

# Migration and Fugue

Book 3

Teneti

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*περὶ δὲ φαντασίας ἄδηλον*

De Anima 415a.4: “The question of imagination is unclear.”

On the twelfth of the twenty-three moons that sailed round the giant planet Carhault, deep in the ponderous system of the same name, was the small farm which gave its name to the moon, the planet and the system. The farm of Carhault was the legendary centre of the great Paulian Empire of Carhault. And now the two Eilean ambassadors, whom in view of the linguistic uncertainty involved we shall continue to call Lo and Halo, were kneeling at an altar in a tiny chapel on the slope above the farm. The Grand Mother bestowed her blessing on the kneeling ambassadors, first on the regrettably male ambassador Lo, and then on the blessed female Halo. In the name of the Father, intoned the Grand Mother, before whom both Woman and Groom are equal.

The water of Carhault was cold upon the ambassadors' hairless heads.

After the blessing, the small company made its way down through the snow to the farm. The Ambassadors walked behind the Grand Mother, followed by six Holy Mothers of the Paulian Church and lastly by the two secular Ministers of State who appeared both to answer to the same name, Isqad Sodt.

Although used to many climates, the Eilean ambassadors had felt the cold, and were relieved to enter the small but comfortable farmhouse. It was clearly not a working farm, being maintained on this holy site by the State of High Carhault under the guidance of the Church. The seven Mothers murmured their excuses and retired into a back room, leaving the two ministers and the two ambassadors alone to dine and to discuss the matter at hand.

Teneti, you say. The sacred metal, said the left-hand Isqad Sodt, passing round the salted bread and oil.

Is it, may I ask, our teneti we are discussing, or yours? asked the right-hand Isqad Sodt, pouring the golden wine.

Huld teneti, your worships, said Lo. The yellow rift ore that Carhault imports from Huld's moon Tenes, from which you smelt teneti, the white metal.

Which you on Eile buy from us, said the right-hand Isqad Sodt.

Some of which we buy from you, said Lo.

Not, we are informed, a mere matter of price?

No indeed, your worships. Eile is happy about the financial aspect, and we trust Carhault is, too. We are concerned about the environmental impact.

There is no environmental impact, said the left-hand Sodt. Our emissions are zero. You have problems on Eile?

Not at all, said Lo. We also fully control emissions. That is not the problem.

Ah, said the right-hand Sodt, you speak of Huld, then?

We do. We have maintained an embassy on Huld for some twenty Huld-years now, almost five Carhault cycles. We have grave concerns for the Huld environment.

Our people are studying your report, said Sodt. Perhaps it would be helpful if you reiterate the main points verbally for us while we dine. We will record our discussion, if you have no objections. Soup? He ladled into their bowls.

The Ambassadors smiled. Their hosts had not, as usual, noticed that the Eileans had not been physically speaking so far. Halo took up the challenge, having greater linguistic skills than Lo:

The report, yes. In brief, Huld is suffering extensive global warming with unstable weather conditions. We have detected perturbations in its orbit around Selig, and traced them to instability in one of its moons, Tenes, where the Alliance is now mining for rift ore. We have established that the mining is on a scale great enough to cause the observed orbital aberration. We conclude that continued rift ore mining on Tenes will result in widespread disaster conditions on Huld. Our mission is to offer help and advice in the search for alternative sources of teneti. For our part, we expect our scientists on Eile to investigate viable alternatives for teneti, thus to relieve pressure on the Tenes mines.

There was a silence. The ministers drank their soup, carefully and noiselessly. Taking their cue, the ambassadors did the same.

The soup finished, one of the Isqad Sodts took the lid off the tureen to display the main dish, apparently a stew of red and green objects. The smell was delicious.

May we offer you seqatau? he said.

Thank you, said the Ambassadors in all four minds together.

A delicacy you may have heard of, said the left-hand Sodt.

He waved his fork at them as if to gain attention.

I should point out, he said, that you are not telling us the whole story. In particular, in saying that loss of mass from our mining on Tenes is causing the orbital perturbations, you are actually telling the wrong story.

The four diners laid down their forks. The two ambassadors concentrated on their plates.

They know, thought Lo to Halo.

We have seen the figures from the astronomers in Pyzan Huld, said the right-hand Sodt. Our astronomers have explained them to us. You do not include them in your report.

I was about to turn to that aspect, said Halo.

I doubt that is true, said the left-hand Sodt. And that dismays us.

Of course you are right, and I apologise, said Halo after a short silence. I assumed you were unaware of the anomaly, and thought it best not to confuse the issue. It is, as you will no doubt have seen, not material to the main facts of the matter.

The ministers smiled politely. Please enjoy the seqatau, they said. Or perhaps only one of them spoke.

Shit, thought Halo to Lo.

The four ate together in silence for a while. The ambassadors knew they were politely being given time to reconstitute their position.

Explain to us the problem with the transible, said the left-hand Sodt.

As you know, said Halo, we do not use transibles on Eile. We prefer to rely on the dynaesthene. Hence our use of teneti.

An unreliable technology, the dynaesthene, said the left-hand Sodt.

We do not find it so, said Halo.

For bulk transfer, said the left-hand Sodt.

Perhaps. Our cargoes are not large.

Pure teneti has little bulk, said the right-hand Sodt. But the ore is bulky. Very bulky. It cannot be transferred directly all the way to Carhault from such a small moon; *that* of course would unsettle its orbit. That is the reason for the transible on the plain on Huld which you call Luce. Tenes is not endangered by the short transfer to Luce, and Huld is large enough not to be endangered by the longer haul to Carhault.

That is so, said Lo in their minds. That is so, repeated Halo for the recording equipment.

The two Sodts looked at each other. Which of you spoke? asked the left-hand Sodt.

I did, said Lo. We both did, said Halo.

The right-hand Sodt reached across the table and turned off the recording apparatus.

There was a heavy silence.

Not material to the main facts? he said.

Very well, said Halo. The silo at Luce was among the largest transibles I have ever seen, although I assume you use even larger ones on Carhault. No matter. The data sent from the Pyzan astronomers, as you have clearly ascertained, show that the loss of mass on Tenes from mining is insufficient to cause the observed anomalies. The actual bulk transfer by transible is not the culprit.

Exactly, said the right-hand Sodt, smiling blandly, savouring his guests' discomfort. So where does the fault lie, do you suppose?

Halo said carefully, controlling her anger: You are clearly referring to the fact that the mining company has set up a transible canopy over the whole plain of Luce, effectively a transible of unprecedented proportions. This was done in order to conceal the operation from Kirfa and Pyzan. The energy involved is enough to explain the aberrations in the orbit of Tenes. However the actual size of the transible is not material to the issue. The overall picture is that, whatever the details of the matter, disastrous climactic change is in progress on Huld, and that this is ultimately the result of mining operations within the Huld moon-system. Such interference with planetary systems is illegal under common jurisdiction in both Eile and Carhault. Huld does not have the necessary cohesion to address the issue on a global basis, but would generally speaking not countenance the ethical issues involved. I regret my attempt to cut corners, but the core of the matter remains the same.

The Sodts smiled at each other, and then at the ambassadors.

No, said the left-hand Sodt.

Please explain, said Halo.

The core of the matter does not remain the same, said the left-hand Sodt.

The transible canopy over the plain, as you call it, said the right-hand Sodt, is indeed the cause of the aberrations. The gravity gradient is excessive. But it is not necessary to the bulk transfer of rift ore. Neither is the so-called depot building necessary. The silo alone would be quite sufficient. And the Alliance has no need to hide its transible from you or any authority on Huld. The Luce canopy has another function, which is none of our business at all. The depot is for the illegal transfer of opi to drug-runners on Tenes and ultimately Huld. And the whole canopy is to hide Luce, the exporter of opi and the refuge of military deserters, from the eyes of the cities of Pyzan and of Kirfa. It is the result of a clandestine understanding between some party on the ground in Huld and the workers on Tenes. It is not our problem; it is not even within our jurisdiction, which as you know does not extend to Huld or any orbital body in the Seli9 system—not even to Tenes, for which we buy access from Pyzan on Huld. We are in fact surprised at your untoward intervention: you are the Eilean mission to Huld, and it is not within your mandate to speak on their behalf. May we offer you more wine?



The journey from Carhault onward to the Ambassadors' home planet in the Eile system was far longer than the short haul from Huld to Carhault. The tides, too, were against them, and the Ambassadors' focus was poor, not having found succour in Carhault. They arrived fatigued and dispirited.

There were new faces in the Council, some old faces missing. A flying visit, it seems, said the new Speaker. An emergency, perhaps?



A predicament, dear Councillors, said Halo. We had to leave Huld on a mission to Carhault to discuss the mining of rift ore on one of the moons of Huld.

Explain, please, dear Ambassador.

Halo outlined the story, making it clear that she was simplifying matters for this preliminary report. As she expected, the Council were not informed on their own use of teneti.

The white metal? they asked. It comes from Huld?

Almost entirely, dear friends, said Halo. It comes from a small moon orbiting Huld, a beautiful yellow moon named Tenes—hence the name of the metal. The mining operations are indirectly responsible for disastrous climactic changes predicted on Huld and already apparent.

And how did Carhault react?

Halo gave a full account of the situation on the plain of Luce, and Carhault's position that this was an internal matter on Huld.

The Council pondered.

What use do we make of teneti? asked one of the new councillors.

It is an essential component of the dynaesthene, said the Speaker. Several councillors looked up in consternation, and the thought went round the table: We depend on this little moon?

We depend on the little moon of Tenes until we find a different source, or an alternative for teneti, said an older councillor.

We are mining a beautiful yellow moon in a distant system?

No. We are buying from the Alliance, which smelts teneti in Carhault from ore imported from the mines on this moon. We buy a minute proportion of their teneti production.

This is not generally understood, said a councillor. It is not a trivial matter. It concerns the dynaesthene.

This is why we come to ask the guidance of the Council, said Halo.

It seems to me, said the Speaker—without a pause, almost as if he were waiting for the proffered opportunity—, that you would have done better to seek our guidance earlier. I would suggest that you acted rashly and without authority in Carhault, and that you underestimated the Carhaultan intelligence service and mishandled your meeting with the secular ministers there.

We accept your criticism, said the Ambassadors together.

There was a short silence.

It has also come to our attention that you have introduced certain aspects of our technology to the people of Huld, said the Speaker. Even the use of the dynaesthene.

On a very small scale, yes that is so, said Halo.

The Council pondered for some time. Eventually their thoughts began to flow together. Finally the Speaker formulated their conclusion:

We will immediately appoint new ambassadors to Huld and monitor the internal situation there more closely. They will make known our dismay at the production of opi and its sale via the Alliance. Kirfa and Pyzan must be informed of the full situation at Luce. This Council will meanwhile initiate a dialogue with our people on the use of teneti in the dynaesthene.

Lo and Halo bowed their heads. The Council heard their thoughts together: Nevertheless we must return to our friends in Huld.

There was again a short silence.

We cannot stop you, of course, said the Speaker. You have freedom of travel. But you will lose the trust of the Council by so doing.

So be it, said the erstwhile Ambassadors.

## 2

Nonsense, said the Abbess Cirsc. Three Pen my elbow in the sky. Mara is a farmer. His idea of heaven is an estate with thirty-two farmhands. These children are under our care, and we won't fail them. It is time to build a school in the Abbey. Ella, you will be the Principal.

You need someone who can keep things together, said Ella. Tesil should be principal. I shall be Master of the Dormitories.

Head Teacher, said Tesil. Mr and Mrs Cwints will be Masters of the Dormitories and School Medics.

The school will teach Chanting, Dancing, Writing and Mathematics, said Cirsc.

And History, said Sextus.

That's the same as Writing, said Septimus.

No it isn't, said Sextus.

A school for all the children of Tarrant and the Hald, said Tesil.

Including us, said Oswicus and Ulpec.

The older pupils will be known as the Grand Masters, said Wen.

And Astronomy, said Hadr.

And Theology, said Cirsc. For those who want to become monks.

And Bovology, said Hadr, for Qno.

Bucology, corrected Sextus.



Mara had however scored with his grandchildren. The two puppies from Lower Crop righted all wrongs. It stood to reason that the two boys assumed ownership of the dog, and the two girls the bitch. The four grandchildren all gave them different names. If they are going to be any

good as farm dogs, said Mara, they need to be trained as farm dogs. No dog will answer to four names.

Yes they will, said Lesuli. Dogs hear meanings, not sounds. Dogs are in contact.

Mother, said Elri, dogs can't read minds.

Minds are the only things they *can* read, said Lesuli. When mankind learnt language, it lost that ability. In fact it lost the ability to think.

No, the other way round, said Ynglà.

Your mother is speaking as a farmer, said Mara.

Obviously, said Elri.

Mara saw the need to change the subject. Cirsc wouldn't accept the idea of building homes for the children at Three Pen, he said.

Speaking as a farmer, said Lesuli, nor would I.

She's going to establish a school for them at the Abbey. An Academy.

We must go and see her, said Elri. We'll persuade her to build a good observatory. On the top of the Hill of the Masters. Ynglà, we must draw up plans for her.

From what I saw of the Abbess, said Mara, I don't think she'll need much persuasion. That's exactly the sort of thing she'd fall for.

How is the Chair? asked Lesuli.

She's going to have a shock when she starts walking again, said Mara. She broke badly. And no chariot to drive around in.

And no Kirfa to chair, said Lesuli.

Don't say that, said Mara.



Cirsc will not let me get up, said Samuesil. I'm putrefying. Don't I smell?

Yes, said Mereg.

And you smell of the cowshed, said Samuesil.

When did you first know? asked Mereg.

The first time I saw you, when you came with Qno and the others for breakfast with me in Elefant Square, said Samuesil. You asked me some question about the Migrants, and I looked at you and could not answer. My tongue was twisted, my heart thumping, there was a fire in me. I felt like a swathe of fresh grass, sweating, green—you know what I mean?

