Works a bit like a kayak, said Meer.

Did you travel on that to Eile? asked Mereg.

No, said Meer. It's a long story.

There was a bustle in the yard and Sextus and Septimus came up from marking the lambs at Lower Crop, bringing Hadr with them. Meer took Hadr by the shoulders. I see the doctors did a good job on both of us, he said. Hadr's eyes shone, but he did not manage to say anything.

No one's had time to make any food at Lower, said Sextus. We're starving.

I've been waiting for you, said Amfer.

Qno was looking Meer over at close range. Don't see like I used to, he said. You're a bigger better Meer.

I hope so, said Meer. You people haven't changed.

Meaning you notice seven years have passed, said Amfer. Now eat. Where are Tesil and her men?

Meer looked at Mereg for an explanation.

Mereg said: Tesil and Ella and their boys, you remember?

Your sister, said Meer. The dancer. I only dimly remember. Are they here?

Seven years, said Mereg. They built Middle Crop. Jank and Jent and Amfer yielded them the land.

Seven years, said Meer. He looked at Mereg. She had put her arm round Hadr's waist.

The two most beautiful people in the Hald, said Meer.

Mereg leant her head on Hadr's shoulder. Hadr is my best friend, she said. We're not together.

Looking at them, Meer saw why.

I can see it's a good friendship, he said.

Hadr is my brother, said Mereg. He's got a beautiful mouth, don't you think?

So have you, said Hadr, laughing. And a beautiful pair of tits.

Idiot, said Mereg.



Mereg and Meer sat together on the bench outside the stable, as they had sat seven years before, looking at the axe in the chopping-block.

Mereg felt she had to speak.

We tried it once, she said. We thought we ought to, but it was miserable. We avoided each other for a whole week. Hadr isn't much for women. But then I missed him, and he missed me, so we talked it over. He's my closest friend.

You're lucky to have each other, said Meer.

They were silent, both looking at the axe.

Sam misses you, said Meer.

Yes, said Mereg, I suppose she would. Will she come and see us?

I doubt it, said Meer.

That's the old axe, said Mereg.

Meer looked at her. You still carry it?

You remember?

I shall never forget that last conversation in Kirfa, said Meer. It's one of the few things I remember clearly from the time before Eile. My cure began then.

That's good, said Mereg.

I am still Meer, in a way, he said. I have a connection with myself as I was then. It's is a connection with another Meer, but it's a Meer I am responsible for.

I should have come with you to Eile, said Mereg. I am still only one person. I still carry the axe, Meer.

Meer looked at her. I can see that, he said. I keep my back covered.

They were silent for a while.

I hear you're preparing to go to Pyzan, he said at last.

Hardly preparing, said Mereg. Pyzan calls, that's all. Do you remember the Astronomers on the road to Kirfa?

Meer looked at her, surprised. Did we meet them on the road to Kirfa? he said. I don't remember that.

We stopped at the turning, said Mereg. But we didn't take the turning to Two Pen. We turned right to Asi instead.

I remember our tip to Asi fairly well. But I have been to Two Pen since, with the Ambassadors, and talked to them. Two sisters.

I have never forgotten that turning, said Mereg. Astronomers! The word itself was magic. I want to go to Pyzan, they have great astronomers there.

The sisters in Two Pen are the greatest astronomers of this age, said Meer. They don't have the equipment that Pyzan has, but they can read the data better than anyone else. Pyzan sends them their data. They are measuring the orbit of Tenes.

Tenes is wobbling, said Mereg. I see it.

You see it?

The little one below the Three-Beyond, said Mereg. What's it called?

Qno would know.

He can't see like he used to. But I can see. It went behind Tenes twice last winter. It shouldn't do that.

You should speak to the sisters at Two Pen, said Meer.

Two Pen, said Mereg wistfully. But I want to see Pyzan.

Her eyes fell on the axe again.



What happened to the Tyran? said Meer suddenly. I heard strange stories in Kirfa. They say that that Pyzan is a republic.

What did you hear in Kirfa? said Mereg.

Meer was choosing his words carefully.

I heard he came to the Hald, he said.

He brought Ella to the Hald, said Mereg.

But he didn't stay?

Has Amfer told you?

Yes, said Meer.

They were both silent.

It didn't work out, said Mereg.

Of course not. It takes a deserter like me to know a deserter.

After another long silence, Mereg said, You would have become my brother. A half-brother in law, or something.

Did he know you were his daughter?

He found out. It came as a shock to him. Four children. He was terrified, poor man.

Four? said Meer.

Tesil, Sextus, Septimus and me. And two grandchildren. He couldn't face us. He headed off east.

And?

We heard he stayed for a while at Two Pen. After that, no one knows. Has Sam told you anything?

Sam says nothing, said Meer. I don't think she likes talking about him.

Do you think they were ever together? said Mereg. Her voice was almost a whisper.

I don't think so, said Meer. Not Sam.



Two days later the Abbess Cirsc sent a monk on a fast horse to Upper Crop with a note for Qno in Cirsc's solid, square handwriting.

Is the Chair with Meer? said the note. Kirfa is asking.

Meer fetched his travel-bag from his old room and came clattering downstairs. I must go, he said. The Chair is in trouble. He kissed his mother and took Qno by the shoulders. It was a good day when you came to the Hald with your little refugees, he said. For me and my mother.

And for me and the little refugees, said Qno, his eyes bright.

Mereg was standing at the window. She and Meer looked at each other, but she came no closer.

I hope to see you all soon, he said. Look after them, Mereg.

They watched him as he climbed into his kayak and sped down the road to the Abbey.

On the new timber bridge over the Chasm Meer met Brother Cro with an empty shopping-basket on his arm. Meer, said Cro happily, lovely to see you! It's been seven years!

You've lost weight, Cro, said Meer.

All this walking back and forth from the Abbey to the Market, said Cro. The Abbess won't drink any old soup, I tell you. My, you're looking good, young Meer!

Thank you, Cro, so are you. Is the Abbess at home?

In her study I daresay, said Cro. Works like the devil. Where's the Chair?

Wish I knew, said Meer.

Cirsc's voice came immediately as he knocked at the door: Do come in!

She was smaller than he remembered. She sat in the old Abbot's chair with several cushions under her, and looked up over her thick reading-glasses as he came in.

My my, she said, putting down her plume. What can I do for you, young man?

Don't you recognise me, Cirsc? said Meer.

You are a long way away, said Cirsc, but I would recognise such a splendid young man at a distance if I had seen him before. You want to see me?

I'm Meer, Abbess Cirsc, he said. You sent Qno a message and I came straight down.

Cirsc slithered from her seat and came round the table to see Meer better.

Heavens above, she said. Meer?

She peered closer. You may be right, she said. Meer's face, sort of. But your colours are so different!



Believe me, said Meer.

Cirsc clasped him happily round his middle, hopping from side to side in her old dance. So this is the new Meer, she said. I'm so glad. I didn't really like the old one. Seven years in Eile, my my. Where are the Ambassadors?—No, wait—where is the Chair?

Nobody knows where Sam is, Cirsc.

They said you went with her to Asi, and that you were going on to the Hald. We thought she went with you.

I left her at Asi, said Meer. She was heading back to Kirfa.

They said she hadn't returned. And then Kirfa stopped replying. And so has Asi.

I shouldn't have left her alone.

Then you would both be missing, said Cirsc.

Has the grid failed before? asked Meer.

It hasn't failed. It still works to Crys and Tarc. You must go at once to Kirfa—she may have returned. I am anxious, Meer; something has happened.

I shall find out what has happened, Cirsc, and send you word.

Wait, said Cirsc. You were at Asi?

Yes.

Did Samuesil speak to Joel about the Span?

Meer looked at her in surprise.

You thought I didn't know what was happening? said Cirsc, twinkling. I am the Abbess. I get to know everything. The girls in Two Pen keep me informed. But there are things they don't know.

Do you? said Meer.

About the mining? Of course.—So what did Joel say?

It was not on the agenda at Asi, said Meer. Just came up in the conversation.

And what was his take? Tell me, I'm inquisitive.

I'm not sure, said Meer. But maybe he knows more than he lets on.

Don't go to Asi, said Cirsc. Go straight to Kirfa. You're wanted there.



Meer reached Crys at first light the next morning. 37 greeted him at the door of the hostel. Food and rest, young man, she said. You're no use to Kirfa hungry and exhausted.

Are you always afoot this early? asked Meer.

Abess sent word, said 37. I hear you've lost my Lady Chair.

I'm going to Asi, to find out what happened, said Meer.

I wouldn't do that, said 37. Funny lot at Asi. You go there alone and there's no saying. Go straight to Kirfa. Keep off the road, 78 says they've put up roadblocks. Crazy people, those Huns. That's my take. Even if they are Anamen. There's Anamen and there's crazy Anamen. Like everywhere.

I could do with a couple of hours' sleep, said Meer.

I'll wake you, said 37.



But Meer could not sleep. He saw before him the road to Asi, remembering in unexpected detail the journey there with Qno and the others. He felt that this was the road he must take if he were to find Samuesil. But he also knew he was needed in Kirfa. Perhaps he dozed. He was in Eile Four again:

*Back! Back! came the call from the front of the line.*

*Meer stood still on the bank, his eyes focused on the gaping black hole in the snow bridge. The line of travellers were scrambling for the safety of the bank. The roar of the river came up from the black hole.*

*Ketsin and three others are gone, said the people around him.*

*From the bank the travellers could see a few hundred fathoms down the pass to their left where the river broke out of the ice and leapt and bounded over the stones. Instead of the bodies they were watching for came a great tumult of snow and broken ice which buckled and ground down over the rapids, until the river ran clear again.*

*Ketsin our guide gone, and no body to take home to his family, and what way will we find now in the High Valley?*

*Onward, only.*

Four hours east of Crys, Meer met Post on the road, returning from Kirfa.

No post from Kirfa, said Post. Don't know why I go there any longer. Left in a hurry. Sandstorm brewing. Big one.

Have you seen the Chair? asked Meer.

No Chair in Kirfa, Mr Meer.

Did you stop at Asi?

Don't go there any more, said Post. Too crazy. Joel has lost it. Keep away from there, Mr Meer.

He leant over and restarted the engine. The paintwork was shabby. As the wagon moved off he turned and called over his shoulder: Funny things going on, Mr Meer! Keep away from Asi.

An hour later Meer set his pod down by the Asi-Two Pen crossroads. It was growing dark. He stepped out of the pod to stretch his limbs, and took a few passes that he had learnt among his friends the villagers on

Eile Four. Then he stood still on the short sandy grass, looking northward up the road to Asi. His mind told him: This direction will take you to her.

And then as he stood, still uncertain, he felt a tiny tremor under his feet in the grass. The weather was calm and fairly warm, with a high scattered cloud-cover and a few stars showing. Tungal was hidden behind clouds. They seemed denser towards the north.

As he watched a far glint of brilliant green light shone out in the north, dancing beyond the farthest horizon, far beyond Asi. It was not the aurora. It seemed to be at a very great distance, and yet it glinted under the lowering clouds.

He returned to his pod and set off up the road to Asi.

Oswicus stood in the doorway steadying himself against the doorpost.

Samuesil, he said. Are you there?

Yes, said Samuesil.

Are you alone?

The girl is with me, said Samuesil.

I can't see, said Oswicus.

She took his hand and led him to a chair.

How many people were hurt? she asked.

Thirty or forty, said Oswicus.

Do your eyes hurt?

Yes.

Do you have doctors?

They are taking people to the Spital, said Oswicus.

You should go there. We will take you.

You will stay here. Where is Hwicce?

You must see a doctor, Oswicus.

Is the girl here?

I am here, said Klimpt.

Can you find Hwicce?

She not at the fire?

I think not, said Oswicus. Help me, he said. I need to lie down.

I go, said Klimpt, and left.

Why did you come here, Oswicus? said Samuesil as she led him to the couch. You should have gone to the Spital.

You are in danger, Samuesil. The people are angry.

They burn my chariot and hurt their eyes and blame me for it?

I ordered the burning, said Oswicus.

You burnt my chariot and slaughtered my mares?

You had to be restrained, said Oswicus. You are wildfire. You would have escaped and betrayed our position.

Now you have betrayed it, said Samuesil. The Ambassadors will have seen the light, it would have been seen as far as Kirfa and as far as Crys. They will be on their way here now. With medicine.

They will be too late, said Oswicus. You must hide. The people will tear you apart. Where is Hwicce?

Klimpt found Hwicce at the Spital. She was tending the casualties, not knowing what to do for their burnt bodies and faces. The medics were efficient, applying herbs and bandages, and administering opi. Klimpt took Hwicce's hand and tugged.

I can't leave here, said Hwicce.

Kirfa, Os, calling you, said Klimpt, tugging faster. She looked Hwicce in the eyes.

Hwicce took bandages, oil and opi and followed her.

You must get Samuesil out, said Oswicus.

Without my horses, without my chariot? said Samuesil.

Can you fly her, Hwicce? To Kirfa?

The winds are not good, said Hwicce. We would have to go west. South west.

You have the equipment in the Tower?

Perhaps.

You must leave immediately. Before the people start gathering.

You need to get to the Spital, Oswicus.

I shall rest here a short while, said Oswicus. Then I can find my way.  
Go.



They are gathering in the Square, said Hwicce. We will take the  
Cloisters. Come. Run.

I should talk to them, said Samuesil. I know how to talk to crowds.  
They will listen.

You do not even speak the language, said Hwicce. Come.

Where to? asked Samuesil.

To the Tower. You can fly from there. Klimpt will go with you.

The three women raced through walkways and tunnels. At length they  
came to the base of a great tower which rose above the roofs on the south  
western slope of the citadel. As they crossed the courtyard in front of the  
tower they could hear the shouts in the centre of the Citadel, and saw the  
reflected light of many torches.

Hwicce and Klimpt swung the great doors to behind them, throwing  
the heavy bolts. It will detain them a short while, said Hwicce. This way.

They sped up the circular stairway around the inside wall of the tower.  
After some climb they came onto a wide landing with gliders' wings of all  
sizes and leather harnesses hung over wooden rails bolted to the walls.  
Hwicce turned round and round in the centre of the floor, searching.

Where is the car? said Hwicce.

What car? said Samuesil, thinking for an instant of her own chariot.

The car—Klimpt, where's the car?

Not here, said the girl.

Upstairs?

Out in the fields, said the girl.

What are we going to do? Upstairs—

Hwicce rushed to the stairway and clambered up.

Nothing, she called down. What are we going to do, Klimpt?

What's the car? said Samuesil again.

To take you. Luggage.

Why can't I fly like Klimpt?

You need to train. From a high place in good winds, in a twosome.

You can't fly without training.

In Kirfa we use Imagination, said Samuesil.

The tower is only for good flyers, said Hwicce—in good winds.

Show me, said Samuesil. I can drive most things.

Shouts came from the courtyard. There was rattling at the great door below.

Let me talk to them, said Samuesil.

Hwicce ignored her. They can slide the bolts with a crow from the outside, she said. They'll cut you down the instant they see you. You're going to have to learn fast.

Hwicce helped to strap a harness onto Samuesil and onto Klimpt. She took two pairs of wings from the rails and clambered up into the loft above. It was a small round room under a glass dome with two doorways giving onto a circular platform. Hwicce glanced up at a pennon flying from the top of the roof.

Easterly breeze, she said. It's been picking up, thankfully. They'll see you as soon as you go outside, so you must prepare in here. You dive straight downwards into the wind to pick up speed, holding you wings like this—

Like this?

Good. Give yourself three seconds and then pan out like this—

Like this—?

Imagination, said Klimpt.



Yes, said Samuesil.

Follow Klimpt. Do what she does, said Hwicce.

Imagination, said Klimpt again, forcefully.

Yes, said Samuesil to herself.

Hwicce slid the sliding doors apart, and the three of them stood on the parapet together, looking down over the roofs of the Citadel.

Now, said Hwicce.

Klimpt leapt easily into the wind. Go, Kirfa! shouted Hwicce. Samuesil dived into the void. She spiralled wildly out of control and fell towards the roofs below them. Klimpt screamed: Imagination!

Two thirds of the way down, Imagination kicked in.

You loony wight, said Amfer.

You can't be saying what I heard you say, said Qno.

Amfer fixed him with her eye and said, loud and clear: You're losing weight.

It's the esses that disappear first, said Cirsc, ladling honey onto her third bannock. Then when the f's and the th's start to go everything begins to sound like an n.

How do you know that? said Qno.

Simple acoustic phonetics, said Cirsc. Qno heard Nimble accoutrement netting, and gave up. Even my dear Cirsc mumbles these days, he thought.

Cirsc was officially visiting her parishioners in the Hald; unofficially she was eating honey bannocks with the people she loved.

Am I losing weight? said Qno.

Not abnormally, said Cirsc. How's your digestion? She was talking slowly and distinctly now, and Qno heard every word.

I'm careful, said Qno. If I eat too much, I can't think straight.

Perhaps you should talk to Sne, said Cirsc. He'll probably suggest Mossweed. Where's Mereg?

She's down at Middle Crop, said Qno. She spends a lot of time these days with Tesil and the boys. Qno was looking a little unhappy.

I shall send Sne to see you, said Cirsc. Stomach and brain and mind, all connected.

On the way down, the monk who was driving the cart turned up the road to Middle Crop.

Thank you, Togg, said Cirsc. How did you know? I forgot to say.

It's the remainder, said Togg. Had to be.

You should be Abbot, said Cirsc.

Never, said Togg.

Tesil and Mereg were eating bannocks and honey. Lovely, said Cirsc, after hugging. Is there tea too? Where are the boys?

Up with the horses, said Tesil. Bannock, Togg?

Don't mind if I do, said Togg.

Then you can get back to the Abbey, said Cirsc. I'm staying the night. Ella or Hadr will drive me back tomorrow.

Tesil had been crying; there was no sign, but Cirsc felt the moisture between them. Ella came in, and Cirsc hugged him. You left the boys up with the horses? said Mereg.

I'm doing the dinner, said Ella. Hadr's with them.

After soup Ella and the boys all went off down to Lower Crop. More horses, said Tesil.

I'll brew rush-water, said Tesil.

We can drink out on the porch, said Mereg.

No. Stay here in the kitchen, said Tesil.

So what's wrong? asked Cirsc.

You know what's wrong, said Mereg. You know everything.

Depends what you mean by Know, said Cirsc.

I love it here in the Hald, said Tesil.

The others said nothing.

The boys love it, Ella has never been so happy, we eat well, we're safe. Country life really agrees with us.

There was another silence.

Shall I say it for you? said Cirsc.

Tesil looked at her, the tears welling again.

You're a dancer, Tesil.

Tesil said: Ella started the revolution in Kirfa. By being arrested, and dragged off with the hostages. So he saw nothing. He won't see what's happening there. He feels he let them down. And he longs for the children in the Kind Garden.

So we're talking about Ella? said Cirsc.

Cirsc, said Tesil. You're so good.

I'm the Abbess, said Cirsc. The job comes with responsibilities. I was Cirsc too long. Now I'm the Abbess.

You still hug people, said Mereg.

That's what Abbesses do, said Cirsc.

The Abbot never hugged anyone, said Mereg.

Oh yes he did. He hugged me, said Cirsc. Nobody knows that. I got into his mind. Why do you think there were all those changes towards the end?

They were your ideas?

None of them. I simply hugged him. The old man had never hugged anyone since he was a novice. Just one hug from me. That's all it took.

Cirsc! said Tesil, laughing.

They sipped their rush-water, silent for a while.

The nuns are a bit bored sometimes, said Cirsc. You could give them dance lessons.

Tesil smiled at her.

There's no going back to Kirfa, said Cirsc. Not for you nor Ella. Things have changed there.

Tesil and Mereg said nothing.

After a while Cirsc said, If you go to Pyzan, Amfer and I will take care of Qno.



Ella brought the two boys up in the cart. Hadr came with them, and his eyes searched Mereg out.

Story! Story! said the two boys when they saw Mereg.

Mereg caught Ella's eye. No story from Mereg tonight, he said. Next time. Mereg has work to do.

You promised, said Ulpec.

No she didn't, said Ella. Mereg has more to think of than just you two scoundrels.

Mrs Qno! chanted Oswic.



Mereg and Hadr walked up the road to Upper Crop together in the failing light.

I got that feeling, said Hadr.

You're my angel, said Mereg.

They climbed over a gate and struck off up the hillside, making for their secret place on the rocky hillside above Upper Crop.

Our secret place, said Mereg. It was good to be a child in the Hald and to have a friend like you.

Still is, said Hadr.

They climbed up to one of the serried outcrops of stone that ran the face of the hillside. Above was a flat terrace of grass and moss some three of four fathoms wide, glancing in to a higher outcrop that ran parallel above it. From the road and the farmstead below the two rock faces

seemed as one, so that the grassy terrace was hidden from below. This had been Hadr and Mereg's Secret Place for seventeen years.

They sat on the terrace and dangled their feet over the drop. Below them glowed two lights in windows of the farmhouse at Upper Crop.

So, what did you want to tell me? said Hadr.

I want you to tell me what you think of Meer.

Whether I fancy him? said Hadr.

Hadr, no. I don't give a toss about your fancies. Just say what you think of Meer.

I think he's gorgeous, said Hadr.

You know what I mean, said Mereg. Tell me.

I think he's mended, if that's what you mean. I think he's a good guy. You're not saying you fancy him, are you?

I can't see him, Hadr. He doesn't make sense to me. I don't recognise him without his old hatred of everything.

You can't see he's someone else.

No. I can't see that. I'm trying, but I can't.

Hadr thought for a while and said, Why are you trying?

I know he wants me. But he sees what I'm like, and accepts that. And that really bothers me.

Sounds a bit complicated, said Hadr.

I *am* a bit complicated.

You said it, said Hadr.

The light was almost gone. They could no longer see the bats flittering among the trees above the farm.

When he left, I was jealous, said Mereg.

Jealous?

He rushed off to look for Sam. I felt left out. I hated the idea of him looking for Sam.

Jealous for Meer or for Sam? said Hadr.

Mereg turned almost startled to look at him. Hadr was smiling quietly to himself, and Merereg sensed rather than saw his smile.

Yes, she said. That's the point.

In Kirfa we could all see you were in love with Sam, said Hadr, still smiling.

But that's not true. I wasn't. She's just so—

Go on.

She's just so wonderful, Hadr. You saw that. Everybody did.

We were all impressed, said Hadr. But we watched you and saw what was happening.

It's not true, said Merereg. She sat and stared into the darkness, her face and body tense.

Hadr put his arm round her and she snuggled up to him, sniffing.

I would rather Meer were with me than with Sam, she said, in a tiny voice.

And the axe? said Hadr.

I can't put it down, Hadr. I keep trying.

Hadr held her tight, and pressed his nose into her hair, finding there the scent of the cowshed.

I think you should talk to Cirsc, he said.



So Merereg went down to the Abbey to talk to Cirsc.

You want to put down the axe, said Cirsc.

Yes, said Merereg.

Meer has gone to find the Chair, said Cirsc, watching the effect of her words. Did you want to go with him?

Mereg looked at her in surprise. I suppose I did, she said.

And if you had, would you have taken the axe with you?

How could I? And yet I would have had to.

Perhaps Abbesses are not expected to know about that sort of thing, said Cirsc. At any rate, I have never carried an axe. But when the Ambassadors taught me to look into my own mind—you remember, you were there—I found all kinds of unnecessary bits and pieces I didn't need. They showed me the way to help others with the same sort of problem.

Can you help me?

You don't sleep enough, said Cirsc. You should lie down on the couch.

Mereg obeyed, saying, I'm not tired. She fell asleep almost immediately.

Cirsc sat on a stool by the couch, watching her face. Then she closed her eyes and sought her own mind, finding the way immediately as the Ambassadors had shown her. The mighty universe.

The axe stood in the chopping-block, rusting, but with a clean razor-sharp blade. Merreg sharpened it often, and split logs for ten minutes every day. It's my work-out, she said.

It's your body's work-out, said Cirsc. Good for the muscles and the stomach, good for the brain. But what does your mind do as you work out?

Typical Cirsc question, said Merreg.

Exactly. Answer it.

Since you're here in my mind, you know the answer, said Merreg.

While I work out, my mind goes to sleep.

Not at all, said Cirsc.

Mereg almost woke, but Cirsc quietened her with a gesture.

Your mind can't go to sleep, Merreg. It doesn't sleep or wake, those are not its modes. Or perhaps is always more or less asleep. Parts of it are sleeping like a log. Or an axe in a chopping-block.

It doesn't feel asleep at the moment, said Merreg.



That's because *you* are asleep.  
In my mind?  
That's what Asleep means, said Cirsc.  
She let Mereg wander for a while.  
It's so huge, said Mereg.  
Isn't it?  
Are you in my mind, or am I in your mind?  
Same option, said Cirsc.  
Two people, one mind?  
Bigger than that.  
How big? asked Mereg.  
Just one mind, said Cirsc.



Mereg smiled as she woke. I love you, Cirsc, she said.  
Thank you, said Cirsc, almost humbly.

Qno was asleep in his chair in the orchard as Mereg came home. He opened his eyes and watched her coming up the pathway.  
I was with Cirsc, she said to him, sitting on the grass beside his chair.  
Any news? he said.  
The axe is gone, she said.  
Ah, he said, reaching out his hand to take hers. That is splendid news.  
But what about the firewood?  
Not that axe, silly, said Mereg, bending down to kiss him on the cheek.

Meer approached Asi in the middle of the night, but kept his distance. It no longer seemed the empty village where Meer and the Chair had held the summit meeting with Joel and his wife. There were lights in all the buildings, and lamps hung over the corrals, which were milling with horses. The village rang with shouts and cries.