Sort of, said Mereg, smiling. The grass is a bit weird, though.

It's from an old song we used to sing, said Samuesil. I am greener than grass.<sup>1</sup> It made sense when I saw you. It gets it right. I envied Hadr so much: he could look straight at your face and simply enjoy it.

I couldn't look at you, said Mereg. Hadr says it was so obvious. Everyone knew.

Do you still feel like that?

I can look at you now, said Mereg, not looking at her. But not too long at once, otherwise I get the grass too.



Klimpt and Meer's return to the Abbey from Luce, in the late afternoon on the day after they had lain together under Meer's cloak on the Moor, was one of the several events which marked the beginning of a new time in the Abbey. Cirsc's tenure as Abbess was by then many weeks old, Samuesil's confinement to her bed of pain in the Abbey was ageless, the arrival of the Grand Masters of the Order of Ella was at least three days old, and the decision to build a school was two days old; but Klimpt and Meer's appearance hand in hand in the cloisters was a clinching

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<sup>1</sup> *χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας ἐμμί.* Sappho 31.

touch. Cirsc hugged Klimpt like a long-lost sister, then Meer like a long-lost brother, and then looked at them both, her face shining. Just to make sure, she said, and hugged Klimpt again. Then she laughed her long gurgling laugh. Same hug on you both, she said. Congratulations! I must say it did cross my mind, just for a second, when Calimpeto flew off to Luce. So you won't be taking the veil, Calimpeto, not immediately at least. Not that that would be a great hindrance.

What is veil, Abbess Cherisoche? said Klimpt.

Not that we wear veils, said Cirsc.



Samuesil lay reading a scroll from the library when Meer and Klimpt came together into the Infirmary. Mereg lay in a deep sleep beside her on the bed.

Hallo Meer, said Samuesil. You found me at last. But it was Calimpeto who saved me.

And broke your legs, said Klimpt.

It was me who did that, said Samuesil.

Mereg opened her eyes, half awake. Oh, she said as she saw Meer; and she rolled to one side and buried her face under Samuesil's bedclothes.

Say hallo nicely to my guests, said Samuesil.

I'm shy, came Mereg's muffled voice.

You're overreacting, said Samuesil.

Mereg's face came up from under the bedclothes to look at them. Then she rolled off the bed, stood up and put her arms round Meer's neck.

No axe? said Klimpt anxiously.

Mereg extricated herself and turned to Klimpt, taking her hands in hers.

No axe, she said. Now I am safe. I have found my brother Meer, whom I never knew before. He's lovely, don't you think, Calimpeto?

Calimpeto had a clear view of herself in the world. Amre is my man, and I am his woman, she said.

Meer, said Samuesil severely from the bed. Take these women of yours home to Upper Crop to meet your mother. And then come back tomorrow without them, for we have some serious talking to do, you and I, and I cannot think straight with Mereg around, and you need to think straight too. See to it that Mereg goes to bed early, she needs her sleep. And my regards to your mother, and say I look forward to meeting her as soon as Cirsc allows me out of bed.

She says that to me every time, said Mereg.

Get out, all of you, said the Chair of Kirfa. You're all making me feel ghastly.



Amfer came to the door as usual, hearing her son's presence as if he were preparing to wail from his cot. She came down to the gate as Meer put his hand on the latch. She took his head in her hands as she had done before, and spoke his name: Meer.

Mother, this is Calimpeto, said Meer.

That's a lovely name, said Amfer. My name is Amfer.

Amafero, said Klimpt.

Where's Qno? asked Mereg.

He's finishing off in the byre, said Amfer. Give him a hand, there's a love. Supper is almost ready.

Calimpeto, said Amfer, smiling, almost as if to herself.

Where are the boys? said Meer.

Took the afternoon off, said Amfer. They have friends in Tarrant, busy, busy. They'll be back around midnight.

Qno and Mereg came in together, having left their overalls in the byre and washed thoroughly at the pump.

So you found the Chair, said Qno.

Calimpeto found her first, said Meer.

Calimpeto, this is Qno, said Mereg.

Angkrō, said Klimpt.

We didn't meet last time, said Qno, taking Klimpt's hand and patting it like a child's. First you brought the Chair, then you went back and brought Meer. That's pretty good going.

Going? said Klimpt.

Staying, Calimpeto, said Amfer.



Two discussions took place at roughly the same time the next day.

Meer came into the infirmary shortly after breakfast. Cirsc and one of the water-lady nuns had just finished washing Samuesil, and she sat up in the bed eating spice bread and drinking rush-water and looking much better, thought Meer, than she had the day before.

Where's Mereg? she asked.

You told her to stay away, said Meer.

I'm having problems with myself, Meer, she said. Sit down and talk to me like an adult. I haven't seen you since Asi, that's far too long.

Adult? said Meer.

That's unfair, I know. Mereg and Cirsc are adults, and they are keeping me alive. It's me who's the problem. I am grappling with my own identity. Am I still Chair of Kirfa? I lie here and people wash me and bring me food, and I hear of refugee children from the Holy City—Meer,



what is happening? Wing and Eye have told me about the storm and the atrocities in Kirfa. I've lost my city, I've lost my Chariot, Wing and Eye have their hands full looking after the Kind children, and Cirsc won't let me out of bed. I've no one to talk Business with.

Government, said Meer.

Protocol, said Samuesil. Negotiation. Pacts.

The Combined Ballet Corps, said Meer.

Oh yes, said Samuesil.

After a while she said: Mereg said you all knew.

I don't think that's quite true, said Meer. We all saw you were like sisters. Qno says they all noticed that you hardly needed to talk together, you seemed simply to be thinking the same things together. I never noticed anything, of course. I was too bound up in my own crazy thoughts. I could see nothing but Mereg, and I hated her beyond description.

And now?

We talked together in Kirfa before I left for Eile with the Ambassadors, said Meer. I told her everything. I think my cure began then.

And now? repeated Samuesil.

There is no longer any axe, said Meer. Has she told you about that?

That and much more, said Samuesil.

So now we are joined together like brother and sister by an ancient and unmerciful narrative, and I think we can go on from there.

Samuesil looked at him long and hard, like the Chair of Kirfa evaluating a close counsellor.

So you are saying we can stop this coffee-talk and discuss what happened at Luce.

Right, said Meer. Will you tell me your story first, or shall I tell mine?

I love her so much, Meer.

Right, said Meer.



Somehow, Meer fed Samuesil with the information she needed to understand the situation at Luce. But her focus was weak, and Meer saw that she was not engaging in the matter. Her temperature was normal, Cirsc had said, but she was fighting the pain in her legs, and her mind and heart saw only Mereg. And yet Meer sensed something more. Beyond, behind all her unease, was the loss of the City of Kirfa and the horrors perpetrated there. Her citizens dying on the grasslands, or already dead in the river.

It is my failure, Meer, she said.

It is all our failures, said Meer. But we have Ella's children.

I dislike children, said Samuesil.



The other conversation that morning was between Mereg and Klimpt. They sat together on the old bench by the byre, looking at the axe in the block.

Many bad people, said Klimpt.

In your life? asked Mereg.

In Luce, said Klimpt. Sink for bad people.

Sink: Mereg turned the word over in her mind. Eventually she traced it back to Meer, and was glad.

You talk a lot, you and Meer? she asked.

I talk in his mind, he talk in mine, said Klimpt. Very good.

Ambassadors make this, I think.

Perhaps, said Mereg. They taught Cirsc and she taught me. But I can only do it with Sam.

You talk Tesamuesil like I talk Amre, that is love, said Klimpt.

Yes, said Mereg. Samuesil.

All names have many sounds, said Klimpt.

Only when we talk with our mouths, said Mereg.

You-me not talk in mind?

I cannot hear you, Calimpeto. Can you hear me?

You strange thoughts, Amrego. Cannot hear.

You too, said Mereg. It's fun, isn't it?

### 3

It was early autumn, and Lesuli and Mara had had the summer to turn the farm at Two Pen into something more than an observatory. They had channelled the energies of the four children, taken in all the grain, retimbered the roof of the byre and practically rebuilt the shippens. The two young mothers had worked hard at their astronomy tables, and had all but forgotten their children. The puppies ran round, and round, and round.

Post continued his fortnightly excursions from Tarc to Crys, and thence on to the Asi-Two Pen crossroads. He never went up the road to Asi, but headed down to Two Pen, since the postal traffic between the sisters and the astronomers in Pyzan had steadily increased over the summer. He went no further along the Kirfa road, but returning to Crys he continued west into the Abbey and delivered post to Tarrant.

One day in early leaf-fall he brought a large package to Two Pen. It contained a huge roll of data and drawings made by Antus of the configuration of the small bodies in the vicinity of Tenes. Elri and Ynglà were enthralled.

How does he achieve such detail? said Ynglà. They must have found Watchers with amazing eyesight.

Wait, said Elri. They have a new lens. Look, he sent us drawings. They are combining lenses ground by the Watchers in Tanquish. They enlarge Tenes a hundredfold. Look, he calls it Telescope. Ynglà, this we must see.

We must talk to Cirsc, said Ynglà. If she agrees to build an observatory for the school, Antus might send us lenses.

Just listen to you, said Lesuli. Cirsc is building a school and all you think of is the stars. What about your children?

What about the children? asked Elri.

Children, school! said Lesuli. See the connection?

Mother you are brilliant! said Ynglà. We take the children to the Abbey, get Cirsc to build an observatory, and leave the children in the school!

Can we take the puppies with us? asked the children.

No. They'll stay with Grandpa Mara and Grandma Lesuli, said Ynglà. They will look after the farm for us while we are at the Abbey.

Will you be coming to school with us? wailed the children in dismay.

We'll be helping Cirsc to build the observatory, said Elri.

And leave Grandpa and Grandma all alone here? said the children.

We'll have the puppies, said Grandpa Mara.

Glorious peace, said Grandma Lesuli. Mara and me, we're used to being alone together. Go, and the sooner the better.

We'll come home for Yule, said the grandchildren.

I daresay you will, said Lesuli, frowning.



The autumn rains had set in, and work on the new school building slowed accordingly. The school was to be held that winter in the Refectory. Eye, Wing and the Kind children had already settled into the rebuilt refugee huts in Meadow Behind.

Elri and Ynglà arrived on the post train one wet and windy afternoon. The four Two Pen children scampered off to find the Kind children as soon as Post switched off the motor in the main courtyard of the Abbey.

No goodbyes, said Ynglà.

They're happy to be rid of us, said Elri.



Observatory, said Cirsc. Why didn't you mention it before?

We thought of it, said Elri, but we couldn't get away.

Busy time at the farm, I suppose, said Cirsc.

Sort of, said Ynglà.

We'll need lenses, said Elri.

Where do you get lenses from?

They grind them in Tanquish, according to Antus. He could arrange it.

Lovely, said Cirsc.

So you think it's a good idea? said Ynglà.

Best yet, said Cirsc. But it means you'll have to stay with us for some while. Supervision and such.

Elri and Ynglà looked at each other. If you say so, Holy Mother, they said.

Cirsc, said Cirsc.



Sextus and Septimus leapt to their feet, wiping their mouths, as Cirsc and the astronomers came into the Refectory.

What are you two doing here? asked Cirsc. Are you eating? It's two hours to dinner.

Cook asked us if we were hungry, said Sextus.

These young men are from Upper Crop, explained Cirsc. They're always hanging around, act as if they own the place. I think of them as outpatient monks. Sextus and Septimus, this is Elri and Ynglà, our resident astronomers, who have just arrived from Two Pen.

The two young men blushed profusely.

It's time for bannocks and rush-water for our guests, said Cirsc. Cook! Guests! —Will you join us, gentlemen?

Thank you very much, said Sextus and Septimus.



Tell me more about this Antus, said Cirsc.

The Astronomer of Pyzan, said Ynglà. He sends us data to work on.

What data? asked Septimus. He had been quicker than Sextus to overcome his shyness.

What sort of data? asked Cirsc.

We are watching the Span, said Ynglà. Antus sends us sightings from Pyzan, and we analyse them.

Tenes, said Cirsc.

You know about Tenes? said Ynglà.

Meer has told me. You must talk to Meer and the Chair. Meer is in Upper Crop, I think? She directed the question to Sextus.

And— Sextus could get no further.

Cirsc looked Sextus. And Mereg? she said

Our sister knows a lot about the stars, said Septimus. You should visit us in Upper Crop and talk to her.

That's a splendid idea, said Cirsc. Did you come down in the cart?

No, we rode over the top, said Sextus.

You must borrow the Abbey cart, said Cirsc. Take the girls to Upper Crop. I still have to prepare lodgings for them here.

Now? said Septimus.

Yes. Can they stay with Amfer for a day or two?

Yes, said Sextus.

We could show them Tarrant on the way, said Septimus.

We used to know Tarrant, said Ynglà. But I expect it's changed.

There's a tavern now, said Septimus.



We both have children, said Ynglà.

Congratulations, said Septimus. We don't.

Thought you ought to know, said Ynglà.

Sextus came from the bar with four beakers of ale.

They both have children, said Septimus.

Where? said Sextus, looking round.

But we don't have husbands, said Ynglà, just in case you're wondering.

Virgin births? said Septimus.

They're in the school, said Ynglà.

Do you need to look after them? said Septimus.

Heavens no, said Ynglà.

So you really want to come home with us to Upper Crop? said Septimus.

That's what Cirsc said, said Ynglà.

Where is it? asked Elri.

It's a farm up in the Hald. We live there with our mother and sister and Qno and Meer and Klimpt.

That's a lot of people, said Ynglà.

You could have our room, said Septimus. We'd sleep downstairs.

Or in the barn, if you'd prefer, said Sextus. I mean Septimus and me, in the barn.

Qno knows everything about the stars, said Septimus. And our sister Mereg knows even more.

Sounds nice, said Ynglà. When shall we go?

When the rain stops, said Sextus.



It didn't, and Sextus and Septimus got very wet on the way home. The astronomers sat in the cart under a tarpaulin. The brothers said nothing, and were careful not to look at each other. From under the tarpaulin they could hear the astronomers muttering together. There were occasional bursts of suppressed laughter.



So at last you get to meet your astronomers, said Qno to Mereg.

I imagined middle-aged farmers, said Mereg.

That time will probably come, said Ynglà.

You have to be young to be an astronomer, said Qno. You have to be able to see.

Qno is always complaining about his sight, said Mereg. But he can name a cow a league off.

I can't see the stars like I used to, said Qno. Mereg tells me what's happening. What's the little one below Three Beyond called?

Elri murmured something.

What?

I'm sorry, said Elri.

Elri is shy of company, said Ynglà. We don't see a lot of people in Two Pen.

Never did here, either, said Amfer. Never spoke for days on end. Then along came Qno and Mereg and the boys, and never a moment's peace. You get used to it.

We have the children of course, said Ynglà.

You have children? Young lassies like you? said Qno.

Two boys, two girls between us, said Ynglà.

And their dads?

Gone, said Ynglà.

Aha, said Qno.

Horses, said Ynglà.

Yes, horses, said Elri.

Aha, said Qno.

Another bannock? said Amfer.

Elri said, You— and was silent again.

Yes? said Qno.

You mention the little one below Three Beyond.

That's right.

We call them Four Beyond, said Elri.

The Anamen call them that?. asked qno.

No. We do. They're a subsystem, said Elri. They're tied together.

That's what Mereg said. But she told me the little one went behind  
Tenes last summer.

Both the Astronomers turned their wide eyes on Mereg.

When?

Fourth Senday after Mold, said Mereg.

Elri and Ynglà looked at each other.

We said it would, said Elri, but there was cloud, we got no sighting.  
Are you sure? Antus saw nothing in Pyzan.

There were clear skies in the Hald. Just after midnight. Snuffed out,  
and came again after a few minutes. Shouldn't have.

Why shouldn't it have? asked Septimus.

Not last year, not this, perhaps once next year, then twice for three  
years, said Mereg

Elri and Ynglà stared at her, their eyes shining. How did you know  
that? asked Elri.

The Span is my playground. You can see it so well here in Upper Crop.  
Qno taught me.

And you saw it go behind Tenes? As we had predicted?

If I had known you were interested, I would have let you know. It looked to me as if Tenes was not where it should be, said Mereg.

Tenes is wandering, said Elri. But we calculated two minutes before midnight.

You're further east from here, said Mereg.

The sisters looked at each other again.

You must see the data we received from Antus, said Elri.

I want to go to Pyzan and see Antus, said Mereg.

So do we, said the astronomers.

Where do we put them, Amfer? said Qno.

Meer's room, said Amfer. There's a big bed.

Where are Meer and Klimpt? asked Septimus.

They're with Sam, said Qno. Plotting something. They'll stay in the Abbey tonight.

Thank you, said the two astronomers.

But Elri slept alone in Meer's big bed, and Sextus slept alone in the brothers' room. Ynglà and Septimus slept in the barn.



The rain cleared up during the night, and the next day dawned dry and bright with a nip in the air. Mereg and Qno came in from the Overfield where they had been milking to find Sextus and Elri sipping coffee at the kitchen table. Amfer toasted bannocks.

Where's Septimus? asked Mereg. Where's Ynglà?

No idea, said Elri stiffly.

Sleeping, said Amfer.

Sextus regarded his coffee.

Amfer placed a tray of toasted bannocks and a pot of honey on the table by the coffee-pot.

Nearly three churns, said Qno. You taking the cart, Sextus?

I suppose so, said Sextus.

You take the milk to Tarrant? asked Elri. Sextus nodded.

I'll come with you, she said.

It's colder, said Amfer. Coffee and bannocks first.

Mereg and Sextus went out to find the Abbey horse and hitch it to the wagon. Qno reached over the table and took Elri's hand.

Seven years ago, he said, Merreg and I and a group of people took the post wagon to Kirfa. We stopped at the Two Pen turning and Post pointed down the road and said: That's where the astronomers live. Seven years ago. You must have been young girls then. But you were famous as astronomers, even then.

Seven years ago we were eighteen, said Elri. Time passes so quickly. And along came the children.

Will you stay in the Abbey for the winter? We heard your mother and Mara were looking after your farm.

We have an observatory to build in the Abbey, said Elri.

Exciting times, said Qno. But first you must get to know Sextus.

Why should I get to know Sextus?

He has something to show you, said Qno.

Something to show me?

You and your sister. Ask him about the Book of the Span.

Elri looked up at Qno for the first time, questioning.

It's in the Abbey library, said Qno. Sextus will show you.

And he squeezed Elri's hand. To his delight, she had a shadow of a smile.



Sextus and Elri sat silent together at the front of the cart. Sextus turned up the track to Middle Crop. We'll take Tesil's milk, he said.

Ella came out of the cowshed with a churn, and Tesil and the two boys appeared on the steps of the farmhouse. We're coming with you, Uncle Sextus, they shouted excitedly. We're going to school!

And in fact the whole family climbed up into the cart with the churns.

I'll ride with you down to Jent, said Tesil. Ella and the boys are going to the Abbey. Is this the astronomer?

Word gets round, said Elri.

We thought there were two of you, said Ella.

My sister stayed behind, said Elri.

Busy, busy, said Tesil. As Amfer says.

Jank brought out two more churns for the cart, and Hadr climbed up to Ella and the boys. I'm coming down to the Abbey, he said. Klimpt is going to give me flying lessons.

Good thing we're going downhill, said Sextus. You'll have to get out and walk when we get down on the level. Six churns and four people. This is only an Abbey horse.

Six people, said Hadr. You have an extra passenger.

Hadr, he said, holding out his hand to Elri. —Friend of Mereg's.

Elri, said Elri, from Two Pen.

Only one of you?

So it seems.

Busy, busy, said Hadr.



And so in one corner of the empty, dusty library the two heads of Elri and Sextus pored together over a small and ancient manuscript written in a crabbed and faded hand on calf-skin. At least one gathering had been lost at the beginning of the book, but the end was intact, although hardly legible. There were a number of holes chewed by diligent book-nymphs. The skin was so dark that the ancient writing was difficult to make out.

Sextus read aloud. The language was the old language of the Hald, and Sextus had to interpret for Elri. She listened with bated breath.

*At leaf-fall in the second year of the Northern Tyran the farmers of High Magre first saw the Holy Star, faint behind Three Beyond.*

What Holy Star? said Elri.

Wait, said Sextus.

Who was the Northern Tyran? said Elri. When was that?

I'm not sure, said Sextus. Perhaps Qno knows. Brother Kto says this manuscript is eight hundred years old.

There is no faint star now behind Three Beyond, said Elri. We call it Four-Beyond. The Fourth is the little one.

Wait, said Sextus.

*After Yule they sent word to the Abbey, but the sky was, um, unfavourable, and we saw nothing.* He means I, when he says We.

Why do you say He? asked Elri.

We don't know his name.

Or her name.

Sextus turned and looked at Elri. Her face was close to his.

That's right, he said.

Go on.

*Until next autumn after leaf-fall when the star was clear and Reagh shone upon it.*

Reagh? said Elri.

That's what they called Tungel, I think. Or some other moon.

Go on.

*All winter it grew, and returned Reagh's light, and became yellow like the Holy Metal, and we called it Tenes.* You see? It's a description of the arrival of Tenes in the Span!

That doesn't make sense, said Elri. They can't have known about the Holy Metal before the arrival of Tenes. And the Holy Metal is white. Hardly anybody on Huld has ever seen it, even today. Was it known before, here in the Abbey?

It's written, said Sextus.

And why does he call it Tenes? Does he ever mention teneti?

Shall I go on? said Sextus.

Yes, said Elri, leaning against him.

*And Reagh sent Tenes to the East, and to the West, and to the South, and to the North, and the yellow light of Tenes was brighter than Tungel.*

This is unbelievable, said Elri. Antus must see this. Does it go on?

Yes, said Sextus.

Go on, then.

Yes.

The ancient leaf of calf-skin was strong enough not to be parted from the book, but it was badly crumpled as Sextus's elbow slid across it. He did not notice.

They stood up together, and the bench they had sat on fell backwards with an un-library clatter onto the stone floor. They held each other very close.

## 4

The small dappled monkey scampered among the trudging feet of the refugees, collecting what it could find: a dropped shawl, a delf nut, a broken buckle. It had no fear of the heavy tread of the horses, the clacking wagon-wheels. And everything it found it took to its mistress, the silver-haired, grey-smocked Aistho, who walked by herself and spoke to no one.

Come, Silver, she said. What have you? A delf nut? Clever boy!

The refugees, a group of some two hundred, stopped every day at sunset by the banks of the Holy River Ozu and put out their few fishing nets for the night. Aistho lit her spirit stove and heated coffee, and people came with mugs and accepted in silence. No one talked to Aistho, who had always been strange, not keeping domestics, cooking and dressing herself, working in her herb garden on the slopes of Kind Hill in Kirfa. Now they needed her. She heated coffee. She had the silver monkey. She embodied the City.

There were no children with the refugees, and no one younger than twenty. Two of the women were heavy with child.

And then one evening two tall black figures stood by Aistho's side and drank her coffee. The blessed Ambassadors have returned to us, said the people of Kirfa.

We are no longer ambassadors, they said. We are merely visitors from Eile.

Welcome, Lo and Halo, they said.

We are no longer Lo and Halo, said the visitors from Eile. Those are the names of the new Ambassadors, who have gone to the Abbey of the Rock to talk with the Abbess Cirsc and the Chair of Kirfa.



The Chair of Kirfa lives? asked the people.

She is injured, but mending. She is in good hands.

And you are no longer Lo and Halo? they asked.

No longer.

You are Lo and Halo to us, said the people.

We will accept those names, said the Eileans, smiling to each other.

Where are your flying boats?

Gone, said Lo. We walked.

You come in good time to help us, said the people. We do not know where we are going, Ambassadors, or how we shall live.

You shall travel four days further upriver, they said. You will come to mighty waterfalls where the Holy River comes down from higher ground—you shall not go beyond them. There is good land on the banks by the Falls, and delf-trees, and pine woods. There you will have delf enough and roots for the winter, and there will be fish in the river. You must build shelters for yourselves. You must build a new city.

We cannot build, said the people of Kirfa.

There is help on the way, close behind you, said the Ambassadors. Be patient.

Stay with us, Lo and Halo, said the people.

We cannot, we have work to do. We must visit the Chair and discuss your situation with her. We will return as soon as we can, that is our promise.



Seven hundred leagues to the west, the two new ambassadors took shape together in the Meadow Behind the Rock, not far from the busy building site where the new school was beginning to look like a building. There was something outrageous about the place and timing of such an

arrival: the old ambassadors had always taken pains to conceal their mode of travel, knowing how perturbing it would be to the people of Huld. However as it happened no one was looking their way when they arrived, and no one had to deal with the manner of their shape-taking, and so whether the incident was premeditated, or a result of their ineptitude, it had no repercussions.

Together they walked towards the building site where Ella and the monks were wielding their axes and hammers. Cirsc, who had been inspecting the work, saw them first. She stood and stared: there was something strange about them.

Welcome to the Abbey of the Rock, she said to them as they approached; but she stopped herself from going to them. Meer straightened his back and looked up gladly: Welcome at last, Lo and Halo, he said. What is the news from Carhault?

The two ambassadors stood and surveyed them. And Meer, too, sensed that something was wrong.

You are the woman Cirsc, said the man who seemed to be Lo. His voice was Lo's voice.

Cirsc turned the question over in her mind, and understood that it was not a question.

And you are the man Meer, said the ambassador with Lo's voice.

Meer felt the hair pricking on the back of his neck.

You are not Lo and Halo, he said.

Lo and Halo, yes, we are Lo and Halo, said the woman.

We know Lo and Halo well, said Meer. We know that you are not they. Who are you?

We are the ambassadors Lo and Halo, said the man. But I sense that this is not to your liking.

Why do you assume their names? asked Meer. Where are they?

We were instructed to use the names you would recognise as ambassadorial names, said the man. Was that not correct?

Instructions from whom? said Meer.

The Office of Diplomacy, said the man.

You were not briefed by the previous ambassadors? asked Meer.

They had left the Service, said Ambassador Lo.

Your Office of Diplomacy does not seem to understand our use of names here on Huld, said Meer. What has happened to Lo and Halo?

We are ambassadors from Eile said the man stiffly. These are our name customs.

Forgive us, Lo and Halo, said Cirsc. We are simple people, with little knowledge of other worlds. Please feel sure that you are welcome among us. Our work here is done for the day. We would be honoured if you would walk with us to the Abbey and take dinner with us, so that I can introduce you to my people.

The honour is ours, said Ambassador Lo.

I trust you secured your pods well, said Meer. There can be sudden winds under the Hill of the Masters.

We do not use pods, said Lo. We do not use outdated technology.



Meer excused himself early from the stiff and formal dinner, and went down to the infirmary to warn Samuesil about the new Eileans. Merreg was with her, sitting on a chair by the open window, her chin on the window-ledge, looking out.

Not Lo and Halo? said Samuesil. What happened?

That's what we will have to find out, said Meer. I have the feeling they don't know much about Huld.

This is disastrous, said Samuesil. We will have to start from scratch.

We'll see, said Meer. I expect Cirsc or Sne will bring them down when dinner is over.

Here they come now, said Mereg, turning from the window.



The Ambassadors could not hide their astonishment. You are the Chair of Kirfa? asked the new Lo, wrinkling his nose. This time it was clearly a question.