Meer took his pod in a wide circle around the settlement, and then continued unseen north over the grasslands, the pod homing in the direction he had set at the crossroads, the momentary flash of brilliant green light, of which there was now no sign. Instead, the pod was heading in under a dark pall of cloud which blotted out the stars one by one.



The pod kept pulling away to the east. No, said Meer, due north, towards the green light. But the pod persevered. It occurred to Meer that it had sensed the Ambassadors on the move, probably from Kirfa, and that they had also seen the green light.

Your call, said Meer to the pod.

And thirty leagues to the east, the Ambassadors' pods nodded towards the west. It's Meer, the Ambassadors thought together.

Two hours later Meer came to the foot of the gulley where the Chair had driven her mares up onto high ground, with the yelling Huns far behind her. The Ambassadors sat tall and motionless in their pods with the carrier pod between them, waiting. Meer felt the familiar warmth of their presence, but there was also a note of anxiety.

Can you tell us anything? they asked him.

I left her at Asi five days ago, said Meer. She sent me on to Magre and to the Hald, and I set off as she was making to return to Kirfa.

She did not return, said Lo.

The Chariot went up this gulley, said Halo. The trace is still bright.

I cannot see as you do, said Meer.

We forget, my friend, said Halo.

An hour later they cleared the final ridge and gazed in silence over the plain of poppies in the growing light of morning. The sun glinted on the far eminence of the Citadel, shining against the farther mountains in shade under black clouds. The great swathes of poppies stretched between them and the Citadel.

I am disturbed, said Lo. Why did we not know of this place?

How could we have missed this on our scans? said Halo.

A high plain this size, said Lo, with mountains surrounding it on three sides. And the colours of the flowers.

It is hidden, said Halo. This is some device. Did you know of this place, Meer?

Meer's brow was puckered. There were stories, when I was a soldier, he said. Places in the highlands which could not be found. Places of refuge for deserters.

Many places?

There was one name, which was not spoken. To say the name was to speak openly of desertion—for which the penalty was death. But everyone knew the name.

The name was Luce?

You have heard it? asked Meer in surprise.

You spoke it sometimes in your sleep, during your treatment, said Halo.

But this place is not concealed by the fear or shame of broken soldiers, said Lo. Although that is here too. This is a level of technology we have not encountered before on your world.

Do you recognise it? asked Meer.

I fear it is the work of the Alliance, said Lo.

But the wound is not the work of the Alliance, said Halo.

Wound? asked Meer.

We forget, always, said Halo. We talk to you Meer as if you were one of us. There is a great fresh wound on the plain in front of the Citadel. The sand is burnt.

They wound their way along the road between the poppies, keeping as was the Ambassadors' custom to the human roads. As they approached, the scale of what they called the Wound forced itself upon Meer's senses: a wide circle of scorched ground where the sand had been glazed by the heat, but few other remains to show what had been burnt except for two charred timbers which had once been two poles perhaps three fathoms in length. Meer recognised them instantly as the shafts of the Chair's chariot, and turned to the Ambassadors in wonder: Where is the rest? he said. Why only the shafts?

The two Ambassadors seemed not to hear. Their eyes were on each other, and Meer's mind, long used to listening, heard snatches of their thought:

What was the tension? asked Lo.

Over seven thousand, said Halo.

Meer could hear no more.

They skirted the ring and followed the winding road up to the gates of the citadel. There was no one in the streets, no sign of life in the buildings,

no movement at the windows. The morning sun was by this time bathing the citadel in golden light, and the breeze was warm. They followed the road up to the high courtyard in front of the large building they judged to be the Town Hall, or some administrative centre. They tethered their pods and went inside, threading the empty staircases and hallways, calling. Finally they came to the large hall that Samuesil had called the Refectory. They stood by the empty benches.

Is anybody here? called Meer.

We can help, called Halo. We are doctors!

An old woman in a grey apron appeared in the far corner.

No soup here, she said. It went to the Spital.

Where is the Spital? called Lo.

Down across the Seed Market, said the old woman.

Is the Chair of Kirfa there?

The Witch of Kirfa has flown, said the woman.

We are strangers to this place, said Lo. Can you show us the way to the Spital? We are doctors, we have medicines.

The woman stood staring at them, still silent.

You are strangers, she said at last.

Doctors, said Lo.

The old woman turned and called: Hwicce!

Drugged with sleep, and with the lack of it, Hwicce appeared at the door. You have come for your Chair, she said.

Where is she? asked Meer.

Six hours' flight to the south-west, or thereabouts. You have medicines?

She led them down to the Spital, a small, low building on the far side of a large market square in the lower part of the town. The pods followed them silently through the winding streets.

In the Spital the tenders were mostly women, distraught, exhausted, administering opi and attempting to cool the burnt bodies with wet oilcloths. They stood aside, uncertain, some fearful, as the Ambassadors appeared in their midst, carrying cases of equipment they had unloaded from their carrier pod.

Have no fear, we are here to help, said Halo. We ask you to assist us first—and then you must go to your homes and sleep. These green cloths must be laid over their eyes. That is all. No more opi. We will see to the rest.

Some thirty people lay in truckle beds or mattresses on the floor. Lo and Halo moved among them, giving each patient an injection wherever they could find undamaged skin. Soon the moaning and laboured breathing subsided, and silence reigned in the Spital. The Ambassadors began to work on the bodies, applying strips of white webbing over the burns and spreading a reddish cream over and around the webbing. They turned the most badly burnt bodies effortlessly and spread the webbing under them.

Meer felt useless. Are there others? he asked Hwicce.

Many dead, said Hwicce. In the courtyard. Three in the next room, blind but not badly burnt.

Three patients lay in the next room with the Ambassadors' green cloths over their eyes. Meer peered at the large man lying apart from the other two, and it came to him that he knew him.

Is that you, Oswicus?

Who is asking?

I am Meer, said Meer. I am Amfer's son.

For a long time, Oswicus did not respond. When at last he spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper.

Everything is broken, he said.

You do not know me, Oswicus, but I have seen you before. I watched from the walls of Kirfa as you took the purple. I pitied you.

You are a deserter, then, said Oswicus.

It takes a soldier to recognise a deserter, said Meer.

I deserted, said Oswicus.

I doubt if a single soldier in the cohorts was surprised when you went missing, said Meer. They knew you were bound for Luce.

Of course, muttered Oswicus.

Listen to me, Centurion. As one deserter to another. My two brothers did not desert with me, they already lay dead on the field of battle. I might have raped and murdered and stolen and found my way to Luce, and we would have met here.

Would have? Here you are.

I met an old monk and your young daughter and they took me to Kirfa, said Meer. And from Kirfa I went to Eile with the Ambassadors who are now working to save your eyes. My recovery took seven years.

I shall not go to Eile, said Oswicus.

I love your daughter, said Meer.

Oswicus made no response. After a while he said: You are wrong. I did not rape and murder and steal to get here.

Where is Samuesil? asked Meer.

She flew away. They would have torn her to pieces. But it was I who ordered the burning.

How, flew?

Here in Luce we fly, my son. Tiny wings on our heels. Oswicus chuckled.

In which direction did she fly?

With the wind, soldier. You will not find her. She has no skill to fly. She lies broken on the Moor. Mark my words.

The Ambassadors came in, preparing their injections. Lo came to inject Oswicus.

Wait, said Meer. He's high on opi. Do you recognise him?

It's the Tyran, said Lo.

Meer bent over him, speaking slowly and clearly.

Where do you send your opi, Oswicus? said Meer.

There was a smile on what they could see of his face.

I too have my doubts, he said.

One more question, said Meer. When will they come for the next assignment?

They don't come, said Oswicus. They are here. Get Hwicce to show you.



Go now, Meer, said Lo. Find Hwicce. Send the women away to rest. We must begin the healing process. We do this best alone.

The Spital was silent except for the gentle breathing of the patients. The exhausted tenders had already left.

Meer found Hwicce sitting on the steps. He sat beside her.

Where is the Chair, Hwicce? he said. Os said she had escaped.

She flew, soldier. She borrowed a pair of wings. She seemed to get the idea. They went south-west.

They?

I sent a guide with her.



South-west where? To Crys?

Further west, I imagine. The wind would have taken them towards Tarrant.

Meer was on his feet. I must go, he said.

She's OK, said Hwicce. I could see that. Fast learner. She was in good hands. We need your help in the Spital.

He hesitated. Samuesil was his chief focus; she had been uppermost in his mind ever since he learned of her disappearance, but he also knew what she would want him to do. There was a mystery here in Luce to unravel.

Oswicus said you would show me the opi assignment, he said.

Never, said Hwicce. He is not in his right mind. This is not your business.

Listen to me, Hwicce, said Meer. I have travelled to other stars. I have been to Eile with the Ambassadors. I have seen transibles in use before. It will not take me long to find this one, but I shall need you to show me the process, so that I do no damage.

I do not understand, said Hwicce. What are transibles?

Perhaps, he thought, she does not know. I think you use a transible to ship your opi to the mining companies, he said.

You mean the Canopy? said Hwicce. We don't have to ship the opi. It's within the Canopy. Haven't you worked that out?

She had conquered her tiredness, and now a broad smile appeared on her face.

You missed that, soldier, didn't you?

What canopy, Hwicce?

It's here. You're in it, soldier. This is the Canopy.

Meer looked at her in disbelief. They were talking about the same thing.

The Citadel?

She laughed at him. The plain, she said. All of Luce. Watch when the stars change.

Meer looked up at the ring of mountains. So that is why we had not found you, he said.

A transible the size of a large plain ringed by mountains. He had never dreamt of such a possibility. He had become acquainted with transible movement of cargo on Eile, sometimes even with transibles as large as warehouses, installations located in two places at once so that cargo could be moved in at one place and taken out at another. But they were not a typical feature of Eilean technology, and he had never fully understood them. The Eileans had not developed transible movement as had the civilisations on the Bases. The Eilean mind found it easier to rely on Thought.

He looked up at the stars. The Span was angling towards the west. The Ambassadors had perhaps realised that the Plain was a transible. He had to discuss the matter with them. When would they be finished at the Spital?

## 13

Samuesil began coughing first. They had reached a great altitude on an updraft at the foot of the Luce uplands, under thick cloud. They could see nothing below them. They could see no sun, and had no sense of direction.

Then Klimpt began coughing. She loosened her headscarf and wound it over her face, leaving only her eyes. She weaved closer to Samuesil: You have no cloth for your face, Kirfa? she shouted

Samuesil pulled a silk shawl from her belt and bound it over her face.

Sand, shouted Klimpt. Sand in the clouds above. Moving west, very fast. And they both thought at the same time: We have no water.

Samuesil had found the poise, the wind in her armpits. She experimented gently, riding the swell. Her wings responded to her arms, to the movements of her body. She was elated.

She had followed Klimpt for some hours before the short night had begun to lift: but there was no sun in this grey morning. The heavy cloud above them rolled as they rolled.

Where are we? shouted Samuesil through her shawl.

North-east wind, shouted Klimpt. We go south-west.

Over the grasslands? shouted Samuesil.

Yes.

Asi?

More west. No settlements. Lose height soon, no updraft.

And what then?

Then you learn to land, Kirfa. Then we walk.

They lost height steadily. Soon Samuesil could make out the featureless grasslands far below. Above them the dark clouds shrouded everything, and to either side there was little visibility.

The ground grew gradually closer. Samuesil began to see the small winding gullies, the scattered rocks, the occasional bushes.

I fly ahead, shouted Klimpt. You behind, good behind, do as I do. Slow and slow and stop and stand down.

They were still moving fast as they approached the ground. Klimpt slewed her wings, slowed as she descended, stalled just before she touched the ground, hopped lightly and folded her wings.

Samuesil flew into a rock and broke both legs below and above the knee.



Jent had put a saucer of milk out for the hedgehog. It was dusted with fine sand. At Crys, the small drifts of sand in the lee of stones and tussocks were ankle-deep. On his way south from Crys to Tarc, Post wound a scarf around his face. In the Abbey of the Rock there was sand among the cobblestones. The red dust in the path round the Hill of the Masters had turned yellow. Cirsc called Sne.

This comes from beyond the Sacred River, she said. It will have been severe in Kirfa. I have spoken to Crys. They know nothing.

I shall take the cart and go to Crys and then on towards Two Pen, said Sne. I can send news from Crys.

No, said Cirsc. I need you here. There is something else afoot.

A premonition, Mother Cirsc? said the old man, looking down at the small, ageless woman.

Wrong word, Sne, said Cirsc.

Smell? Little bird? Dream?

Slight declination of the Pole, said Cirsc. She turned, as if listening. She faced northeast.

On second thoughts, Sne, she said, take the cart and go north up round the foot of the Moors towards the east. About a day, no further. Come straight back if you find nothing. Use your imagination.

May I borrow yours? said Sne.



Klimpt made Samuesil as comfortable as possible. Samuesil's left leg had an ugly open fracture which was bleeding, although not profusely. Klimpt took her face-cloth and attempted to make a tourniquet over the knee, but could see no effect on the bleeding. She didn't dare move the leg. The right leg was more or less straight but swollen both above and below the knee.