Yes, said the Chair of Kirfa. I apologise for receiving you in bed, I had an accident and broke both legs. I was waiting for the previous ambassadors, they were superb doctors. They would have had me on my feet in no time.

We are ambassadors, not doctors, said Lo.

And you have come for an audience with the Chair of Kirfa?

We stopped in Kirfa. There were very few people and there was no food. We therefore came to the Abbey of the Rock.

That was wise, said the Chair. I think it is not correct to offer Eileans a seat?

No, said Lo. There was a stiff silence.

And since Kirfa is empty, where will you establish your Embassy? asked the Chair of Kirfa politely.

We are ambassadors to Huld, not to Kirfa alone, as were our predecessors, said Halo. Our immediate interest is open channels of communication with responsible bodies on Huld with a view to insuring a sustainable flow of rift ore from the moon Tenes to the smelters on the Carhaultan Bases.

Sustainable? said the Chair.

We understand there are climactic consequences here on Huld, said Lo. These must be kept to a minimum.

And your definition of minimum?

Acceptable to all parties.

Honourable Ambassadors, said the Chair. You say you have visited Kirfa. The city, as you will have noticed, is built on the banks of the Holy River Ozu. The river has for many cycles now marked the boundary between the habitable lands on its west bank, and the arid desert on its east bank. This boundary has begun to shift in recent times. We foresee that if the trend continues, Kirfa will find itself in the desert. We can tolerate no unfavourable climactic change at all. It is not enough for us that climactic change be kept to a minimum. It must be kept at zero, and preferably wound back to an earlier status. That is the position of the Council of Kirfa, and it is not negotiable.

The Ambassadors seemed to hesitate. Then Halo said:

We found no Council in Kirfa. The city was almost deserted, and parts of it were in ruins. Terrible things have happened there, apparently in your absence. And now you are confined to a bed in the Abbey of the Rock. We are unsure as to whether you can be seen as an accountable party in these deliberations.

While you are here, talking to me, said Samuesil evenly, I am clearly an accountable party.

We are here to validate exactly that question, said Lo.

Mereg spoke suddenly from the window: We too have yet to validate your accountability. Clearly you are not Lo and Halo.

Halo said, We can assure you—

Your names are a source of confusion, said Samuesil. My companion is asking who you are, not what you call yourselves.

Confused, Lo said something unintelligible in his own language.

Where are the old ambassadors? asked Merreg.

They are not parties to this matter.

Where are they? said Samuesil, in a voice that Mereg remembered from her time in Kirfa.

We are aware of them, said Ambassador Halo, after a short pause. They are approaching.

Then I would prefer to adjourn this meeting until they arrive, said the Chair.

Ambassador Halo seemed to be choosing her words carefully.

We would prefer to regard this meeting as concluded, she said. We have an appointment with the Senate in Pyzan which cannot wait. We thank you for your hospitality; we shall be leaving this evening.

The ambassadors rose, bowed and withdrew.



The dappled monkey was cold; its natural habitat had humid heat and warm rain under a great green canopy of jungle. By the banks of the Holy River below the great Falls there was wind and cold rain. Aistho stood and watched the good citizens of Kirfa learning slowly and painfully how not to build. The monkey sat and watched from Aistho's shoulder, and Aistho's shoulder was wet and cold.

We should have dug deeper holes for the supports, said the people of Kirfa. This shelter will collapse in the first winter storm. And it is not big enough for all of us.

We need tarpaulins, they said to Aistho. And we need bigger and better nets for the fish. And spades to dig roots. And seeds and beans. We should have gone south into the warm lands.

Into the dry lands, said Aistho, where we would yearn for running water.

The water will run no longer when winter freezes it, said the people.

No matter, said a woman. For here come the Huns to slaughter us all.

They turned and followed her gaze down the grey bank of the river. A troop of horsemen were following the tracks the citizens of Kirfa had made through the wet grasses the day before: eleven half-naked men on horses with blankets draped over their shoulders against the cold wind. Some had children sitting before them, others women. Many had feathers in their headbands, but the blue paint on their bodies had mostly run off in the rain. Behind them they came some dozen figures on foot, clad in the rough hessian smocks and skirts of the Kirfan Migrants. And the citizens of Kirfa saw that the women and children who sat with the riders on their horses were Migrants too.

The troop came up to where the citizens were attempting to weave tree-branches and bundles of broom together to make shelters from the rain.

What are you doing? said the young Hun who rode foremost. He carried a great spear adorned with feathers. Two small Migrant children sat in front of him, clinging to the horse's mane.

We are building, said the citizens.

The Ambassadors told us you were here, said the young man. It is a good sheltered place for the winter, and forage for the horses among the trees. You need to learn to build, it seems.

Will you join us?

We will join you. This will be the New Gosste.

Kirfa, said the voice of a Migrant woman. She sat in front of a Hun who had wrapped his blanket over them both, so that only her face appeared.

First we will build a fire, said the young man with the children. Then we will build winter quarters. Then we will choose a name.

## 5

This time, as the familiar figures of the Eileans appeared at the Backward Gate in the Meadow Behind the Rock, the Abbess Cirsc ran to them, spluttering and laughing, and hugged them both, and Ella and the workers on the foundations of the school laid down their tools and hearkened to her happiness.

Lo and Halo are back! she called delightedly.

We left our names in Eile, they said. The new ambassadors received our names. But the people of Kirfa continued to call us Lo and Halo.

What people of Kirfa? asked Meer, coming up to take their outstretched hands. You found people in Kirfa?

The people of New Kirfa, said Halo. They are building their new town seven leagues upriver by the Holy Falls.

Where are your pods? said Meer.

They are not functioning, said Lo. We have lost access.

Then how did you get here? said Meer.

We came on foot, said Lo. Fast, probably, by your standards.

Come, my friends, said Meer. Come and tell Sam your good news.



Lo ran his hands gently over Samuesil's broken legs.

You have done a good job, Abbess Cirsc, he said. You and the monks. The left leg will heal completely. The setting of the right leg is not perfect; she will have a small limp. But she has the healing process well in hand. You have been helping her, Abbess.

I am your pupil, said Cirsc.

How long do I have to lie here, Lo? said Samuesil.



What do you say, Cirsc? said Lo.

You are almost ready. Now the Ambassadors are here all is safe. Tomorrow perhaps you may try. It will be painful.

Samuesil heaved herself up and sat in her bed, wincing a little. —Now I must hear your story, my friends, she said. And receive your guidance.

Our Council supports us no longer, said Halo. We no longer have access to the common dynaesthene. We returned because we were homesick for Kirfa. And Kirfa is no more. We fear that we have little for you in the way of guidance.

You will make your home with us in the Abbey, said Cirsc.

I must return to Kirfa, said Samuesil. And I must find my people in this New Kirfa you speak of.

And how do you think you can do that? said Cirsc.

Klimpt will fly with me, said the Chair of Kirfa. But I must also go to Pyzan, and speak with the Senate. What should I do first?

First you must sleep, said Halo.



It was not until the next morning in the Refectory, while Samuesil slept on, that Meer, Cirsc and the former Ambassadors found time to discuss what had happened.

There have been changes in the Council in Eile, said Lo. While you were there with us Meer, during the time of the crisis on the Second Planet, every mind in the Council was focused on the necessities. Those were momentous times. Now there are new faces, and new times.

But why did they appoint new ambassadors?

We had made mistakes in our handling of the matter in Carhault, said Halo. We thought not to mention the Canopy, but they had already understood that that was the cause of the problem, and had decided this

was an internal matter on Huld. Perhaps they were right. It was also our mistake not to have discussed the matter first with our Council: it gave the Council reason to dismiss us. They were right to find fault, but we were surprised how ready they were to replace us. Something has happened: there are new currents flowing in the Council.

The new ambassadors have left for Pyzan, said Meer. I have the impression that their visit to Samuesil was an empty gesture. Their real mission was always to Pyzan. But there are many things I do not understand. These ambassadors have been poorly briefed as to the ways and customs on Huld; they had an arrogant attitude that surprised me, coming from Eile.

While you lived with us in Eile you saw Eile through our eyes, said Halo. That was unavoidable: you were undergoing a long and difficult recovery, and we had to follow you closely. But there was much that escaped your notice.

I am Huld born, said Meer. I was a legionary, not a diplomat.

Meer, you have grown since we parted in Luce. You are even less of a legionary than you were then. What has happened to you?

Calimpeto has happened to him, said Cirsc.

Aha, said the Eileans. We too were impressed by Calimpeto. Where is she?

At home with Qno and Amfer, said Meer. They have something between them, Klimpt and Qno. They talk for hours. Klimpt is becoming much more fluent. Perhaps I should be jealous.

Doubtless, said Lo. Qno is a lady's man. I think we should go up into the Hald and join the conversation. And we have never seen Upper Crop, and never met your mother.

I shall stay with Samuesil, said Cirsc.



Meer and the Eileans heard the laughter as they approached the gate. Turning down into the orchard, they found a party in progress: Qno, Klimpt, Amfer, Sextus, Septimus, Hadr, Tesil, Oswicus and Ulpec, a huge pile of bannocks and honey and a steaming pot of rush-water.

Does nobody do any work on this farm? asked Meer.

Nobody, said Qno. The farm farms itself. Where's Mereg?

Sleeping, said Meer.

Of course, said Qno. Lo and Halo! How good to see you again! Come and say Hallo to Amfer.

We are honoured to meet you, Amfer, said Lo.

The good people who cured my son will always be welcome in Upper Crop, said Amfer. We owe deep gratitude to Eile.

We are honoured, Amfer, they said. But we no longer speak for Eile. We are simple visitors.

No longer ambassadors? said Qno. Have you come to live with us in the Hald? Shall we find you a farm? Have you forgotten your names?

You are among the few we know, Qno, who understand our names, they said.

I am the wisest of the bunch, said Qno. The old Abbot said so. Only Cirsc is wiser than I am, and she got it from me.

Lo took Klimpt's hand and led her away down into the trees. They sat together on a fallen log—a difficult task for an Eilean—and talked for a long time together, and nobody heard what they said.

We're finishing the bannocks! called Hadr.

You know we don't eat bannocks, called Lo back.

Klimpt does, called Hadr.

We are busy, sweet boy, said Klimpt. Will you bring me one bannock?

Sweet boy? said Hadr. Where did she learn that?

Be happy she recognises you, said Qno. Woe to anyone who underestimates Calimpeto.



Samuesil and Mereg woke together, and looked long at each other. Your face in mine eye, mine in thine, said Samuesil.

Twisted eye-beams, said Mereg.

Mereg, I must go to Pyzan, said Samuesil suddenly. I must address the Senate.

Then I shall come with you, said Mereg.

Samuesil said nothing. Until suddenly she said: Help me. And she sat up and swivelled her legs off the bed and set them lightly on the floor, and cried out in pain. The floor stings all the way up my spine, she said. I shall never walk. Will you fetch Cirsc for me?

Cirsc and Mereg stood on either side of her and took her hands. But she wailed as she put weight in her feet.

Which leg was worse? asked Cirsc.

They were both worse, said Samuesil.

That's good, said Cirsc. Then it's just stiffness.

Help me back. I never want to get up. Mereg, we shall live here in this bed.

Then we won't get to Pyzan, said Mereg.

Samuesil looked at her sharply. I didn't say that, she said.

Mereg sat beside her, silent.

I'll send breakfast, said Cirsc, leaving them together.

Meer will come with me, said Samuesil. We will be very quick. The ambassadors will take us.

Mereg said nothing, but her eyes were wide and round.



You forget I am a deserter, said Meer. If I show my face in Pyzan, I shall be hanged.

How will they know you? said Samuesil.

They will see my ring, said Meer.

Stupid soldier, said Samuesil. Throw it away.

I threw it away long ago, in Eile, said Meer. But they will see it, when they see me. I shall betray myself.

I thought they had cured you in Eile, said Samuesil.

He cured himself, said Lo. His anger and his shame. But he cannot change the past, and neither can we.

If I am to address the Senate in Pyzan, said Samuesil, I must have a delegation with me. Meer, Lo, Halo, Wing and Eye.

We cannot go with you to Pyzan, said Lo. We are not ambassadors of Eile, and we cannot usurp the role of the true ambassadors.

I cannot go alone, said Samuesil.

You have Wing and Eye, said Meer. They were enough when you spoke to the old Tyran outside Magre.

I could walk then, snapped Samuesil. And I was the Chair. And I was a young girl. I had power.

Winter will soon be upon us, said Halo. The last passages to Pyzan are leaving Tarc Haven as we speak. You will in any case have to await the first ships next spring.

You can take me by Thought, as you took Meer to Eile, said Samuesil. Her voice was breaking.

We are no longer ambassadors, said Halo. We no longer have access to the common dynaesthene.

I cannot sail in a filthy Pyzan ship, said Samuesil. I am not a legionary.  
I am a legionary, said Meer.



Mereg stayed at home in Upper Crop for three days. Klimpt came to help her in the cowshed.

You not see Tesamuesil? said Klimpt.

No, said Mereg. And her name is Samuesil.

You cross?

She wants to go to Pyzan without me, said Mereg. But it was always me who wanted to go to Pyzan. I want to see Antus.

She finished Dwork 4's last drops of milk, stood up with her milk pail and scratched the cow around her ears. She brought the pail over to where Klimpt was standing by the churns.

I shall go to Pyzan without *her*, she said suddenly. That will show her who I am.

She not know who you are?

I thought she did, said Mereg. I need Hadr to talk to.

Hadr in kitchen, drink coffee with Amafero, said Klimpt. You go. I finish.

Hadr led Mereg up through Overfield, over the stone wall and up the hillside to their Secret Place. They sat together in the coarse autumn grass and held each other close.

Have you brought Sam here? he asked.

She can't walk, idiot, said Mereg.

I could carry her for you.