The big rock that marked the end of Samuesil's first flight provided some sort of shelter. Klimpt arranged the great wings around her, and put a small pack from her own back under her head. She spread her outer tunic over Samuesil's legs.

The air was clearing. Klimpt pointed to the west.

Hills, she said. Very much west. Closest the Abbey. One, two days. You do not move.

Samuesil was dripping with sweat, her breathing laboured. I'm thirsty, she said.

I too thirsty, said Klimpt. She rummaged in her pouch and took out a small lump what looked like brown cake.

Opi, she said. Chew little bits if pain too much. No move. Brave Kirfa. Patience.

Patience, thought Samuesil, as Klimpt took off at a loping run to the southwest.



Klimpt kept the wind in her back, running at an easy speed to preserve her strength. She reckoned she would be at least a day and a half to the Abbey, depending on her stamina. If she found water it would be easier. She wondered whether Samuesil could survive two days. Or even more?

The hills to her right came no nearer. It occurred to her that the Abbey lay round the bend of the hills, and she veered towards them, with the idea that she would have to skirt them to get to the Abbey.

And nine hours later as she ran along the roots of the hills she saw the donkey and wagon coming towards her.



Hallo, Calimpeto, said Cirsc. I had a feeling it would be you.

Hallo, Cherisoche, said Klimpt. What you do here?

I run the place, actually, said Cirsc.

Cherisoche? said Sne.

That's right, said Cirsc.

I see you have spoken together before, said Sne.

We've never met, said Cirsc. But we changelings tend to know about each other.

You Abbot? said Klimpt, unbelieving.

Abbess, said Cirsc.

I thought old man, said Klimpt.

The old abbot passed away, said Cirsc. Now tell us where you have been, Calimpeto. Where did you find the Chair?

Kirfa find me, said Klimpt. Place no name.

Luce? said Cirsc.

Shush. No name.

Calimpeto, you are safe here. No deserters, no opi, no ore.

Ore? said Sne.

Shush, said Klimpt. Kirfa not hear.



The Chair of Kirfa could not, as it happened, hear, although her ears were hearing and her brain was sorting the information. But her mind was busy elsewhere.

Her body was in fever. Sne and his two apothecary monks had set her broken legs to the best of their abilities, binding them with splints, and they had done what they could to lower her fever; but Sne was fearful. She will not lie still, he said.

Leave us, Sne, said Cirsc. Klimpt and I will sit beside her. All will be well.

She learn fast, said Klimpt. I never see so fast learn fly. Imagination very strong.

We can settle her, said Cirsc. I have been shown.

Who show? said Klimpt eagerly.

Two doctors from a world far away, said Cirsc. They showed me the way into my own mind. I can reach her from there.

You strong Abbess, said Klimpt, giggling. I like.

Me too, said Cirsc. Hold her hand, Calimpeto, give her your spirit. Now let me work.

Where is Mereg? said Samuesil.

Mereg will be here soon, said Cirsc. Do you hear me now?

Oh, said Samuesil. And then after a pause she said: Yes. And in her sleep she said: I remember you, Cirsc. Welcome. Make yourself at home.

Thank you, my lady, said Cirsc in Samuesil's sleep. You have a fine mansion.

Sometimes a little difficult to manage, said Samuesil. But then I suppose you know all about that.

I do, my lady. But the Ambassadors showed me an important secret. May I show you?

I think that would be a good idea, dear Cirsc. I need something like an important secret right now.

So Cirsc showed her, just as the Ambassadors had shown to Cirsc seven years before.

Oh, said Samuesil again. Yes.



Cirsc and Klimpt sat and watched the Chair of Kirfa as she moved in wonder through the latitudes and labyrinths of her vast and silent, sleeping mind. It had no limits, it stretched to the Span and beyond; she noted the activity around Tenes as she passed, and reminded herself to speak to Meer about it. But her mind also had a centre, a place where she was most herself, and she saw that it was a troubled place. It was a world with limbs, and thought, and she moved in the thought of her own world around her own broken body, and composed the limbs, and saw how they could be made straight. So clearly did she see that she opened her eyes and looked at Klimpt, who was holding her hand, and smiled at her; and turned her head on the pillow and looked at Cirsc, and Cirsc's face wrinkled in a happiness which encompassed more than Samuesil's eyes could manage, so she closed them again no longer to limit her awareness of that happiness. And finally, since her whole vast mind was sleeping, Samuesil's body acknowledged its guidance, and put itself to sleep as well.



Splendid sequence, said Cirsc. And now come and eat, Calimpeto, and tell me what is happening in Luce.



Klimpt was thirsty and very hungry. Cirsc sat with her in the Refectory and watched her sucking up the soup. Calimpeto, whose tongue turned Cirsc into Cherisoche. She saw the reflection of Samuesil about her, and guessed that she had only recently woken from her changeling's dream.

How long have you been in Luce, Calimpeto?

Since remember, said Klimpt aloud. But Cirsc heard: I can remember last summer, when they taught me how to fly. Before that I can remember being with Hwicce on Tenes, but I do not know how I came there. And Hwicce took me to Luce. Luce is better than Tenes. But I like the Abbey best.

Cirsc said: Do you remember Carhault?

You hear I talk? said Klimpt.

I think so.

Yes maybe Carhault, said Klimpt. Bad people, bad speak.

You speak beautifully, Calimpeto.

Learn from you, learn from Kirfa. Good people.

After they had eaten, they went back to the Infirmary and found Samuesil still sleeping, with Mereg sitting beside her and holding her hand.

You came in good time, said Cirsc. If she wakes, and needs you, then just remember nothing will happen but what is supposed to happen.

And when, four hours later, Samuesil opened her eyes and saw Mereg looking at her, that is just what happened.

Mereg, she said. You are so beautiful.

So are you, Samuesil, said Merereg.

They looked into each others' eyes for a long time.

This is something Cirsc has given us, said Samuesil.

I think it's something she learnt from the Ambassadors, said Merereg.

No, said Samuesil. They could not do this. This is greater. This is Cirsc's own.

And then she said: I need to have a pee. Is there a thing? I mustn't move my legs.

I think you have to use this, said Merereg, finding a glass contraption beside the bed. Shall I call the medics?

No, said Samuesil. I can manage.

Samuesil peed mightily.

Do you know what we have to do now? said Samuesil, as Merereg took the glass.

Tell me, said Merereg.

Come into me, said Samuesil. Let me come into you.



Lo and Halo came out of the Spital and sat either side of Meer on the steps.

Are you finished? he asked in surprise.

We have initiated the healing process, said Halo. The first stages are at work. We will have to stay for several days. You are concerned about Samuesil?

I have to find her, said Meer.

She is in the Abbey of the Rock, said Lo. She is badly injured, but mending. Cirsc is tending her.

You are in contact with the Abbey?

We are in contact with Cirsc. We share Mind.

Then I shall leave immediately, said Meer.

Be calm, said Halo. She is in good hands. Cirsc is teaching her  
Thought. We need you here for a while yet.

I have found the transible, said Meer.

They looked at him.

It is the whole plain of Luce, said Meer.

Lo and Halo looked at each other. That would explain much, they said,  
though it is difficult to believe. Lo stood up, his eyes running along the  
ridge of the mountains. Then he looked up at the Span.

It may be, he said aloud. It would be why we never saw the plain on  
our scans.

If it is so, said Halo, it is disconcerting indeed.

Look at the stars to the West, said Lo. It is true.

The Astronomers in Two Pen should see this, said Halo.

It is spreading, said Lo. The skies are changing.

What's that smell? asked Malarea.

Bad air, said Mrs Cwints. She looked at her husband, who kept his eyes down. Both the Doctors Cwints recognised the smell very well.

Shut the window, said Numeth.

But it's hot, said Malarea.

Bad air, said Mrs Cwints. Shut the window.

The Doctors Cwints had been supervising the bathing of the Grand Masters in two large tubs in the kitchen. At first there had been flat refusal, until Mrs Cwints understood the reason.

Girls first, boys wait outside, she said.

She and her husband had stayed up all night sewing tunics for the Grand Order out of various curtains and hangings that adorned the Aides' apartment. While Mrs Cwints supervised the bathing girls, Mr Cwints had brought out a pair of scissors from the Cwints's Medical Case and was busy cutting the boys' matted hair. The girls emerged from the kitchen looking spruce and tidy in their new tunics, but the boys were reluctant to submit themselves to the bath. Mr Cwints shepherded them willy-nilly into the kitchen. Girls have warmed the water, he said. The boys undressed sullenly, keeping their backs to each other.

No shame, said Mr Cwints. Lovely bodies, healthy boys. Wash off grime. Nice new colourful tunics. Fit for Grand Masters.

By this time the younger children were waking, and Wing shared out biscuits and dried fruit.

Bad smell, said the children. Teenagers' smell.

Which was true enough. But that was not the smell that came in from the outside. There's something rotting out there, said Numeth.

Don't open the door, said Malarea.



As Eye made her way from the Watch back to the apartment she found the Migrant Street Crews at work again. They were not however cleaning the streets of sand. They were carrying corpses out of the houses and piling them onto handcarts. The stench was overpowering.

Lovely morning, said Borl amicably.

What has happened? was all that Eye could say.

Street Crews cleaning up, said Borl. Bad smell, temporarily of course. No wind for the moment.

The corpses were bloody, many with their throats slit.

Ladies and Gentlemen of Kirfa, said Borl.

Who did this, Borl? said Eye.

No idea, said Borl. Neatly done, though.



We stay indoors and rest today, said Eye. Her face was grim, decided. Nobody questioned her authority.

We have food for midday, she said. As soon as it's dark this evening we move down to the Watch. We'll be safe with them. The sergeant is going to make room for us.

Safe with the Watch? You're joking, said Wen. For us, it's safe when the Watch are doing something at the other end of town. Keep out of their way, I say.

You go to them when you need food, said Eye.

Food is different. That's their job, see for the citizens. We are citizens. We are all citizens, said Eye. We must stick together. The Watch have submitted to me as Second in Command under the Chair.

And when will the famous Chair come back? asked Wen.

When her present business is finished.

Which is what?

Securing the future of Kirfa, said Eye.

So why don't we go down to the Watch now? asked Wen.

The Watch is busy. There are things that have to be done first.

Securing the future of Kirfa? said Wen.

Yes. Exactly, said Eye.



The street crew worked all day, methodically piling the decaying bodies of the good citizens of Kirfa onto handcarts and trundling them down to Elefant Square. The Square had been swept clean of sand, and Borl stood on a table flanked by Hatch, bawling orders. The bodies were wheeled across the square and tipped over the parapet into the Holy River below. Most of them failed to fall into the water, piling up instead on the rocky slopes of the bank. Borl had sent a detachment down to the river, where they used long poles to persuade the ladies and gentlemen of Kirfa to enter the water.

What finer conclusion to a distinguished career of leisure than to float away down the Sacred River? asked Borl wisely.

Good fertiliser for the farmers down in the Drays, said Hatch.

New start for the Migroes of Kirfa, said Borl.



A gentle westerly breeze had sprung up and the heat was less intense, with a hint of moisture in the air. The smell had abated, although still pungent by certain houses and street-corners. The streets were empty, and there were no lights in the windows. Eye led the way, holding an oil-lamp above her head and carefully avoiding the worst puddles of blood. She was followed closely by the Grand Masters in their colourful tunics. Next came Wing leading the line of fifteen children, walking crabwise, all hand-in-hand, with Malarea and Numeth shepherding them and trying to prevent them jumping delightedly into the puddles. The Doctors Cwints followed, Mr Cwints with a lantern, and behind them two Men of the Watch with a handcart piled with blankets and the remains of the Aides' foodstuffs.

Rather smaller than Elefant Square, Post Office Square was among the older squares in the city, and the first the arriving traveller saw as she emerged from the entry tunnel under the great hanging gardens. The grand old building that dominated the square had once been a town hall, but for many decades now it had housed the City Post Office. Beside it, huddled between the Post Office and the Wall, stood the Station of the City Watch.

The Sergeant of the Watch showed the Aides and their followers into two adjoining spacious rooms at the back of the building. Ten or so truckle beds had been found, and there was a pile of mattresses in one corner.

The Corporal is cooking mash, said the Sergeant. We found a good store of food in the kitchens behind the Council House. There's room in the canteen for everyone.

There were perhaps a dozen men of the Watch in the Briefing room.  
Where is everybody? asked Wing.

Dunno, said the Sergeant. Not turned up since the storm. Don't like to think.

Sergeant, are you aware of what has been going on in the city? asked Wing.

Since when? asked the Sergeant.

Since the storm, for instance.

The Sergeant rose to his full height and looked Wing in the eye.

No, sir, I am not aware, he said.



The Postmaster General nodded gravely from a corner of the canteen.  
A huge man, and a dedicated eater, he picked unhappily at the mash.

Wing left the children and took a seat opposite him.