Halfwit, said Mereg.

That's my Mereg, said Hadr.

Are you in love with anyone? asked Mereg.

Meer is stunning, said Hadr.

No, I mean, really in love?

He looked at her long and searchingly. No, he said. Unless with you.

You are an angel, said Mereg, snuggling against him. I love you too.

After a while she said, Sam said she envied you. You could look at me and not feel weak in the knees. She says she can't do that.

You're the loveliest person I know, said Hadr, and I could live with you for ever. But I don't get weak in the knees when I look at you. I get happy inside. I get weak in the knees when I look at Meer. But Meer only gets weak in the knees for Klimpt. Do you get weak in the knees for Sam?

Yes, said Mereg. The green grass.

Even though she treats you like that?

Even if she never wants to see me again, said Mereg.

You love her because she's a fantastic woman, said Hadr. You know she doesn't treat anyone as an equal.

I am an equal, said Mereg. I am a fantastic woman.

We can all see that. But Sam is not asking for a fantastic woman. She wants you because she gets the green grass when she sees you. That's what she feels for you. Ask Reagh, said Hadr.

Mereg was silent. Reagh, the Goddess of Love and Peace. And it came to her that she had been in love with Reagh long before she met Samuesil. Reagh would have taken her to Pyzan.

We must do it again some time, Hadr, she said. We could have children.

Give me good warning, said Hadr.



Meer met Samuesil in the courtyard outside the Refectory. She was walking with crutches, her face twisted with pain.

Damn you, Meer, she said when they met.

Nice to see you too, said Meer. Are you going to eat?

Of course.

Then I'll eat with you, said Meer.

I'm not in the mood for company, said Samuesil.

You can't carry a bowl of soup. Not with crutches. I'll have to serve you.

Damn you, said Samuesil. They went in together.

Soup tastes better when you sit at a table, said Samuesil. I hate drinking soup in bed. I hate bed. I'm never going to bed again.

Have you been discharged from the Infirmary?

I've discharged myself, said Samuesil.

You'll come up to Upper Crop and convalesce, said Meer. Qno is waiting for you. And Klimpt wants you to fly again.

Meer, we have to go to Pyzan. You must come with me.

No, said Meer.

You are deserting me, you and the ambassadors, said Samuesil.

You have Wing, Eye and Mereg, said Meer.

Mereg has not been to see me for three days, said Samuesil.

Mereg told Klimpt you had a disagreement, said Meer.

Meer, said Samuesil, Kirfa is in ruins. The Huns and the Migrants are slaughtering each other. Tenes is spiralling out of control. There is a small group of people in Pyzan who are amassing power and riches by destroying Tenes and endangering the climate of our planet. This must stop. If Mereg and I have a disagreement together, that belongs to



another story which should be told somewhere else. There are more important things going on than peoples' love affairs.

My, said Meer. You *are* getting better. I think you should discuss this with Mereg.



I shall address the Senate, said Samuesil. You will come with me as my consort.

Your what? said Mereg.

My wife, said Samuesil. I am the Chair of Kirfa and you are my wife. The Senate will respect that.

Your wife? said Mereg aghast.

Mereg, you know what I mean.

I'm not your arsehole wife, said Mereg.

Please Mereg. We have to do this.

Sam, said Mereg. We are the green grass. I am not your side-kick.

Just this once. For Kirfa? For me?

Mereg took a deep breath. If I love you, she said, and you love me, and if you are the Chair Kirfa, then I am the Chair of Kirfa. It's as simple as that.

I am the Chair of Kirfa, said Samuesil.

Mereg looked long at her, and Samuesil looked away. Mereg saw what it was that fed her love for this peerless woman. It was her power, and her being.

We are not going to Pyzan together, she said. The ambassadors can't take you to Pyzan. And I am not your wife.

There was a desolate silence.

I am Qno's wife, said Mereg. For ever.

They looked in different directions for a long time, sitting on the bed together in silence.

I know that, said Samuesil after a long while, her voice bleak and small. But Mereg was not listening.

I am going to Pyzan with Hadr, said Mereg. We are taking the last ship in five day's time. You're staying here. Convalescing. Physical therapy. Mending your legs.



Amfer hugged her to her breast.

This was how I said goodbye to my sons, she said. Now I am saying goodbye to my daughter.

It'll only be for six months, said Mereg.

Qno, then, held her close, and kissed her forehead.

Write, he said.

## 6

My dearest husband,

Your warning was correct. Although we received food and shelter in a good hostelry in Tarc, the host quite clearly would have preferred us to give him some money. But in Tarc Haven, which is a few hours' walk further down the river, it was either money or nothing. We slept the night under some strange sea-trees which grow everywhere in Tarc Haven, with the smell of salt in the air, windy but not cold. The next morning we found the ship that was bound for Pyzan, but the captain demanded payment in coin, even although there were few passengers on board and plenty of room. When we told him we had no money he suggested we sell ourselves on board, but we didn't like the idea and Hadr said he wasn't for sale, and the captain laughed in a silly way. Finally we had to sign a thing called a Letter of Salt which he said we would have to redeem by finding work in Pyzan. We are not sure what that means but we'll probably find out when we arrive.

We sail tomorrow. We are sending this letter with a man who is going up to Tarc tomorrow and promised to give Post the letter. We are rather hungry, but there's a smell of food from below decks. In haste, the man will be leaving soon.

Love to you and to everyone from me and Hadr.

Your wife Mereg Mereg.



Dearest Qno,

I won't tell you much about the sea voyage. It celeb

was long, and we were cold and sea-sick, and when we got over our sickness we were cold and hungry. The galley allowed us only a small meal each day, since we were not paying passengers. There were actually no other passengers that we saw.

Everything is fine now, we are in the Pantalley Quarter of Pyzan and we have lodgings with good people who keep us warm and fed, I'll tell you about them later. We had a bad time first when we left the ship in the Lower Basin, after tacking up the Neck towards Pyzan. We slept among the columns in the Temple of Taarh for the first nights, and begged in the Form. It was wet and cold and we thought we were finished, we felt so stupid for having left the Hald and we cried together when we thought of you and Amfer. But then Taarh himself, Reagh's brother, the God of rain and fresh running water, he came out of his temple and took us home to the Colour People and they gave us hot soup and put us into a warm bed, and here I am writing a letter to you my dearest Qno. The Colour People know Taarh well, and he stays in their house a lot, but I don't think they recognise he is a God, they don't go to temples or anything. But he really is Reagh's brother, I can see the resemblance from the big picture of Reagh in the Abbey Chapel. It's a bit puzzling because he's not really very godlike, I expect Cirsc would explain. He talks politics with the Colour People just as if he were one of them. They're always planning demonstrations and holding rallies and giving speeches about the way the Senate should be running the city. I think they will take over Pyzan some day, they get massive audiences. I hope so. They are good to us because they say we Hald people practice a Share Economy, I think they call it, they say they want to learn from us and they ask us questions all the time and we tell them the simplest things about the Hald and Kirfa and they think it's all marvellous, it's beyond me. We are sort of celebrities. Anyway Hadr is very happy about it.

Pyzan is absolutely huge. It's a hundred times bigger than Kirfa ever was. Taarh has showed us round. The halls and circuses and temples and public and private buildings are greater and more splendid than I can ever tell you in a letter. I can't think how they persuaded people to build them like that. And if you think that there was ever a crowd in Tarrant Market or in the Elefant in Kirfa, you don't know what crowd means. When Hadr and I go out in the city we hold hands tight so as not to lose each other.

It's not exactly dangerous. There are dead people everywhere, they die of hunger and cold and never notice because they smoke opi, and the street-workers take them away in carts. The Colour People say that when the Share Economy is established in Pyzan there will be no more homeless. I hope they are right. And they say that on the outskirts of the town there are huge encampments of country people who work in the city whenever they can get work for pitiful wages, we haven't seen these encampments yet, Taarh says he will take us when we've got used to the city. There are no homeless in Tarrant as far as I know but Kirfa didn't turn out so well.

But I was going to tell you about Antus. Taarh and the Colour People had no idea who Antus was, and I tried asking people in the streets but they didn't understand the way I talk or if they did they had no idea either. It was strange the way I found him.

One day I saw the ambassadors, the new ambassadors. They were talking to a group of important-looking citizens on the steps of the big Temple in the Form, and there was a short stubby little man with them and suddenly I got the idea that was Antus. Then they all said goodbye to each other and I followed the little man up through the Middle Town and followed him home. So I asked a woman who it was that lived in the

house and she said Antus the Astronomer, but it was getting late so I decided to come back later.

Tuls is going to the Post Office, he said he'd take my letter. When you get it there will be a little colourful label attached to it. This is because in Pyzan you have to pay money to send a letter, and the little label shows you have paid. They make it all very complicated here. I'll write to you again when I've seen Antus.

I miss you dear Qno. And I miss Amfer, and Hadr sends his love to Jank and Jent.

I miss you very much.

Your loving wife, Mereg Mereg.

P.S. Tuls is going to finish his coffee first, so I have time to tell you what I didn't say in the first letter, because I wasn't sure. It's this: on the way down from Tarc to Tarc Haven, Hadr and I found a nice place in the woods and we made a baby together. Hadr found it rather difficult and we hoped it had worked because he didn't want to have to do it again, although I found it quite nice and I was really happy afterwards, but Hadr said our friendship was the most important thing in his life and he wasn't going to risk it again. And now it seems it did work and Hadr and I are very excited, he's looking forward to being a father and I expect you are too.

Your loving wife Mereg Mereg.



The large door was newly painted in dark shining chestnut, the only painted part of the rather dilapidated house. There was a bell-pull which pulled down a long way, and Mereg could hear a bell ringing far inside

the house. A dog started barking, and a huge yellow hound sprang forth in Mereg's mind. There was a long pause, and the dog stopped barking.

A small peephole door opened and a pointed face peered out.

Yes? it said.

Is Antus at home? said Mereg.

We're very busy, said the face.

It's Mereg Mereg from the Hald, said Mereg. I come from the sisters in Two Pen.

The peep door slammed shut and the big door opened ponderously.

Come in, Mereg Mereg, said the pointed face, now perched on the shoulders of a lanky young man with a huge shock of unruly hair which had not been visible from the peep-hole. Antus will be delighted, he said, and so will Trenchant.



The dog Trenchant, knee-high with a long black coat, was indeed delighted, and had to be admonished.

Mereg? Elri mentioned you, said Antus, taking her hand in both of his. He was Mereg's height, with a square head and almost no neck, thick-set but not overweight, his hair and beard grey and patchy.

The young man took her hand and bowed slightly. Congratulations on your pregnancy, he said.

Mereg stroked her tummy. Does it show already? she said

No, said the young man. It shows in your hair.

Teleus, coffee or something. You're the watcher who saw Payle go behind Tenes last summer?

We don't call it Payle, said Mereg. How did you know?

You saved us, said Antus. Elri wrote about you. We needed that sighting. You clinched it. Tell me about these lady astronomers, I've never seen them.

They're lovely, said Mereg.

The right age for me?

They're my age, said Mereg.

You're joking, said Antus.

They are in the Abbey at the moment, said Mereg. Abbess Cirsc is building a real observatory.

That's what Elri told us in her letter. She wants lenses. We'll oblige of course. Your age, you say? You hear that Peleus?

Pteleu, said the young man. He's known me for eighteen months, he said to Mereg. These Pyzan people never get names right. They can't say pt and they put -us on every name.

Mereg, Elri and Yngla, said Antus triumphantly.

He remembers women's names, said Pteleu.

You'll stay for dinner, young lady, said Antus. We have to talk. Teleus will take you home after dinner. You must explain for us this business with Luce.

Mereg did her best; but what she knew of Luce was from Meer and Klimpt and Samuesil, and their stories didn't exactly overlap.

We think we understand about the transible, said Antus. At least Peleus does. But we don't really understand about the Canopy that Elri talks about in the letter.

Mereg tried to explain: Meer says the whole plain of Luce between the mountains is one huge transible with a sort of shield over it that they call the Canopy. Elri mentioned a massive gravity gradient which would explain the movement of Tenes.



Meer is the man who went to Eile with the Ambassadors?

That's right.

I don't trust the ambassadors, said Antus. Peteleus says they are frauds.

They're not Meer's ambassadors, said Mereg. They have replaced the old ambassadors, the ones who took Meer to Eile with them. They are wonderful people.

These new ambassadors give me the creeps, said Antus. Will you come with me to the Senate?

What do you mean? asked Mereg.

Teleus can't come, for obvious reasons, said Antus. The Ambassadors asked me to go with them to address the Senate, make it look as if they had scientific backing, I suppose. Will you come with me?

Why not Pteleu? said Mereg.

It's obvious, said Antus. Just look at him.

Mereg did, and saw nothing obvious.

Come with you as your—what? asked Mereg.

As my colleague, said Antus. You can tell them about Payle.

Mereg's thoughts were of Samuesil.

Yes, I'll come, she said.



You don't really have to accompany me home, said Mereg.

You've no idea, said Pteleu.

I'm staying with the Colour People, said Mereg.

I know, said Pteleu.

How did you know?

The word gets round, said Pteleu. Your friend is with you?

Hadr?

The father of your child?

You seem to know everything, said Mereg.

I look forward to meeting Hadr, said Pteleu.

Are you a Colour Person? asked Mereg.

Yes of course, said Pteleu. So are you.

Mereg was hardly surprised to find that all the inhabitants of her refuge greeted Pteleu like an old friend.

But you said you didn't know who Antus was, said Mereg.

We didn't know you meant *Antus*, they said.

There are hundreds of thousands of people who live in this city, said Mereg, and you all seem to know each other.

Depends what you mean by *all*, they said.

And then Mereg caught sight of Hadr. He was staring at Pteleu, utterly transported. Hadr, come and say Hallo to Pteleu, she said.