How are things in the Post Office? he asked.

Glad you asked, said the Postmaster General.

Well? said Wing.

Not well at all, if that's what you mean. Been no post for weeks. All my men gone. Telegrid as dead as a doornail.

What's wrong with the grid? asked Wing.

Nothing, as far as I can see. Just dead. Need to ask the Chair.  
Ambassadors could probably fix it.

When is Post due next?

The Postmaster General looked up sorrowfully.

He didn't come last time. Why should he come next?





Everybody slept well in their new quarters, feeling safer under the auspices of the Watch than they had for some time. Even the Grand Masters of the Order of Ella seemed relaxed in the headquarters of their arch enemies. But at breakfast next morning the Aides' hopes began to crumble again.

Um, said the Sergeant. He had not yet found the right way to address the Chair's two deputies.

What's wrong, Sergeant? said Wing.

Borl has turned up, sir. He wants to talk to you and, um, your colleague, sir.

Can we talk to him in one of the interview rooms? said Wing.

Should be no problem, sir.

Borl didn't have the Sergeant's difficulty. Heard from your Missus yet? he asked.

You mean the Chair? asked Eye politely.

If there's any Chair in Kirfa, my lass, it's me, said Borl. Just so as you get the picture.

The Chair is temporally detained, Borl, you know that, said Eye. Until she returns, Wing and I speak for her.

That may be the case for your so-called Watch, said Borl. And it may be the case for your Imbo kiddies. But they're all you've got, let me tell you. Kirfa is a city of Migroes.

The two Aides were silent, not knowing how to reply.

The Imboes are gone, Lady Eye and Lord Wing. And you saw what happened to those who stayed. They're on their way down river now. They say the river dries up ten leagues down. The big ones will strand first, I daresay.

We are not afraid of you, Borl, said Eye.

Then you lack imagination, my Lady Eye. My lord Wing is afraid of me, I fancy. Rightly so. But I didn't come here to parley, my dears. I came here to tell you what to do.

He was silent again, savouring the moment.

You can't keep the children here, Lady Eye. We are taking over. We are the Watch now, and we will be moving into this building as soon as it suits us. That will be tomorrow, like as not. The Imbo kiddies upstairs are simply in our way. And your precious Watch likewise. There's still enough water in the Holy River Ozu, if you get my meaning.

So what do you want us to do?

I'll tell you, Lady. I don't want to have to deal with your precious children. So I'll tell you. There are horses still in the City Stables, and two or three wagons. The boys want those horses, good meat on them. But I have a better idea. Wagons and horses, my dears. Enough for you lot and those kiddies upstairs. Take off and get out, before I change my mind.

The Sergeant put his head in at the door.

Borl, he said. Hatch wants to talk to you.

They could hear Hatch shouting outside: Borl! You've got to come, Borl. It's the Huns!



Borl, Hatch and Bar marched three abreast into the great tunnel that was Kirfa's gateway to the western world. There was still a good deal of blown sand in the road, but it was passable. A troop of a dozen purposeful migrants followed them.

Outside, arranged in loose formation facing the gateway, twenty or so half-naked bright blue warriors sat astride their horses, waiting. They gave a howl as Borl and his followers appeared outside the gate. Their

leader, a lanky young man with feathers in his hair, spurred his horse forward to meet them.

Hatch, he said. Your grandmother was asking about you. I told her you were a Migro. Was that right?

That's right, Fletch, said Hatch. Give her my love and say I'll look her up soon enough.

Don't have any high hopes, said Fletch. And Borl—you making a noise, are you?

Not yodelling, at any rate, said Borl. The horsemen took the cue and began yodelling. Borl stuck his fingers in his ears.

Fletch raised his hand, and the howling stopped.

Borl, he said. We want our city back.

Back? said Borl. When did you ever have a city, you daft Huns?

The horsemen reached for the quivers on their backs, and carefully slotted arrows into the strings of their bows.

Hey, Fletch, shouted Hatch. We're unarmed. This is an unarmed parley.

This is not a parley, said Fletch. This is a warning. You are standing on our grass.

We are the Migroes of Kirfa, said Borl. This is *our* grass.

The horsemen lifted their bows.

Fletch turned to them, suddenly angry. Put those things away you halfwits. You'll get your archery practice, have patience.

He turned back to Borl.

It's our grass, Borl my friend, right up to your gates. Joel says so. We have it in writing. And he says to tell you that by sunset tomorrow it will also be our city, the City of Gosste. You Migroes can get back over your river and betake yourselves east where you belong. Just came to give you due notice of that simple fact, Borl, due and formal notice, as signed and

sealed by Speaker Joel. We have arrows for every one of you, Borl. So just you make sure you're the other side of the river when we turn up tomorrow. Yours sincerely, Joel.

He turned his horse, shaking his feathered spear at his men, and gave a blood-curdling screech. The horsemen wheeled their horses and took off west across the grasslands, howling and screeching as they rode away.

Borl raised his voice and bellowed after them:

See you tomorrow, my lads!



Borl, Hatch and Bar made their way back through the tunnel and marched straight across Post Office Square with a troop of Migrants in their wake. They stormed up the steps of the Watch and burst into the Briefing Room.

Right, said Borl to the assembled men of the Watch. Seems you're on our side after all. Where's the cannon?

You're not having the Cannon of Kirfa, never, said the Sergeant.

We are too, said Borl. We have an army of three hundred crazy Huns to deal with tomorrow. They say they're coming to take over the city. Where's the cannon?

The men of the Watch looked at each other.

In the cannon-room, said the Sergeant.

How many balls are there?

A few. Twelve, perhaps.

And powder?

Probably some left. From New Year's Eve.

We'll take the cannon up on the walls to cover the gate. Firearms?

Firearms?

Firearms, you heard me. The Watch has always had firearms.

Firearms, yes. Six, if I remember.

Only six? Where are they?

In the cannon-room, said the Sergeant.

Twenty-four, Sarge, said Second of the Watch. In the cupboard behind the boiler.

Ammunition?

Fifty boxes of nails, Sarge, said the Second.

Turn 'em out, said Borl.



Wing went down to the City Stables to check the horses and wagons. There were two wagons, but no horses.

They were eaten, said the ostler.

What do you do without horses? asked Wing.

Asi supplies us, said the ostler. Three coming tomorrow.

Asi is at war with Kirfa, said Wing. They are coming to take over the city tomorrow.

That's right, said the ostler. They said they'd bring the new horses with them.

What do they get in return? asked Wing.

Wagons. We build them. Best wagons on the grasslands, said the ostler. That's what they say in Asi.

We need these two wagons and horses tomorrow, said Wing, to evacuate the children. Can you make them ready for us?

See what I can do, said the ostler. Children come first. Asi will understand that.



There will be horses tomorrow, said Wing to Eye. And there are two wagons. We can crowd the children into them. We'll pack all the food and blankets we can.

And go where? said Eye.

Make for the Abbey of the Rock, said Wing. It's our safest hope. But we will have to wait until after the Huns arrive tomorrow. They're bringing the horses.

So let's hope they win the battle, said Eye.

The next morning dawned under heavy cloud, with spots of rain in the wind. The men of the Watch were uneasy, unsure of where they stood in the impending battle.

You could come with us, said Wing. You'd have to walk behind the wagons, but Borl has promised us safe passage.

And how is he going to do that? If he loses the war?

Then we ask safe passage from the Huns, said Wing.

Neither the Huns nor the Migrants of Kirfa seemed to be early risers. The day of the battle wore on, and it was not until midday that Borl and his army arrived in Post Office Square.

Any sign of Fletch? he asked.

I've got a man on the lookout, said the Sergeant of the Watch. Nothing yet.

The Migrant army was busy inspecting the firearms, which all needed to be wiped clean of dust and cobwebs. The powder and nails were distributed. The cannon had been hauled up onto the garden walls the evening before, and a shot had been fired to make sure it worked. Borl was pleased and excited.

One broadside will send them running, he said.

At two o'clock the rain began to clear and the clouds lifted a little. But it was still an hour before the Huns appeared, walking their horses at no great pace over the grasslands. Borl and his men went up onto the garden walls, taking the firearms with them. The men of the watch produced

their truncheons, and formed some sort of a battle-line in front of the Post Office. The Postmaster General came out to watch, smoking his pipe.

About three hundred strong, wet and bedraggled, the Huns took up battle position in front of the walls. They could see the cannon above the gate, and wisely came no nearer. A single Hun detached himself from the main formation and rode towards the wall leading three horses.

Whoa! bellowed Borl from the walls. Where do you think you're going?  
Delivering, shouted the man. Assignment of horses for the Stables.  
Make it quick, said Borl.

For a long time nothing happened. The rider delivered the horses and returned to his army.

Where are the wagons? said Fletch.

They promised delivery next week, said the rider.

They'd better, said Fletch.

And then there was the sound of a claxon. Up the road from Crys came Post on his motor-wagon, drawing two passenger-coaches and the box-wagon on the end. Both the coaches and the box-wagon were empty. He honked the claxon again, for the road was blocked by the besieging army.

Let him through, you halfwits, bellowed Borl from the wall. Can't you see it's Post?

With some pushing and flanking the warriors made way for the post train. Post honked again, apparently to say thank-you, and the train made its way in through the gate. But it failed to appear in the square, for it sat fast in the drifted sands in the tunnel. Post honked again.

Four or five Huns dismounted and went into the tunnel to help push. They were joined by the Sergeant of the Watch and three men of his men.



You want to clear this sand, said one of the Huns.

We'll leave that to whoever wins the battle, said the Sergeant.

Post sat pokerfaced in his driver's seat while the men pushed and heaved the wagons through the sand.

Why isn't Borl helping? asked a Hun.

He's guarding the City, said the Sergeant.

We're attacking the City, said the Hun. That's no easier.

There's more of you than us, said the Sergeant.

We're only three hundred, said the Hun. Twelve arrows each. That's only enough for three thousand six hundred Migroes.

You'll have to make every shot hit, said the Sergeant. You should be all right.



No post for Kirfa, said Post as the men of the Watch greeted him on the steps of the Post Office. The Postmaster General ambled down to shake his hand. Long time no see, said the Postmaster General.

Any post your end? asked Post.

Not a sausage.

There you are, then, said Post.

So what brought you?

Sand in the air as far as the Abbey and beyond, said Post. The Abbess reckoned there's been a bad storm here, what with the silence from the Telegrid. So I brought two passenger coaches. For refugees from Kirfa, if you get my meaning. Been a bit short of refugees recently. 37 was complaining. You got any?

One assignment of children for the Abbey, said the Sergeant.

No citizens?

They've all gone, said the Sergeant. Either north upriver walking or south downriver floating. There's only eighteen men of the Watch left. We might come with you. Depends on who wins the war. If it's the Huns, we could do duty as the City Watch of Gosste. But Borl wants us out.

Only got two coaches, said Post.

We've been promised two wagons and horses, said the Sergeant.

There was a loud blast from the walls, and everyone jumped. The cannon had been fired. They could hear Borl bellowing: One step further, you blue babies, and we'll blast you all to smithereens!

Smithereens is an old Anamen word, observed the Sergeant.

Eye and Wing appeared at the south end of the Square, each driving a one-horse wagon. They could hardly contain themselves when they saw Post. You have two coaches! shouted Eye. Room for all the children! You are our saviour, Post!

Never presumed otherwise, Miss Eye, said Post.

There was a rattle of firearms from up on the wall, and hellish warcries could be heard through the tunnel. The cannon resounded again.

I suggest, said Post, that we hasten the evacuation before the real fighting takes place. I'm told that the Huns can be quite effective when they're really on the war-path, although I've never actually seen anything to support that story. Nevertheless, better safe than sorry.



The Cwints family shepherded the children out to the coaches, into which they tumbled with squeals of delight. Mr and Mrs Cwints and their daughters seemed to disappear into the tumbling flock of children. The Grand Masters tried not to show too much enthusiasm, but their eyes were flashing. Several men of the Watch helped Wing and Eye to load the

two horse-wagons with water and provisions and whatever clothing and blankets they could salvage from the headquarters of the Watch.

Will you come with us, Sergeant? asked Wing.

Can't rightly say just at this moment, sir, said the Sergeant. Depends rather on the outcome of the battle.

Don't quite catch your meaning, Sarge, said the Second. Borl has thrown us out. I'm no friend of the Huns. I say we partake as it were in the evacuation.

I'll need your help out through the tunnel in any case, said Post.

But we can't leave, said the Sergeant. Borl has the Cannon of Kirfa.

And he's only got nine balls left, said the Second. What do you say, lads?

The men of the Watch seemed generally to agree with the Second. The Sergeant didn't press the point.

Post assumed command.

We need ropes, he called. Four men of the Watch go first with the horse-wagons and ropes, to pull the motor through the sand. The rest of the Watch walk beside to give us a heave if necessary. Miss Eye in the front coach with the children, Mr Wing in the second coach with the youngsters.

Grand Masters! called Wen from the coach.

Everybody ready?