Hadr came forward like a sleep-walker.

Hallo, he said.

Hallo, said Pteleu.

And watching them, Mereg felt a wave of excitement, a happy feeling, but tinged with apprehension. It made her think of Meer, and for a moment she didn't see the connection. Then she remembered Meer's face as he saw her lying in Samuesil's bed. And the apprehension left her.



Dearest Mereg,

I'm sorry I didn't manage to send you a letter before I died. I felt there wasn't really anything interesting to say, and I was always waiting for something to happen so that I could tell you about it. Dwork 7 was born and Dwork 5 was gathered to her mothers, but since Dwork 7 was clearly

Dwork 3 reborn I didn't think that news enough to write, although on second thoughts perhaps I just wasn't feeling up to writing. The last few weeks I wasn't really feeling up to anything. It was too cold to sit out in the orchard so I stayed in the kitchen, Amfer packed me in blankets on the couch and I was really very comfortable, Cirsc came and held my hand and Amfer read and re-read your letters. But just before I died some interesting things happened which I feel you should know about.

You remember that I told you I had once met Reagh, when I was a young man and not at all sure I wanted to be a monk all my life. I was cutting wood down Behind the Rock when I saw her sitting on a tree-stump and watching me swing my axe. I carried on swinging a bit and pretended I hadn't seen her, one doesn't like to be too forward with the Gods. After a while she called my name, Cjõ, she said, and I stopped and turned towards her and immediately fell to my knees, that is to say my knees gave way and I couldn't think. She stood up and came to me and took my hand and led me into the wood towards the Ring. She told me many things and I had always meant to write them down for you, but then it happened again. About two days before I died there she was sitting at the kitchen table with Amfer drinking coffee, you remember the last batch of Harris Coffee that Jank got from Tarrant Market. They thought I was asleep and they were talking about me. She was as beautiful as I remembered her, there was a light about her in the kitchen and Amfer sat in her light too and looked as young and beautiful as she did.

They were talking woman-talk about me and you and particularly about Klimpt and Meer, I forgot to say that Klimpt and Meer have been away in Luce for some time now, she taught him to fly using Sam's wings and they went off to Luce to get a new pair of wings for Sam, the

old ones were not quite right for her and that is why she broke her legs. Anyway back to my story.

After a while Reagh came over and sat by my couch. I could see Amfer still sitting at the table and sipping her coffee, you know the way she does.

Reagh didn't exactly talk to me, but you know how it is. She told me you and Hadr would not come to any harm in Pyzan, she had her brother Taarh keeping an eye on you, that's why you're getting so much rain. And then she said Amfer wanted me to know how good it had been to have us in the house, me and you and the brothers. And I forgot to say the brothers and Lesuli's girls seem to be very close, the boys are staying in Tarrant over the winter and they all come up every now and then with the girls' three children, they are little devils, much worse than Tesil's boys which is saying something, but they're all getting on very well at the school. Where was I.

Yes, Reagh. You remember, Mereg, you once told me you were in love with Reagh when you were young. Well the fact is I have been in love with Reagh all my life. She sat by the couch and thanked me for it, she said it helped her to be. Of course she said she loved me too, that was very nice.

I wanted to go out into the Orchard and die under the trees, but Amfer said it was much more practical to die in bed because it was raining quite heavily, I said that I didn't mind but she persuaded me not to. I will be buried under the Hill of the Masters in the Abbey although I would have preferred to be buried up in the Overfield where we were married but Amfer didn't like that idea because as you know the wicked Kul is buried there and she didn't want him in the same field as me, also it would be difficult if he got dug up by mistake when they took my grave. Amfer had never mentioned Kul before, it was very interesting. You know

about Kul, so she said. She said she felt quite giddy at the idea that I was about to die.

She says not to stop sending me letters just because I'm dead. She can read them to me like she always did.

Anyway so I died, and actually it's much easier to write now. I wanted to thank you once again for coming into my life, and to say that sometimes I have been in love with you just as much as with Reagh, now I'm dead it seems safe to say such things. I'm so proud and happy that you're going to make me a father. I shall think of you for quite a long time, you and your family and friends.

Your loving husband,

Qno.



Dearest dearest Qno,

I don't know whether this will interest you very much now you are dead, but I promised in my last letter to tell you what the Colour People had said about money and power, and a promise is a promise.

They were asking Hadr and me to explain how the Share Economy worked. I said I didn't know, I had never heard of a Share Economy. Amfer, if you're reading this letter to Qno, get him to explain a Share Economy, it's the sort of thing he would understand. I told them I had lived nearly all my life in the Hald and never knew any other way of living. They asked how we exchanged goods in the Market. I said we didn't exchange goods, we brought what we could spare to the Market and took what we needed, I thought that's what Market meant. Then they asked how we prevented greedy people from taking more than they needed, or bringing less than they could spare. I said we didn't prevent them, but people who acted like that didn't have very good names in the town, and

they usually tried to behave better because it wasn't very nice to be disliked by everybody. Then something really interesting happened.

One of the Colour People is a woman called Jul who is very nice, and her man is called Tuls and he is also very nice, and Taarh and Hadr and me and Jul and Tuls often hang around together and talk. What happened was that Jul said that there was exactly the same problem in Pyzan, using money didn't prevent greedy people from taking too much. But the difference was that greedy people in Pyzan focused their greed on money because money was the only way to get goods. But if you could get hold of a lot of money something else happened: you also became powerful, and could change the rules to your own advantage, and that although powerful people were in the main unpopular that didn't matter to them because they had power and associated with other people who had power and got to decide the rules. Jul said that couldn't happen in a Share Economy. I thought that sounded sort of right. I wonder what you think of that, my sweet kind Qno.

I don't understand that you're dead. Hadr and I slept in the same bed last night and held on tight to each other and told each other that you were dead, but we still didn't believe what we were telling each other.

I'll send you another letter at least after Antus and I have gone to the Senate, Amfer will read it to you, and perhaps to Meer and the others.

Your loving wife Mereg Mereg.



Mereg asked Taarh: Are you really Reagh's brother? The God of rain and running water? I always thought Rufor was Reagh's brother.

He looked at her with his quick eyes.

You worship Reagh in the Hald, don't you? he said.

Worship is not quite the right word, said Mereg. She is important in our thought, how does that sound?

It sounds very natural, peace and love, said Taarh.

You're evading my question.

No, I was just looking for the best way to answer. Yes, I suppose I am Reagh's brother, if you put it like that.

So you and Rufor and Reagh are siblings?

Siblings is a nice word, said Taarh.

So do you sort of talk together often?

Sort of all the time, said Taarh, looking uncomfortable.

I had a letter from home. My late husband said he had talked to Reagh, and she says you're looking after Hadr and me.

I saved you from the street, said Taarh apologetically.

Why? asked Mereg. Why us?

I suppose we thought we should help, said Taarh. We thought you were doing important things that most other people are not doing.

We? asked Mereg

All of us, said Taarh.

You and Reagh and...?

Look at me, Mereg, said Taarh. What do you see?

I see the God Taarh, said Mereg.

This is so difficult, said Taarh. I wish I understood. Me, you, she—such confusion!

You and me, no confusion there, said Mereg, wondering where this conversation was going.

Not for you. But we have to struggle hard. To understand the I, for instance. You have the most amazing peculiarities, you man-people. It is a mighty power you have to keep yourselves apart. To maintain the I, even here with me, face to face. And then this weird idea that I am a God

and you are not. I have to work hard to maintain my separate identity from Reagh, and with Rufor and all the others, so that you can fit it into your world. Do you not feel the struggle?

Mereg was thinking of Hadr, the father of the child inside her; and then of Samuesil, her other I. She realised that she understood. There was no blinding light, no thundering epiphany, but a clear understanding.

I see what you mean, said Merreg. I wish Cirsc were here, she'd like this.



The lenses were arranged in a thick hollow tube of some woody growth suspended from a timber frame arranged around a central pin on a small platform, so that it could be rotated in all directions.

Can it see through the walls? asked Hadr.

Good point, said Antus. We keep it inside while the rain lasts. If it clears up we take it up on the roof.

It's always raining, said Hadr.

It's Taarh's season, said Antus. We don't use the big telescope much during the winter. We use this little one. —He showed them a smaller wooden arrangement which stood on three legs.

Telescope, said Merreg.

That's what it's called, said Antus.

This is what the girls want, said Merreg. And Cirsc.

I've sent word to Tanquish, said Antus.

And these are drawings we made with the big telescope, said Pteleu.

This is Tenes?

That is Tungal. This is Tenes.

It's not quite round, said Merreg.

It's not, said Pteleu.



What are these markings on it?

Sinks. Cave-ins, from the mining. The Ambassadors told us.

The Ambassadors knew what they were?

They've seen them. They went there.

And they are coming now, this evening? said Mereg.

After dinner, said Antus. They don't eat.

But we do, said Pteleu. Come on, I've laid the table.



As soon as they have finished dinner, which was an especially good mash made by Pteleu, the bell rang and Trenchant was gripped by a paroxysm of territorial prejudice. Pteleu went to the door to welcome the guests while Mereg tried to soothe the excited dog by patting and stroking and saying reassuring things about the Eilean ambassadors, although in truth she felt very much like barking at them herself. Pteleu showed them into the dining room.

You have many animals? said the new Lo apprehensively, eyeing the snarling dog.

Only this one, said Antus. He keeps away unwanted visitors. We have valuable equipment in the house, you understand.

Ah, the girl Mereg, companion to Kirfa, said the new Halo. Good. But who are these?

My assistant Proteleus and Mereg's brother Hadr, said Antus.

The young men are lovers? said the new Lo.

I daresay, said Antus. Yes, said Pteleu. Clever you.

And you are carrying your brother's child? said the new Lo to Mereg.

Mereg looked the Ambassador in the eye. Finally she said: You have been poorly briefed as to the ways of men, Ambassador. And Hadr is not actually my brother.

We have not been briefed at all, said the new Lo. We are here to learn from the beginning. The reports of the previous ambassadors were misleading. And you know little of the ways of Eile, Mereg.

Not, at least, of the faction that you represent, said Mereg.

You are forthcoming, said the new Lo.

Thank you, said Mereg.

Can we offer you something to drink? asked Antus.



Here on Huld, said Antus, we have not discovered electricity yet, whatever that may be.

I think they used something like it in Kirfa, when I was there, said Mereg. The Ballet Corps had amazing lighting. The Pyzan armies had never seen anything like it. I was there, I saw it.

That wasn't electricity, said the new Halo. That was Eilean dynaesthene. The previous ambassadors to Kirfa have been reprimanded by our Council for introducing Eilean technology to Huld.

Their technology saved the Holy City from being overrun by a barbarous enemy, said Mereg.

The work of the Eilean Ambassador is to observe, not interfere, said the new Lo. The outcome of the Kirfa-Pyzan conflict should not have been decided in Eile. Now, seven years later, Kirfa is ruined and empty.

Seven years ago, said Mereg, Eile saw things differently. There seem to have been changes.

We have made progress, said the new Lo.

Many would call it regress, said Mereg.

That is a provocative remark, said the new Lo.

You said your mandate was to observe, said Mereg. Not to judge.

The Ambassadors were silent. Antus was silent, apprehensive. Pteleu was expressionless. Hadr was grinning.

Are we here to discuss our meeting with the Senate? asked Mereg.

*Our* meeting? said the new Halo. We will address the Senate as Ambassadors from Eile. The subject of our address will be the mining concerns on Tenes. We have asked Antus to accompany us to explain the astronomical data. You will not participate.

Mereg is the representative of the Astronomers in Two Pen, said Antus. Their analysis of the data forms the basis of my presentation, and Mereg has herself made valuable contributions to the data. I shall need her for consultation at the meeting.

The ambassadors looked at each other. Mereg was aware of snatches of their rapid thought: *We must be seen to observe impartiality ... the girl will not block us ... this can be turned to our advantage ... she is listening ...*

Very well, said the new Lo. Mereg accompanies us.



Antus outlined the technical data: Loss of bodily mass on Tenes due to ore extraction has demonstrably caused fluctuations in the Tenes area of Reagh's Span, leading to slight polar disturbances on Huld. Minor climactic changes in progress on Huld can be traced to these disturbances, and will lead to an average global warming of nearly two degrees over the next century. This is in itself unacceptable.

However these trends have accelerated dramatically over the past seven years, and we have been looking for possible causes. The Tenes subsystem of five distinct bodies suffers increased instability, while at the same time climactic conditions on Huld have deteriorated with alarming rapidity. These developments can be correlated with reports of

abnormally heavy transible activity in an upland area north of the Anamen grasslands known as Luce. The transible there seems to cover an unprecedentedly large area. Analysis by the Two Pen observers indicates that the gravity gradient accruing to such a gigantic transible would be sufficient to cause the observed aberrations. The reason for the unusual size of these transible facilities is unclear.

That is all? asked Lo.

We intend therefore to ask for clarification from the business partners of the mining companies in Pyzan, said Antus.

Is this a wise approach? said Halo.

They will decline to comment, said Lo.

We will petition for the Senate to look into the matter, said Antus.

The Senate's response will be interesting, said Lo.

It will be crucial, said Mereg.

•

Anyone would think you were the Chair of Kirfa, said Hadr, as Pteleu accompanied them back to the Colour House in the Pantalley Quarter.

I *am* the Chair of Kirfa, said Mereg. Ask Sam.

•

Pullentem deals in opi, said Tuls. Everybody knows that.

I've heard that name, said Mereg. He was a Councillor in Kirfa. His throat was slit.

May not be the same name, said Tuls. This Pullentem is a Northerner.

So was the Councillor, said Mereg.

He is a big name in the Senate. Represents the mining companies. He's the figure you're going to have to watch. If you're really going to be allowed to speak, then he's already watching you.

And even as they spoke, there was a hammering on the door, and voices outside: Open up!

Jul sprang to her feet. This way! she said to Mereg. Hadr! Pteleu! Come! She disappeared into the hallway, with Mereg and her companions on her heels.

Tuls opened the window and called down: Who is it? Two watchmen with heavy staves of office looked up at him. Open up! they bawled.

Hold on, said Tuls. I'm coming down.

Mereg Mereg and Hadr Jent, said the first watchman as Tuls opened the door. We know they're here.

Not this evening they aren't, said Tuls. What's up?

Letter of Salt underwrit by Mereg Mereg and Hadr Jent, said the watchman. Three weeks overdue.

They pushed their way past Tuls and marched up the stairs. And were met on the landing by Taarh.

Letter of Salt, said Taarh. I'll pay it.

Three weeks too late, said the watchman. Where are they? They're coming with us.

Best to take the payment, said Taarh. They're not here.

Oh yes they are, said the watchman. That much we know.

Look for yourself, said Taarh pleasantly. Try not to break anything.

Jul came in through the open door, a little short of breath. What's up? she asked.

Letter of Salt, said Tuls. They're searching the house.

Break anything, yelled Jul after the two watchmen, and you'll pay for it.

They're only doing their job, said Taarh pleasantly. Nice weather out?  
Lovely, said Jul.



Hadr and Mereg followed Pteleu as he threaded a winding way through the side streets of the Lower Town, skirted the Form and headed up into the Middle Town towards the Observatory. He slipped the key into the lock in the great painted door and the three of them pushed in. Trenchant came flapping down the stairs at a great pace and paddled around them in circles, whining happily at his friends and masters. Antus appeared at the head of the stairs.

Trouble? he asked.

Watchmen, said Pteleu, with a Letter of Salt.

You should have told me, said Antus. I'd have paid it.

It has to be paid? said Mereg anxiously. Nobody told us.

Never sign a Letter of Salt, said Antus—rule number One. If by mistake you do, either pay it immediately or disappear—rule number Two.

What is this thing you call a Letter of Salt? asked Mereg

Historically, an early bill of debt, said Antus. Dating from the time of the Kings. The salt-sellers of Pyzan were the lowest of the low, they worked as slaves in the salt-pans along the shore south of Pyzan. They took Letters of Salt as payment, and then tried to trade them in for the right to work the salt-pans. The name stuck. It is a mark of shame in Pyzan to have set one's name to a Letter of Salt, and in a society where people are chasing each other's fortunes a great amount of money is spent in some circles to keep things secret. In my opinion there's something behind this particular Salt of yours. You already have enemies in Pyzan.

Already, said Mereg. You speak as if it would anyway have happened, given time.

You live with the Colour People, said Antus, and have your nose in matters of state. You walk a dangerous path.

This couldn't happen in the Hald, said Mereg.

Share Economy my painted arse, snorted Antus. You provincials have no idea. Best to sleep here, my children. Trenchant has a particular aversion to Letters of Salt.



We meet the Ambassadors on the steps of the Senate at an hour before midday, said Antus. There are apparently people we must dine with in the Form. You will meet Pullentem, whom somehow we have to sidestep, and Senator Quis who is my personal friend. He will support us, if anyone does. The Senate convenes an hour after midday. You are ready?

I think so, said Mereg.

Over the coffee and sweetbread, introductions were made. Dr Antus, astronomer of Pyzan. Mereg from the Hald, a colleague of Antus. Senator Pullentem. Senator Quis. Sandre, Company Director. Lo and Halo, Ambassadors from Eile.

Pullentem was ponderously drawing his breath to begin when Mereg asked her question: What does your company specialise in, Director Sandre?

Sandre pinned her with his eye.

Resources, he said.

Mereg's head tilted slightly to one side, her eyebrows raised a tiny fraction.

Mining, said Sandre.

Of course, said Mereg. I apologise; I should have guessed.

Teneti, said Sandre.

And Mereg gave him a smile such as even Hadr had never seen.

Pullentem and Sandre exchanged glances. Lo and Halo were expressionless, guarding their common thoughts. Quis looked enquiringly at Antus; Antus nodded and smiled reassuringly. Quis took a deep breath.

You were in Kirfa, I believe, said Pullentem solemnly, when Oswicus called the retreat?

I was indeed, said Mereg.

Did you ever meet my twin brother, Councillor Pullentem?

Unfortunately, no. But I heard he was a casualty in the sand-storm.

My deepest condolences.

He was a casualty of the Uprising, said Senator Pullentem.

Shocking, said Mereg.

The company sipped their coffee in silence.

There was a large portion of Mereg that stood aside and watched in wonder. What was happening? Where had this power come from?

Carefully, Mereg Mereg; not too fast.

Lo took control of the situation. You will first say a few words to the Senate, Senator Pullentem?

That was my plan, Ambassador. Which of you will speak first?

My colleague will speak first, said Lo. I may add a few comments.

And Antus will follow?

We will be ready for questions first.

Of course, said Pullentem. Excellent.

And then Antus will present the data. And answer further questions.

Excellent, said Pullentem. Will the young lady speak?



She will doubtless be able to elucidate some of the points raised in the questions, said Lo.

After which will be the debate, said Pullentem. I suggest you lead, Quis.

My pleasure, said Quis.

And Mereg saw what was happening. She was breathing slowly and deeply.

You are the Chair of Kirfa, said Mereg's mind to Mereg's body. Kirfa will address the Senate.



In the tightly-packed Senate, the roar went up: Pullentem! Pullentem has the floor!

The word had gone round like wildfire in the city: Pullentem will speak on Climate Change! There will be fireworks! The public gallery was packed: the Colour People had hung their multicoloured banners over the rail, and were chanting their Share Song; the Pyzan Citizens for Freedom waved their yellow and green flags, the Faceless their black flags, the Marians their red flags, the Ruforians their military banners, and everywhere streamed the mighty flag of Reagh, the white circle on its white background, Peace and Love. Pyzan was a city of flags.

Pullentem! roared the senators.

Eventually the great man rose to his feet as the roar became all-pervading; and everywhere in the anxious city the scurrying citizens hearkened to the far roar of their Senate and turned to their manifold interpretations.

Gradually the noise subsided, amid calls of *Give ear* and *Throw him out*. Pullentem waited for calm to fall. He had been exercising his voice

for the past half-hour in his chamber; and now it rose round and ripe over the tiered circles.

Friends! Citizens!

Roar.

They say our climate is changing!

Roar.

Kirfa, they say, has been abandoned to the encroaching sands!

No roar. Pullentem allowed a dramatic pause.

No, my friends! Kirfa has been abandoned to the encroaching hordes of migrants!

Small roar.

My brother Councillor Pullentem of Kirfa gave his life in the final struggle against the Migrant armies on the battlefield at the gates of Kirfa! I can tell you what happened in Kirfa!

A call came from the floor: Move to debate these preposterous statements!

Scattered roars.

Of course we will debate, citizens! thundered Pullentem. What else are we here for? But I ask for patience—we have distinguished guests among us, who have come from afar to honour this venerable Senate. I beg leave to introduce them to this House—

Roars of assent.

Their Excellencies the Ambassadors from Eile are here to address us, good friends. Give ear!

Calls of *Give ear* and *Throw them out*, as was the custom.

The Eilean woman who had taken the name Halo was already standing. A hush fell on the crowded benches. Tall, hairless, deep purple black, clad in her simple robe, she was magnificent. Her gaze swept majestically over the listening senators. There was silence.

Gentlemen, said Halo.

Her voice was wonderful, her intonation exquisite, the lilt of her slight alien accent enchanting. In the whole crowded assembly only Mereg understood that she was speaking in physical silence, flooding the minds of the gentlemen of the Senate and the crowds in the Public Benches. And in spite of her mistrust and dislike of the new ambassadors, Mereg's heart soared in admiration for the mastery of the performance.

I am honoured to stand before this venerable and magnificent assembly, said Halo's silent voice. Far away on my home planet, far beyond Thought, my Council stands with me in thanking you for this audience.

Our mission to Huld is to replace the previous Eilean legation which for several cycles was attached to Kirfa, in accordance with outdated policies followed by the Eilean Council. Following recent changes in the Council we now have a mandate to establish a global Embassy on Huld, and we find it fitting humbly to request leave to set up our Embassy here in Pyzan, the greatest and most magnificent city on Huld.

A roar of acceptance; and nods of assent in the front benches.

But to the matter in hand. We have brought with us to this session one of your own Pyzan scholars, the renowned astronomer Dr Antus, who has been studying this most beautiful ribbon of moons you have for your delight on Huld, which goes by the magical name of Reagh's Span. May I tell you, gentlemen, that although our citizenry far away in Eile knows little of your beautiful solar system, or your lovely sun which we name Seli9, and still less of your beautiful planet Huld, and the magnificent cultural heritage that flourishes here—in spite of this woeful ignorance of our people there is not a single child in our wide domains who has not heard of the beautiful globes of Reagh's Span. Our children's great favourite is the lovely yellow Tenes, which is on the agenda of our

debate here today. Tenes, the Golden Moon, the provider of the sacred white metal teneti. And it is my pleasure to suggest that your own Dr Antus now take the floor to explain the matter of our present mission.

Few if any of the senators present had ever heard the astronomer's name, or even knew what an astronomer did for a living. There were murmurs as the squat unkempt figure of Antus got to his feet, nervously shuffling his papers.

Citizens, Honourable Senators, he began.

*Speak up, man! Throw him out!*

Pullentem rose to his feet. Gentlemen! he roared. The Ambassadors are our guests; the Astronomer Antus is their guest. May I suggest a little civility towards the guest of our guests?

*Give ear! Throw him out!*

The traditional formulae having thus been spoken, the Senate reluctantly composed itself to listen.

For many years now, honourable Senators, began Antus, I have been studying and analysing the movements of the lovely Tenes. Of late I have collaborated with colleagues in the Anamen territories, at an observatory known as Two Pen. The collaboration has been twofold: on the one hand Two Pen is many weeks' journey by land from here, so that the timing and apparent configuration of celestial events as seen from Two Pen are not the same as they are here in Pyzan, although the parallax is small on a planetary scale. Analysis of the minute data mismatch from these two locations enables us to calculate exactly the true configuration of the bodies concerned.

*What is the man talking about? Get to the point, man!*

Secondly—

*Throw him out!*

Gentlemen, patience! The point is on the point of coming to a point, bellowed Pullentem.

Secondly, my Anamen colleagues have analytic abilities far in advance of anything we have here in Pyzan, and have been able to interpret the date with unerring—

*In advance of anything in Pyzan? What nonsense is this? Throw him out! — Give ear! — Who is this scarecrow?*

Antus stood dumbfounded, unable to make himself heard. He turned his anxious eyes to Mereg. She smiled encouragingly, and he braced his shoulders.

Gentlemen, he began again. To his surprise, a hush began to fall. He looked up from his papers, and sensed as he did so that he was no longer the centre of attention. Glancing across the benches he saw that Company Director Sandre had stood up, and had raised his hand for silence.

There was a subdued murmur from the benches: *Give ear!*

Antus sat down.

Honourable Senators, said Sandre. I am a little dismayed at your apparent inability to listen to the essential astronomical information that our venerable Astronomer Antus is presenting to you. I assure you, Senators, that Antus's data is simple to understand, and very much to the point. May I perhaps be allowed to offer you a brief summary of the main points of his presentation? Dr Antus, you will, I trust, put me right if I should misrepresent your data in any way?

Of course, mumbled Antus.

Very well. Do I have your attention, Senators?

*Give ear.*

As most of you know, I run the Pyzan Coordination of the Alliance companies now conducting mining activities on the moon Tenes in Reagh's Span.

Quis spoke from his seat: A point of elucidation, Director. When you speak of an Alliance, you are referring I believe to intelligences on distant stars?

On a distant planetary system we know as Carhault, said Sandre.

And you, Director, from your facilities here in Pyzan, are coordinating the mining ventures of alien companies in our Span?

Sandre smiled. The honourable Ambassador from Eile, a system very much more distant than Carhault, has just told us that while few of her fellow citizens have heard of our planet Huld, every child knows where Tenes is. May I say, in order to add to this tale, that while few people in Carhault know of the planet Huld, there is no financial concern in the dominions of Carhault that has not heard the name of Pyzan. They know it as the location of the Sandre headquarters. Does that answer your question?

It does indeed, said Quis. In plain terms, it tells us that intelligences from other stars are conducting lucrative mining operations on a moon orbiting our planet, and are aided and abetted by citizens of Pyzan. At least that is now clear. Please continue.

My thanks to the good Senator Quis, said Sandre, smiling brightly. His point is taken, even if it is couched in wording typical of Quis's faction. Aiding and abetting! Even if you didn't know who Quis was, you would know from his stale clichés which side of the river he hails from. I would call it a healthy business relationship, Senator Quis.

Contradiction in terms, muttered Quis.

In your terms, I have no doubt, said Sandre. May I now be allowed to continue my summary of Dr Antus's data?

*Give ear.*

The idea has been going around for some time now that the mining operations on Tenes have somehow been affecting the moon's orbit, and that this in turn is morphing the climate of our planet Huld. I have no doubt that our Dr Antus can present you with rock-solid data to indicate that the mining operations on Huld will eventually ruin our climate and destroy us all. He will show us blackboards of neatly written mathematical and astronomical formulae which will clinch his theory beyond any possible doubt. Is that not so, Dr Antus? Or am I misrepresenting you in any way?

Antus's mumbled reply was not decipherable.