What about me? called the Postmaster General.

Bring the horn, said Post.

The post-horn rang over Post Office Square for the last time as the cavalcade made its way over the cobblestone towards the gate.

As they approached the tunnel a battle-cry was raised at the City end of the square. A mob of mostly male migrants burst into the square

waving clubs and spades and stakes. Where's the fight? they yelled. Where's Borl? Why weren't we woken early?

Borl looked down from his perch on the walls.

It's the lads! he shouted. They woke up! Out through the tunnel, lads, and at 'em! For Kirfa and the Migroes!

The mob rushed across the square and into the tunnel, jostling each other to get through and yelling horribly. From the walls the cannon was heard again, and a spatter of firearms. The leading horse-wagons had stopped in indecision.

Forward! roared Post in a voice that few had ever heard before. Out! Out! Before the idiot Huns attack the tunnel!

Outside the battle raged. The migrants ran howling towards the mounted Huns, falling over each other as the arrows hit. The cannon blasted again, cutting a swathe through the horsemen. Borl was descending the terraced walls with his men, firing wildly into the mêlée. The men of the Watch put their shoulders to the coaches and the post train ran with little trouble in the same ruts it had made earlier, bursting at full speed out of the tunnel into the maelstrom of fighting warriors.

Borl's voice thundered over the battlefield:

It's the children! Fletch! Give way for the children! Hold your fire, Migroes.

Hold your fire and give way for the children! roared Fletch. Three cheers for Post!

The post-train and its accompanying wagons careered through the battlefield out onto the empty grasslands, veered wildly to regain the road, and sped off towards Crys with sixteen men of the Watch running behind. The two armies on the battlefield waved and cheered. Then they

stood for a while regaining their breath, and looking uncertainly at each other.

For Kirfa and glory, Migroes! roared Borl.

Gosste forever! yelled Fletch.

And the killing began in earnest.

In Two Pen, the astronomers put down their pens and looked at each other.

Doesn't add up, said Ynglà.

It can't not add up, said Elri. Antus's figures are never wrong.

All the same, the aberration is too great. If Tenes had lost that amount of its mass we would see it with our bare eyes. And the Span would be wildly unstable. But it's only Tenes which is moving, and the Three-Beyond are only showing slight aberrations. Everything else in the vicinity is normal. Something is moving Tenes other than simple loss of mass.

Let's work out the forces involved, said Elri.

Mara's voice could be heard shouting up from the farmhouse: Supper, girls!

The astronomers sighed and set off down the ladder.

Make the best of it, said Lesuli. The Huns are going to war with Gosste. No more provisions until the war is over, they say. Couple of weeks, they reckon.

We've roots enough, said Ynglà. The children made rude faces.

Maybe I'll take a ride into Tarrant, said Mara. See what the Abbot has to say, pick up some provisions.

Abness, said Lesuli. When will you go?

Been thinking of it for a couple of days. Tomorrow, I was thinking. Unless you want to come.

Staying here with the children, said Lesuli. And the girls, if they ever show their faces out of that precious observatory of theirs.

You'll take a letter to Pyzan for us, said Elri. Leave it at Crys, Post will pick it up. And this letter goes to Meer. Take it to the Abbess.



Mara took the Red and kept him at a trot up the road out of Two Pen. The grandchildren stood in a row and waved.

Don't forget! they called.

Forget what? asked Mara.

Granddad! they yelled. You promised!

Never trust any grown-ups, called Mara.

He'll keep his promise, said the eldest boy as he disappeared up into the trees. He just acts like that.

He was right about the grown-ups, said one of the girls.

The Red cantered at an even pace over the grasslands on the Two Pen Road. Mara came within sight of the turning to Crys just in time to see the cavalcade in the distance, two horse-wagons and the post-train with two coaches making its way past the Two Pen turning. It was travelling slowly, and Mara gave the Red no rein, knowing he would overtake them on the road.

Patience, young Red, he said to the horse. You going to have to learn to take things gently.

Grandfathers, thought the horse.

There's a man on a horse following us! called Wen. Fan out, Masters, and defend the train!

Anyone who gets off the coach will have to walk for an hour, said Wing evenly. It's one man on a horse. You'll be polite to him.

It's Mara, said Post. From Two Pen. He's going our way. We'll let him catch up at his own speed.

Morning, said Mara as he came alongside. Cargo of children I see? Going where?

Going to the Abbey, said Wing.

Inborn children? Going to the Abbey?

Refugees, said Post. Last Inborn out of Kirfa. Plus Cwintses.

Hey, whoa, said Mara. What's this? Last Inborn?

Last out, said Post. Fletch and your brother Borl were fighting over Kirfa outside the walls as we came away. They'll finish each other off I wouldn't wonder.

Post had switched off the engine. Mara reined in the Red and looked at them in amaze.

Borl and Fletch fighting? said Mara. What over?

Kirfa, said Post. Not that there's much left to fight over. Didn't you get any sand?

What sand? said Mara.

There's been a sand-storm, said Post. Kirfa got hit bad. You noticed nothing? There's sand on the road as far as the Abbey and beyond.

We never notice a thing down in Pen, said Mara. Never any wind. Too sheltered. Gets on my nerves at times. Borl fighting, you say?

You ought to turn back and see if he's still alive, said Post. Arrows and firearms, I tell you.

Not my party, said Mara. Borl's problem. The Chair will sort it out. I have business in Tarrant.

They keep you on a tight rein, those women, said Post.



The women are fine, said Mara. Too concerned with the stars to bother me. It's the grandchildren who order me about.—While I remember, letter to Pyzan. Who's that in the horse-wagons?

Ex-Watch, said Post. Present refugees. We'll wait here for the rest of them to catch up. They're walking.

There's horses enough all over the grasslands, said Mara.

The Watch don't take to horses, particularly not Anamen, said Post. I see you're on the Red. What does Joel say about that?

I don't talk to Joel, said Mara. What are you going to do with these children?

Take them to the Abbey, like I said.

And then what?

Refugees, said Post. What happens to refugees? You got any ideas?

Mara was thoughtful.

Talk to me when you get to the Abbey, he said.



Mara gave the Red the rein, watered and fed him at Crys, drank two bowls of 37's soup, and then set out for the Abbey.

Load of hungry children coming in from Gosste, he told 37. You'll need the big pot.

Haven't seen any refugees for years, said 37, delighted.



Qno had come down to the Abbey to visit Cro, who was poorly. Cro lay in the infirmary alongside Samuesil. Qno sat on a stool beside him and looked at his old friend.

We're old, Cro, said Qno. I had a feeling it might come to this.

Funny business, said Cro. Not quite what I expected. You talked to Reagh recently?

Once or twice, said Qno. She hangs around the farm a bit. Seems fond of cows. Probably just trying to impress me.

You're one of her favourites, Qno, you know that?

No, she doesn't have favourites.

Not like that, said Cro. Do you know, she never says I?

She says We, said Qno. I noticed that.

Lovely girl, said Cro.

Listen to you two old men, said Samuesil. You never grow up.

Sorry my lady, said Qno. I thought you were asleep.

How can I sleep with this chattering old man in the next bed?

She tells the most whopping stories, said Cro.

Qno turned on his stool and took Samuesil's hand, patting it fondly.

You'll stay with us in the Hald, as soon as you're up and about, he said. Best place in the world to convalesce. Best air in the world. Best conversation.

It's lovely to see you, Qno, said Samuesil. It's been a long time.

At my age, seven years is a short time, said Qno. It's only 8.75% of what I've already lived. It looks longer to you. I'd say about 20% of your experience.

Good guess, said Samuesil. Did you bring Mereg?

Busy with a cow, said Qno. She'll be down later.



Mara stopped for a plate of mash in the Abbey Refectory. The Abbess saw him sitting with Qno and Sne and took her plate down from the High Table, where she didn't like to eat alone, and sat with them.

Who's this nice-looking man talking with my monks? she said.

Mara stood and bowed and introduced himself.

The Astronomers? she said, delighted. I really want to meet those girls. So does Qno.

Welcome any time, ma'am. I have a letter from them to Meer, ma'am. I was to leave it with you.

I'll see it goes to the right place, said Cirsc. Is that what brings you here?

Going to the market, ma'am. Short of provisions, and Asi seems to be too busy to help. — Met Post on the way, ma'am. He's on the way here. Cargo of children from Kirfa. Refugees.

These are sorry times, said Cirsc. Refugees from Kirfa. Thank you for the warning, we must see to the Refugee Camp. But you'd better be quick if you want to get to the market before they close.

I promised the children a puppy, said Mara. No farm without a dog, I say.

I'll come with you, said Qno. I have to meet a young man in the market, he's taking me back to the Hald. And as it happens he might have a puppy for you.



Mara left the Red in the stables, slung the saddle-bag over his shoulder, and followed Qno over the new bridge. The Market was finishing for the day, but Mara found most of the provisions he was looking for. Qno looked around for Ella, and found him sitting with a pot of ale outside the market tavern.

The Chair sends her regards, he said.

I suppose we're going to have to meet her, said Ella. Tesil won't like it.

It will be all right, said Qno. She's not the same Chair. Cirsc has got into her. You all need to meet.

Who's this? said Ella, as Mara came towards them with a bulging saddle-bag.

You the man with the puppies? said Mara, holding out his hand.

Yes, as it happens, said Ella, taking the hand. The name's Ella.

Mara was taken aback. Not Ella of the Kind Garden? he said.

That's right, said Ella.

Mara, Lesuli's man. From Tarn.

Borl's brother?

No less.

How's Borl? How's the revolution? asked Ella.

Last I heard Borl and Fletch were trying to kill each other outside the walls of the City, said Mara. Which reminds me. Your children are on the way.

My children are hiding somewhere here in the market, said Ella.

The Kind Garden children. Refugees. I passed Post on the way here with two full coaches.

Ella looked at him, his eyes wide. Coming here? he said. How far behind you?

Two days or more, at their speed, said Mara.

Ella stood up. Qno, he said. You'll take Mara and the boys home in the cart, if you can find them. Mara you'll stay with us the night and choose a puppy. I'm going to meet the children.

You got a horse? said Mara. Do you want to take the Red?



The Abbess set her monks to repair the old refugee huts and prepare the kitchen for the impending arrivals. Then she took the letter to Samuesil.

Samuesil was manipulating the pain in her legs.

It's tough, this cure of yours, she said to Cirsc.

You weren't designed to fly, said Cirsc.

Oh yes I was. Just you see when I get out of this bed. Calimpeto has my wings ready.

I've got a letter to Meer from the Astronomers, said Cirsc.

Let me see.

It's for Meer, said Cirsc.

I am Meer, said the Chair of Kirfa.

They both read the letter together. It was mostly a table of ciphers, followed by two cryptic sentences:

Tenes has lost 0.00004 sub crit. Present aberration suggests loss of 0.3 sub crit. Impossible, unless other forces. We are analysing. Elri. Ynglà.

This means nothing to me, said Samuesil.

I think it means that Tenes has lost a minute mass to the miners, and that that loss doesn't explain its present movement, said Cirsc.

Meer and the Ambassadors must be told, said the Chair. My hope is that they have reached Luce and are tending to the casualties. Where is Klimpt?

Calimpeto, said Klimpt, sleepily.

Calimpeto my sweet child, can you fly back to Luce?

Two three days, said Klimpt. Wind.

Will you do this for me, my love? This letter must go to Meer.

Who Meer?

My assistant, or at any rate the two ambassadors, they will be in Luce. They will have seen the light from the Burning. If you do not find Meer, give the letter to the ambassadors.

Who ambassadors?

They are tall black doctors with no hair. They will be with the injured.

Cannot speak Ambassador talk.

You won't have to, Calimpeto. They are from a world far away. They understand all languages, and they talk to us in our minds so that we can understand. It will be easy to talk to them.

Klimpt turned anxiously to Cirsc.

After, I come back here? she said.

Of course, Calimpeto. This is your home.

Cherisoche, said Klimpt, as if to herself.

Cirsc looked fondly at the Chair of Kirfa. You're right, she said. I hadn't noticed. They talk to us in our minds.



Wen stood up in the coach and called: Enemy approaching from the front! Masters, take up defence positions!

Masters, said Wing severely. Sit down and stay put.

It's the Red, said Post. But it's not Mara.

Someone has ambushed Mara and taken his horse, said Wen.

Post switched off the engine and the motor chugged to a halt. Hallo, Ella, he said. You're on the Red, I see.

Post, you rascal. You've got my children, said Ella.

The Order of the Grand Masters of Ella tumbled, or rather fell, out of the coach. They picked themselves up sheepishly and attempted to form ranks. Wen was choking back her tears. She tried to say All hail Ella, but could not get the words out. The Grand Masters responded to their leader's distress by breaking down and sobbing loudly.

Wen? said Ella. Gwendy? Barkin? Cheese?

He dismounted and stood with his arms open. My how you've grown, he said. They huddled round him, wailing like small children. The

younger children in the front wagon looked on in amazement, wondering who this was.

Strangely moving, said Post, staring resolutely at the horizon.



Qno found Oswicus and Ulpec sitting on the steps of the bakery eating bannocks.

Blom, he said severely to the baker. You're spoiling their appetite for supper.

I'm not responsible for unruly children who over-indulge themselves, said Blom. I told them you'd tick them off.

I'm ticking you off, said Qno.

How many? said Blom.

Two large loaves, said Qno.

So these are Tesil's boys, said Mara.

Oswicus and Ulpec, said Qno. Boys, this is Mara. He wants a puppy.

The horse between the shafts of Ella's cart did not have the calibre of the Red. Mara climbed down and walked beside the cart. The horse was blatantly grateful.

The Tyran's name? said Mara.

Oswicus was their grandfather, said Qno.

He brought our Dad home, said Oswicus. Then he went away.

Lesuli's girls say he was at Two Pen for a time, said Mara. Where is he now?

No one knows, said Qno.

He's travelling, said Ulpec. Discovering new territories. When he has finished, he's coming back to tell us about them.

Tesil took the news anxiously. The Kind children? she said. Seven years later? When are they due at the Abbey?

In a day or two, said Mara.

And Ella has gone to meet them? What will happen to them?

Perhaps Cirsc will find families for them, said Qno.

They have always lived together, said Tesil. They are Kind Garden children. Ella will not let them be split up.

Mara said nothing, pondering.

Are you going to take a puppy? asked Ulpec. There are six.

Can I take two? asked Mara.



The next morning Mara took the two puppies in a wicker basket with a cloth tied over it. Hadr and the two boys drove him down to Tarrant. Ulpec wanted to see the Red.

When they had gone, Tesil walked alone to Upper Crop.

Want a walk? said Mereg.

The sisters climbed up through the Overfield where seven cows were tearing up the grass, three of them Dwork's descendents. They clambered over the stone wall at the top of the field and headed up the hillside towards Mereg and Hadr's secret place. Tesil climbed fast on her long legs, bounding from tuft to tuft, and Mereg was hard put to keep up with her. At the first brow Tesil was winded, and threw herself panting onto the grass. Mereg came up and sat beside her.

What's up? asked Mereg.

Ella, said Tesil. The old story.

He wants back to Kirfa?

Mara arrived from Two Pen, said Tesil. The children are on the way.

The children?



Ella's Kind children,

I see, said Mereg.

He has been talking about the children lately. His mind is always in Kirfa.

He can't leave at this time of the year, said Mereg. The farm needs him.

He knows that, said Tesil. Ella loves it here in the Hald. But if the Kind children come to the Abbey he will not be able to resist.

What about you? said Mereg.

I can't go back to Kirfa. I hate Kirfa.

You would dance again. Teach at the Academy.

Not in Kirfa. Kirfa is dying. I'd rather come to Pyzan with you.

Why not? said Mereg eagerly. They know your name in Pyzan. The dancer who conquered the Pyzan army. You'd be a sensation.

I couldn't drag the boys to Pyzan. I'd lose them there. They love it in the Hald. They're free here. They're never at home. They're up here with you, or down with Jank and Jent, or wandering on the Moors with Hadr, or down in the Abbey with the monks. They're overjoyed at the idea of Cirsc being Abbess. They already know Tarrant better than I do. They'd simply disappear in the big city. They're born deserters. They have their grandfather's blood.

Mereg was thinking.

Sam has found Oswicus, she said.

I heard. This Luce place. What does that matter to us?

He's your father, said Mereg. He's our father. Sextus and Septimus talk about him. They talk together in Pyzan, when they think I'm not listening. I can understand them.

I can't, said Tesil. I don't want to.

Then Tesil said: Mara had some plan for the Kind children. He talked of Three Pen.

Two Pen? said Mereg.

Three. There are many Pen valleys. Downriver from Two Pen he says there is good farming land. He wants to help us build houses there and farm with thirty children. It's a crazy idea, but I can't think of any better. We can't keep thirty children in Middle Crop, and hardly in Tarrant or the Abbey.

What does Cirsc say? said Mereg.

I've not seen her. Perhaps we should go down to the Abbey and talk.

I'm going down to see Sam when I've finished milking, said Mereg.

Be careful of Sam, said Tesil. She claims you, lock stock and barrel.

I know, said Mereg. It's what I want.

Meer wants you, said Tesil.

Meer was drawn to me because I had the axe. Now I have laid it down. He won't find me exciting any more. I won't find him exciting.

Klimpt picked up a good updraft from the top of the Hill of the Masters, waved goodbye to Cirsc and Sne who had accompanied her to the top, and soared north-east along the flank of the Great Moor, rising easily in the south-easterly breeze. She landed towards evening some leagues east of Magre, opened a small sticky casket of bread soaked in Cirsc's soup, wrapped herself in her wings under a bush and slept untroubled until morning. She woke with the sun in her face and a stiff southerly breeze ruffling her feathers, and after a segment of cheese and a small flagon of water leapt into the air again and spent an hour rising in a spiral over the north-easternmost outcrop of the Moor. At three thousand fathoms she judged she had gained enough height to cross the grasslands, and slid crabwise across the wind towards the northeast. By late afternoon, having dropped to 500 fathoms, she picked up the updraft from the rising land south of the Luce uplands, and as dusk fell she landed neatly on the road just as it began to climb towards the gates of the citadel. She folded her wings, relieved herself, drank the last of her water, and began to trudge up the hill towards the gates.

There was something following her. She turned, and saw nothing in the failing light; but she fancied she heard a sigh, a rasping breath, a hissing. She fancied she heard a shadow.

On the walls above the gates, a tall figure seemed to be watching, too far away for Klimpt to see its face. But Klimpt heard its voice, speaking softly to her mind in her own language:

Walk fast, do not look round. I shall guard your back.

How are you going to guard my back standing up there on the wall?  
she asked.

You are Calimpeto, who flew with the Chair of Kirfa?

I am. And you are an Ambassador?

I am. How is it with the Chair?

Her legs are broken, my Lord, but she will mend. She lies in the Infirmary in the Abbey of the Rock, and Cirsc is tending her. I come with a letter for Meer, assistant to the Chair. What is following me?

Nothing for you to fear. It will obey me, said the soft voice in her mind. Come up to the Spital, Calimpeto, and eat, for you are tired and hungry.

The letter is from the Astronomers in Two Pen, said Klimpt, still speaking in her own language. Perhaps you should see it.

Yes, I think so, said the voice.

Oswicus lay with the green cloth over his eyes, but he pulled it up as Klimpt came to his bed, followed by Lo. His eyes were red and watery, but he looked hard at Klimpt. Then he pulled the cloth back over his eyes.

How is Samuesil, Klimpt?

Broken legs. Strong woman.

Where is she?

Cherisoche, said Klimpt.

Where is that? said Oswicus.

Klimpt made a great effort. Chirichke, she said. Chirisc.

The changeling?

Abness, Rock, said Klimpt.

Cirsc is Abness in the Abbey of the Rock, said Lo.

It seemed to take Oswicus an effort to understand.

Samuesil is there?

Healing, said Klimpt.

Oswicus said nothing for a while.

Klimpt, he said at last. Hwicce has taken Meer to show him the Depot. You understand?

No understand. Great danger.

You hear her, Ambassador? Great danger. You people don't know what you're doing.

My fear is that the mining companies do not know what they are doing, said Lo. We understand the principal of the transible, although we have little use for such technology. Here you are using transibles more powerful than I would have thought advisable. Klimpt has brought word to us from Pyzan and from the astronomers in Two Pen. They are watching Tenes. It is behaving in a way they do not understand. I suspect that here in Luce we have found the answer. There are many things you are not telling us.

If the stars are beginning to change, as you say, said Oswicus, it means the Company is preparing for transfer. If your people are too close to the Depot when the transfer occurs, the Canopy will not protect them.

It was as if Lo were listening to another voice.

Halo hears you, he said. She is telling Meer and Hwicce.

I go, said Klimpt.



The Depot was a huge rectangular building with a curved steel roof, with a massive circular silo at one end, attached to the building with a tangle of massive pipes and gangways. Meer, Halo and Hwicce stayed the pods at a distance of several stadia and studied the buildings through their night-lenses.

We must see what is inside, said Meer.

We put an assignment of opi in the House the same day that Kirfa arrived, said Hwicce. The apprehension in her eyes glinted in the gleam of the Span. Why was she doing this? Why did she trust these strange people? Perhaps they had a power over her that she could not feel.

And will they have taken it by now? said Meer.

They are not ready with the silo, said Hwicce, it is only half full. Usually they take the ore and the opi at the same time. But if the skies are changing it may be that they need the opi now.

Wait, said Halo. Lo is speaking to me.—The girl Klimpt has returned. Who is that?

The girl Klimpt flew with Kirfa, said Hwicce.

Where is Samuesil? said Meer.

She is in the Abbey of the Rock. Klimpt has a letter from Two Pen. Lo is reading it.—We do not understand it fully. The movement of Tenes is not caused merely by mining, it says. Klimpt is bringing it.

How can she bring it to us? said Meer.

She flies, of course, said Hwicce.

The huge doors of the building were open at the northern gable. The party steadied their pods and stared through their night-lenses. The building was empty but for a large timber raft of small cloth bags piled more than man-high. The cloth was greyish-white, but extensively stained with a dark ochre powder.

That is your opi? asked Meer.

No longer ours, said Hwicce. It is in the Depot. Do not enter. Where it goes, you will go.

And in the silo?

Rift ore, said Halo.

What is its use? asked Meer.

To make teneti, said Halo.

The metal?

The white metal of the gods, said Halo. We use it as conductors for the dynaesthene.

Your dynaesthene? On Eile?

We buy it from the Bases, said Halo.

Do you know where it comes from? asked Meer.

Perhaps we do. At least we do now, said Halo, as if to herself.



Klimpt's wings flapped once, and she landed softly behind them.

Hwicce, she said. Danger.

I have told them, Klimpt. They are mad, and have made me mad.

You have the letter? asked Halo.

Kirfa send, said Klimpt.

Meer and Halo pored over it together.

This is the answer, said Meer. A transible of this size, covering the whole plain, would mean an enormous gradient, enough to cause the aberration that they mention. You are right, Hwicce. We are in danger.

As he spoke, the night dimmed, and then brightened again. They looked instinctively up at the Span: it had gone, and with it the night-gleam. But there was no cloud: the skies were clear, and the stars bright and clear; but there were many moons in the sky, some bright, some dark, of different sizes.

We are too close, said Hwicce. Back! Fly, Klimpt, fly!

Klimpt flew, and the pods raced after her.



This is far enough, said Meer.

The pods came to a halt by an outcrop of broken rock. Meer and the Ambassadors climbed up on the rock and peered over, training their night-lenses on the building. Hwicce crouched with her back to the rock and shut her eyes. Klimpt was nowhere to be seen.

These are the skies of Tenes in the Span, said Meer. But look behind us—they are still our skies in the west.

There was a light shining inside the building. But it seemed not to emanate from the building itself: rather it was a reflected light being shone from somewhere outside. It shifted, and brightened; and suddenly the shadow of a large moving machine manifested itself to the left of the building, rolling towards it. As it approached the building it became clearer: it had a glass dome with a figure inside at the controls; under it there were massive metal belts like chains which clanked over huge cogged wheels, and a large fork-like contraption at the front. The machine rolled into the building and the light became shaded, but still shifting. After a short while the machine came backing out of the building, holding the timber pallet of opi in its fork. And as it backed way from the building its outlines faded, it became a shadow, and then snuffed out. A few seconds later the light was gone; and the moons were gone, and the far Span in its correct place.

That machine is on Tenes, said Meer. They would not need belts on Carhault.

The building is also on Carhault, said Lo. The flow of rift ore into the silo is from Tenes, and from there it runs to Carhault.

But that seems not to be our problem, said Meer. If the Astronomers are right, it is Luce itself which is our problem.





Klimpt fled across the southerly wind back to the citadel. And she fled indeed, with fear upon her. Not from the shifting stars—she knew what they meant. But from the shadow that followed her. Sometimes she heard its hissing, especially when it came close. Once it overtook her, and its wind jolted her flight; she saw it once clearly, the charred body of a war-chariot. She sought desperately in her mind for the voice of the Ambassador. Help, Mr Ambassador, she said into the wind, opening her mind into the rolling wind. Please guard my back. It is chasing me.

It is following you, said the voice of the Ambassador, not chasing you. It smells the Chair of Kirfa about you, and that is whom it seeks. It means you no harm, but you must be strong, and show you accept its presence, and do not fear it.

Tell me what it is, Mr Ambassador.

It is the chariot of the Chair of Kirfa, said the voice.



Meer and the two ambassadors sat together later that evening in the Spital, in the anteroom used by the tenders. Three tenders watched over the patients, and had little to do, for they slept peacefully. Tomorrow, Lo had told them, we must give them nourishment; we brought it with us, and we shall show you how to administer it. While they sleep we work to heal them, and that work goes well.

And their eyes, doctor?

Some will recover completely, others partially. Some will lose their sight.

The ambassadors had not slept, and they took no nourishment, but drank rush-water with Meer. Meer ate bread and cheese from the Refectory.

I don't know what to do, said Meer.

Not yet, perhaps, said Halo. The way will come.

Oswicus must help us, said Meer.

We find him very strong, said Lo. When he wakes next, we must all talk together.

The woman Hwicce is important to us, said Meer.

And the girl Klimpt is important to you, said Halo.



Bad news from the nice girl for you, Amre, said Klimpt, not looking at Meer.

Nice girl?

Friend of Kirfa, said Klimpt.

Mereg?

Yes, Emerego.

What bad news?

She lose axe, said Klimpt.

My sweet Calimpeto, said Meer with a catch in his voice. That is very good news.

Klimpt looked at him, uncertain. Bad axe? she asked.

Meer caught her in his arms and kissed her tousled forehead.

It is a happy axe, he said. Will you come back with me to see the Abbess, and to meet Samuesil and Merreg again?

You go? asked Klimpt.

Soon. But we have work to do here first.



The Ambassadors had given Oswicus a green shade for his eyes. Why green? he asked. The colour of the burning light?

And did you see it green?

I saw nothing, said Oswicus. Afterwards I was blind.

How do you see now? asked Lo.

Red. Everything is red. There is no other colour.

And through the green shade?

Oswicus peered.

Through the green shade I see how badly I see, he said.

That will improve, said Lo.



For all the difficulty she had with language, Klimpt found that she could speak easily with the Ambassadors. And she understood better than the others that she was speaking within the Ambassadors' minds, and that they were speaking within hers. Meer, on his seven-year sojourn in Eile, had been slow to learn this, and it was not long before his return to Huld that he fully realised that, when the Ambassadors spoke, there was often no sound in the air. Oswicus, Hwicce and the five elders of Luce whom Oswicus had called to the meeting, did not notice this at all. They expected off-world people to talk strangely.

The elders were polite, but said little. Instead they frequently exchanged glances. Only one of them had witnessed the Burning, and only indistinctly, from some distance. He wore the green shade that the Ambassadors had given him.

Oswicus was weak, and spoke slowly with long pauses. It was sometimes difficult to hear his words, but Hwicce was quick to interpret. Hwicce seemed to be the main spokesman.

Meer recounted his expeditions with the Ambassadors to the southern hemisphere of Huld and the climactic changes they had observed there, and tried to give them an indication of the expansion of the arid deserts that lay to the east of the Ozu River. The Elders listened silently. Klimpt listened, and Meer's words were bright in her mind.

In Luce, our summers are becoming warmer, said Hwicce. The opi grows faster. We harvest earlier each year. But the winters are harsher.

There is greater seasonal change throughout Huld, said Meer. And our astronomers believe they have found the reason.

We know the reason, said Hwicce. It is the greed of Pyzan.

Meer looked at the Ambassadors: they were smiling.

In Pyzan they use coins, said Hwicce. They hoard money.

And this affects the weather?

They sell to the Bases, said Hwicce.

What do they sell?

You know what they sell. Teneti. The rift-ore from the Span. Tenes is spiralling inwards. We can see it. It is pulling Huld with it.

This is known in Luce?

How could we not know it? We have seen the mines on Tenes. We have seen the gaping holes.

You have seen them? You have lenses here in Luce? asked Meer.

I do not understand your lenses, said Hwicce.

No one can see the holes on Tenes without lenses, said Meer. They have lenses in Pyzan. You have them here? Eye-glasses?

You mean telescopes? said Hwicce.

Telescopes, yes, said Meer.

You are simpletons, said Hwicce. You see, Klimpt? They understand nothing. Tell them, girl.

We walk on Tenes, said Klimpt. See mines. Drink good wine.

The Ambassador nodded to Meer, and he heard Lo's voice in his mind: She speaks well, Meer. We have seen this in her mind. She has clear memories.

She speaks well? thought Meer. What does Lo mean?

You have travelled to Tenes? he said to Hwicce. You have travelled with the transible?

I do not understand this transible, said Hwicce. The miners took us. We went. They were thanking us for the opi.

You went by the Depot, then, said Meer.

Hwicce said nothing.

Why then were you so afraid of the Depot?

It is terrible on Tenes, said Hwicce.

All bad on Tenes, said Klimpt.

And it was as if Meer heard Klimpt for the first time: It was terrible on Tenes, she had said. The miners live in hell. I lived in hell.

There was a long silence. The elders looked at each other and nodded agreement. Oswicus had his eyes shut.

How long have you been sending opi to Tenes? said Hwicce.

Hwicce looked at Oswicus. How long since you came, Os? she asked.

You had started before I came, said Oswicus.

You got them to set up the Canopy, Tyran, said Hwicce.

Six years ago, said Oswicus.

You knew of us, Oswicus, said Lo. You knew we might find you.

Yes.

Did you know we were scanning Huld?

The mining Company knew.

So you hid Luce from our scans?

And I hid Luce from Pyzan. And now you have found us, which means Pyzan has found us. There is no shelter left for deserters in Luce. Everything is broken.

There was a long silence.

Joel found us, said Oswicus. Before you did.



How long will you stay here? Meer asked the Ambassadors.

A few days longer, said Lo. Then we will not be needed. Hwicce will finish our work. Now you should go to the Abbey.

I shall go with Klimpt, said Meer. Will you not come with us?

No. We must leave Huld for a while. We must speak with the Alliance. We will return. We must speak with Pyzan.

And Kirfa?

There was sorrow in the minds of the Ambassadors, and in their faces. We mourn for Kirfa, they said.



*Meer took the child in his arms and held it up to see its face in the light. It reached up to touch the thick wet snow that hung in his beard.*

*Did you lay out in the snow? asked the child.*

*No, said Meer. I was walking. The snow blew into my face.*

*Your warm face is melting the cold snow, said the child.*

*You are warmer than I am, said Meer.*

*That is because I am still living, said the child.*

*Its mother laughed. Meer is still living, too, she said.*

*Not like us, said the child. He is living in another world.*

*He is with us now.*

*Will we go and live with him in his warm world? asked the child.*



May I fly back to the Abbey? said Klimpt.

You do not need our permission, said Lo. But I see you are anxious about the Chariot.

If it follows me to the Abbey, said Klimpt, it will haunt Samuesil, and perhaps others.

It will stay here, said, Lo. I shall see to it that it does not leave Luce. It will wait for Samuesil to come.

Klimpt said to Meer: You said you would go with me to the Abbey. But I shall fly.

I shall go with you, said Meer.

You cannot fly with me, Amre. It is not a skill for you.

I shall take the pod, said Meer.

Then I shall fly, and watch you, said Klimpt.

And as his pod sped down from the high plain of Luce, he could see the tiny span of Klimpt's wings spiralling upward, high above him.

You will never learn to fly like this, Amre, said her voice in his mind. I know your sort. You are a ground-man, like Oswicus.

We are deserters, Oswicus and me, said Meer. Can deserters not fly?

Both you and Oswicus became soldiers because that was where your thoughts lay, on the ground, said Klimpt. The army fooled you. If you had flown instead, you would not have been fooled.

I think you are right, Calimpeto.

By evening they had reached Calimpeto's sleeping-place on the flank of the moors north-east of Magre. They ate bread and cheese and drank cold rush-water. They did not talk, but their minds were close to each other. Meer took out the bedroll from his pod and spread his great cloak over it. They slid together under the cloak and held each other. I felt you in my mind as I flew, she said. Now I want to feel you on the ground.



Fletch heard himself screaming. He wondered why: he felt no pain. Perhaps it was someone else, he reasoned.

He could not figure out whether he was lying on his left side or his right side. The horizon, he ascertained, was vertical; that was some comfort. Not too far away, either.

Then he remembered the horse. Most of him was lying under it.

A voice was speaking from the other side of the horse. Bloody racket, it was saying. Wake everyone up with your screaming.

That you, Borl? said Fletch.

That you, Fletch? said Borl. You under the horse?

Come and get me out, there's a good fellow, said Fletch.

Sorry mate, said Borl. No legs.

They were silent for a while.

Stupid Migro, said Fletch.

Crazy Hun, said Borl.

They both chuckled.

Bad idea, said Fletch.

Big mistake, said Borl. Should of known better.

Should of, said Fletch.

Some of your boys ran away, said Borl.

Yours too, said Fletch. Sensible buggers.

Suddenly the horse heaved itself to its feet. Fletch screamed again.

Least your lungs are all right, said Borl.

The horse hobbled forward a few paces. It had a broken front leg. Borl could see Fletch now. He was amazingly twisted. The horse turned on

three legs, taking its time, and looked at them dolefully. It seemed to Borl that it had Fletch in its right eye, Borl in its left.

You still there? said Borl.

There was a silence. Then suddenly Fletch said, quite loudly: Still here.

That your mare? said Borl.

She is.

She's got a broken leg.

Stepped on a wheel, said Fletch.

Poor girl, said Borl. She's looking at you. Can't you shoot her?

No more arrows, said Fletch.

There's one in my arse, said Borl.

How did you get that? asked Fletch with a chuckle.

I was lying here minding my own business when one of your boys came up and shot me in the arse.

They do things like that, said Fletch. Bloody idiots.

Can't see your face, said Borl.

Can't see yours, said Fletch.

The horse wobbled and collapsed.

Somehow, Fletch was stretching out his hand towards Borl. Borl took it, and they lay hand in hand.

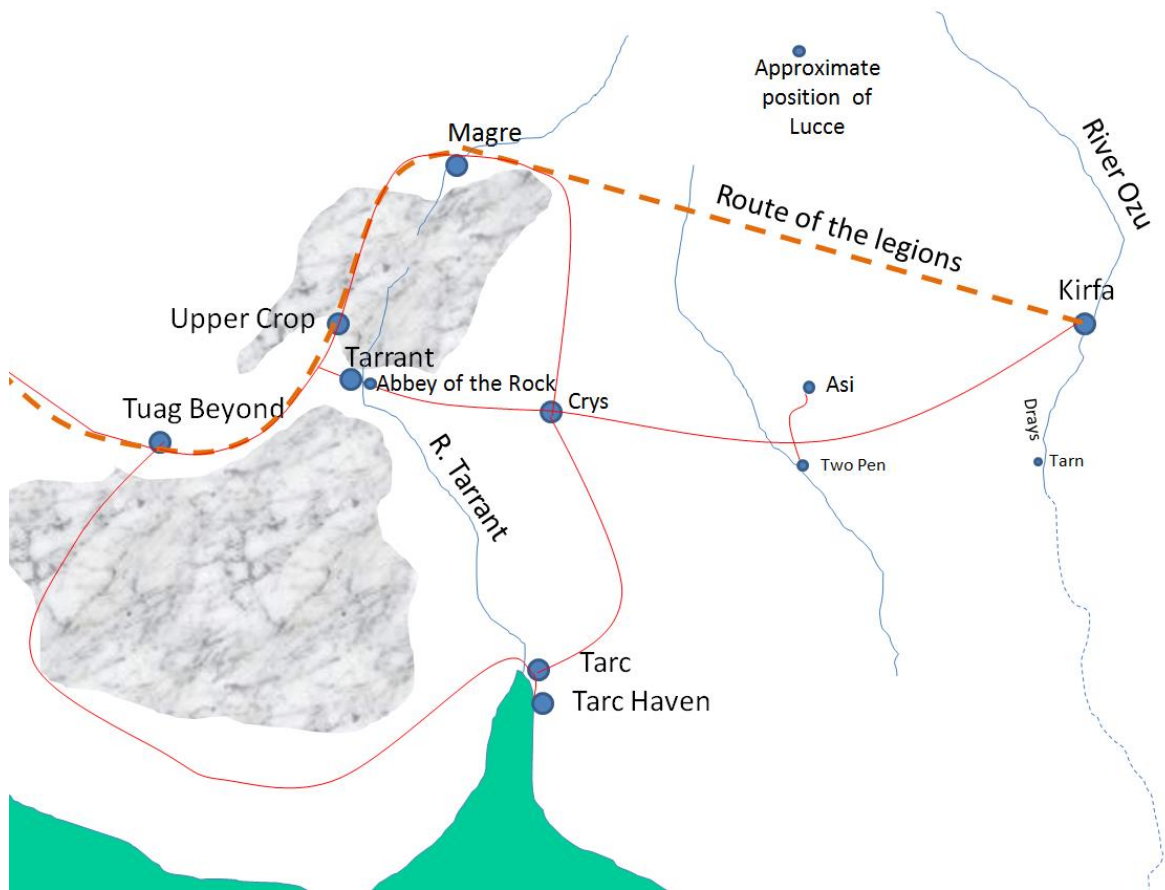
After a while, Borl felt Fletch's hand twitching. Unless it was his own.

Name of the Father, said Borl.

Name of the Mother, said Fletch.

Name of the Child, they said together.

Feb 2020



Map of the Hald and the Anamen Territories