Good. As I said, beyond any possible doubt. That is to say, beyond all possibility of Dr Antus's doubt. Honourable Senators, I am not a scientific doctor or astronomer, and my mathematical expertise is limited to the counting of Pyzan dollars. Dr Antus has kindly shown me some of his formulae and some of the remarkable drawings he has made, with the aid of his new Tanquish lenses, of the moon Tenes and the ugly mining marks, as he calls them, on its surface, and the instability of its little orbit. I admired these drawings greatly, and as I said to him at the time, I am grateful to the Senate for having allotted a generous portion of the City's taxes to keeping his project alive, to feeding him and his dog and his assistants—now two of them—, in order that so many pretty pictures of scarred moons and unstable orbits should appear before the public gaze, so that this venerable Senate, which has so much time on its hands, has at last found something useful to do: discuss the climate.

There was laughter among the benches.

As far as I can see, honourable Senators, continues Sandre, the word *climate* is an academic term for what you and I and the citizen in the street calls *weather*. It has been raining heavily in our city this autumn,

as we are all aware. It also rained heavily last autumn, I recall, and all the autumns I can call to mind before it, except perhaps one or two when it snowed, and one or two when the sun shone. In Kirfa, I am told, it is very hot and dry. I think I remember learning in my geography lessons at school that in the autumn it was hot and dry in Kirfa, and that it got hotter and drier every autumn, and that the time would eventually come when the Holy City would turn into a Holy Expanse of Hot Sand.

That, honourable Senators, was long before anyone had heard of the Alliance and of the sacred metal teneti. But now we have heard of it, and suddenly these age-old trends in the weather have turned into climactic disturbances. So much for the long and elegant formulae on the blackboard. So much for the honest tax-payer's money. So much for climate change. Do I have to press my point any longer?

*Left, left!*

Mereg looked enquiringly at Antus. Noes to the left, he whispered to her.

Sandre had resumed his seat, crossed his legs and also his arms, and smiled at the world.

Pullentem had risen to his feet. Anything to add, Dr Antus? he asked. —Ah, I see the little lady wishes to speak—

He sat again, for Merag has risen to her feet, standing now silent and letting her gaze range over the assembly.

A new hush fell. The small figure swayed slightly, her hands flexing gently at her side, as if they had something to say. And then she raised them unhurriedly towards her throat, as if holding some secret about to be released. There was utter silence. Merag took hold of it, and allowed it to consolidate itself around her.

This is not an easy matter, gentlemen, she said at last, her voice filling the void. I am in grave danger. And so are you.



No one breathed.

My name is Mereg daughter of Mereg, originally of the lands west of the Hald, west of the town we know as Tuag Beyond, which you in Pyzan know as the province of Dace, once a stronghold of your legions. My task here was to speak to you as Dr Antus's assistant, and as associate of the Astronomers at Two Pen. As such, I have several points to add to Director Sandre's statements. But before I can do this, I must first reveal to you that I am also here in another capacity.

The senatorial hearts all seemed to skip a beat. The smile on the Director's face remained however broad and condescending.

I am also Mereg Mereg, First Secretary to Samuesil, Chair of the Holy City of Kirfa.

Everywhere on the benches, eyes sought each other out.

The Lady Samuesil sends you her warmest greetings, and regrets that due to an unfortunate flying accident she is unable to be here today. I speak therefore on her behalf.

A tall, elderly senator in the front benches rose to his feet.

My Lady, he said. Permit me to ask. You speak for the Lady Samuesil who vanquished the Tyran Oswicus seven years ago at Kirfa?

I do, said Mereg. I stood by her side that day on the plain before Kirfa.

You were the handmaid whom she is said to have taken with her onto the field of battle?

I was. And now I am her closest associate. My words are her words. Her words are mine.

Pullentem had turned in his seat to look at the Ambassadors. They were expressionless. He turned again, and stared straight in front of him across the floor of the Senate. Mereg followed his gaze. Opposite him on one of the outer benches she picked out the man he was staring at. The two men were watching each other.

The elderly senator had clasped his hands before him and now he bowed deeply towards Merreg. Forgive my interruption, my lady, he said.

It was not an interruption, said Merreg. It was a valuable point, and now it has been clarified. I am in your debt.

The Senator bowed again, and took his seat.

I think, said Merreg, that there is another gentleman opposite me who wishes to say something. She indicated the man who had been exchanging glances with Pullentem.

You have a question, I believe?

The man was visibly flustered. Me? he mouthed, tapping his chest.

You, Senator. You have something to tell the assembly.

The man's eyes switched to Pullentem. Pullentem gave an imperceptible shrug. The man stood slowly to his feet.

Yes? said Merreg. You have a question?

His eyes still on the glowering Pullentem, the man took a paper from a pocket within his cloak.

I have a question—

*Speak up, man! Throw him out!*

—I am instructed to ask you, Madam First Secretary to the Chair of Kirfa, whether you know anything of the woman Merreg Merreg whose signature I see here on this Letter of Salt?

Quis was on his feet. Remove that man! he shouted. He is not a senator. He is a Sergeant of the Watch. He has no right to sit on the benches!

But Merreg's hands were rising again.

There is no need, she said. This man has asked a question which is fundamental to the matter in hand. To answer your question, Gentleman of the Watch, the signature is mine.

There were expressions of wonder in the benches.

And why, may I ask, said Pullentem, rising to his feet and turning to address her— What in Heaven’s name would induce the First Secretary to the Chair of Kirfa to put her signature to a Letter of Salt? Is she perhaps not a First Secretary at all, but a penniless guttersnipe? That letter is three weeks old! You should be behind bars, young woman!

That is enough! came suddenly from Quis. You expose yourself, Pullentem. What do you know of the date on this letter?

Of course I know everything about this letter, Senator Quis.

And yet you allow this young lady to dine with us in the Form, and you bring her with you into the Senate in the guise of an astronomer’s personal assistant? Knowing all along that she was bound by a Letter of Salt?

I have a penchant for the dramatic, Quis, said Pullentem, as I’m sure you have noticed before. This snippet of a girl claims to speak for the Chair of Kirfa! And yet she is wanted by the Watch for an unredeemed Letter of Salt! First Secretary my painted elbow.

Yet another senator rose to his feet in the front benches. He looked across at a colleague and nodded to him, and he too rose to his feet. A hush fell: they were clearly well-known in the Chamber.

You will not know us, Lady Mereg, said the senator who had risen first. But this Senate knows us. We both stood in the front line of the legions seven years ago before Kirfa, and we were rewarded for our services by being elected to this Senate. There have been many lies told about the so-called Battle of Kirfa, mostly by senators of Pullentem’s faction. That is an old and worn debate, which I shall not open again here. My colleague and I simply wish to confirm that this is assuredly the same young lady who stood not ten fathoms from us beside the Chair of Kirfa on the field that day. We noted the closeness of their relationship. Her

manner and bearing mirror those of the Chair herself. We gladly vouch for the fact that she is who she says she is.

The two Senators sat down. There was a silence. All eyes were on Mereg.

Thank you, Senators, said Mereg at last. It warms my heart to meet you again in these happier circumstances. But I feel we should now continue with the matter in hand.

The Letter of Salt! someone shouted.

That indeed is the matter in hand, said Mereg. Of course that is my signature on that meaningless paper. How else could I travel to Pyzan? I am penniless, gentlemen, and have always been, and so is the Chair of Kirfa, and so is everyone else in my country. We have food and shelter, wine and dance, and good doctors and schools. We have no plans afoot to adopt your dysfunctional system of monetary exchange which can only ever result in the ruthless exploitation of most people by a small group of smiling psychopaths such as we see before us in this honourable Senate.

Where on earth, thought Mereg in the ensuing uproar, did I learn the terms *dysfunctional* and *psychopath*? But as she gazed over the sea of shouting senators she realised that the uproar was not aimed at her. It was domestic. It was senatorial. It was factional. It was not her argument. And it was wasting her time.

She stood with her hand raised, demanding silence. It was Samuesil's gesture, and she felt its inevitability. She stood and waited.

*Give ear. Give ear.*

And then finally: *Give ear! Throw her out!*

Honourable Senators, she called, her voice finding precisely the right tone in the gradually quietening chamber.

*Give ear.*

Gentlemen. As First Secretary to the Chair of Kirfa, I must respond to Director Sandre's extraordinary interpretation of Dr Antus's observations. In particular, I feel it is necessary to supply one or two details that he seems to have forgotten.

There was silence again.

When I arrived in Pyzan, I was, as I have already hinted, puzzled by your cumbersome culture of monetary exchange. But there were other strange phenomena which surprised me. It seems that large numbers of your citizens sleep in the streets, in the wind and rain. I realised after some thought that this was also a result of your monetary habits. Furthermore, it occurred to me that the extraordinary number of dead people found every morning in the streets was not a result of any plague, but, again, of this strange monetary obsession of yours.

However there was another phenomenon which I could not, at first, assign to money. I discovered that large numbers of your homeless compatriots and your unnumbered dead—large numbers of the legionaries you demobilized seven years ago after the débâcle at Kirfa, were opi addicts. It seems you have some terrible problems in your city, gentlemen.

But I see now that there is in fact a clear relationship between opi addiction and this despicable monetary system.

It sits here in your Senate.

There should have been uproar. But there was silence. Mereg felt the enormity of her power. But still she did not understand whence it came.

It became clear to me, she continued, that your system of exchange did not only create paupers. It also created very rich people. I think you know who they are, here in your Senate. They are quite simply most of you.

She paused, to allow her words to take effect.

One or two, perhaps, more than others, said Mereg.

Dead silence.

In his summary of the effect of his mining on Tenes, Director Sandre has neglected to inform you of information supplied by the Chair of Kirfa, her close associate and my dear foster-brother Meer Amfer, our friends the previous Ambassadors from Eile, and the Astronomers of Two Pen.

Director Sandre, she went on,—reputedly the richest citizen in Pyzan— was a little too eager to take the floor, preventing Dr Antus from presenting his report in full. Antus would have gone on to show that for the past five or six years the orbit of the moon Tenes has become unstable to an unprecedented degree, and that this instability, according to the Two Pen astronomers, could not be traced directly to mining on Tenes.

Indirectly, however, it can.

Far to the north-west of Kirfa lies a mountainous region we had always assumed to be uninhabited. But as the Chair of Kirfa and our friends the previous Ambassadors were to discover, there is a small city hiding among the mountains in a wide plain which bears the name of Luce.

Throughout the chamber there came the sound of sudden indrawn breaths. Mereg waited for her words to be fully understood.

The military Senator who had vouched for her identity spoke softly from his seat, but his words were clearly heard throughout the chamber: That name has never before been spoken here in this Senate, Lady Mereg.

Never until now, Senator? Could you perhaps explain to us why this is so?

The military senator spoke from his seat, now more loudly.

Every soldier knows the name of Luce, he said. And he knows he will be flogged for mentioning it. Luce is the name of freedom and safety for

the deserter, the unspoken name of the invisible city where he can find a pot of soup and a place to lay his head. But now the name has been spoken in the Senate, and if we are lucky no one will be flogged.

Thank you, Senator. The invisible city, you say. Invisible to the legions, invisible to the Senate of Pyzan, invisible even to the advanced surveillance techniques which the previous Ambassadors had brought to the City of Kirfa. How could this be, gentlemen?

No one uttered the phrase *Give ear*. They were listening too intently.

Mereg went on, the words welling up somewhere behind her conscious thought and bursting forth with effortless power: The plain of Luce, as my colleagues have discovered, is the site of an Alliance way-station for the transport of teneti rift ore from Tenes to Carhault, using a technology which the Carhaultan call a transible. This would not in itself be remarkable—but for one point. A transible canopy—a huge device to avoid detection—has been erected over the whole plain of Luce, making the transible and the city itself invisible to surveillance. And also, incidentally, hiding the extensive coclico plantations that stretch over much of the plain of Luce.

Coclico? It was the military senator that spoke.

Papaver, said Merreg. Opi.

And this protective canopy, as you call it, is causing the perturbations in the orbit of Tenes?

Transibles create weak gravity gradients in normal use. A transible canopy encompassing a plain the size of Luce would cause a huge gravity gradient if connected as a transible to a small moon such as Tenes.

And the reason for this canopy?

There are others here who can answer that question, said Merreg.

The silence seemed to be rising to a crescendo.

Finally Senator Quis spoke. You buy your opi from Sandre, do you not, Senator Pullentem? And Sandre gets the opi from Luce?

Pullentem did not answer, but his lip curled as his eyes locked with Mereg's.

No answer, Pullentem? With your penchant for the dramatic?

The Letter of Salt is unpaid, said Pullentem. In this Senate I trust the Rule of Law will prevail.

The same law for a senator as for a debtor? asked Mereg.

Take her away, said Pullentem. And in the blanket of silence which enveloped the seated senators, four Gentlemen of the Watch led Mereg away, so that she did not find out until several days later how the Rule of Law was applied in the Senate against the faction of Sandre and Pullentem. The ensuing debate, she was to learn, was short, sharp and decisive, and above all highly civilised. Some said that the Military Faction had gained influence. But the Senate chanted: Quis! Quis! *Throw him out! Give ear!*

And the price of opi on the streets trebled overnight.



Several hundred fathoms above the Abbey of the Rock, Klimpt and Meer soared around each other in the night sky, climbing on the warm south-westerly autumn breeze rising against the flanks of the great Moor. The bright spark of Tungel lent a faint glow to the high cloud-cover, but they could barely see each other as they wheeled, their wings almost touching. Far below a few faint lights from Tarrant Town could be seen.

We must go back to Luce, said Klimpt suddenly. Fetch wings for Samuesil. These too heavy for her.

Meer was riding on Samuesil's wings.

Do you think she is ready to fly? said Meer.

With the right wings, soon, said Klimpt.

They glided together north-east along the flank of the Moor, in the direction of Luce.

You mean now? said Meer.

Silly, said Klimpt. Find nice bank, nice grass. Crowberries. Make love with crowberries.

How do you do that? said Meer.

I show you, said Klimpt.

Later they sat together and gazed over the dark landscape towards Luce.

Are you homesick? said Meer.

No, said Klimpt. Rock Abbey is my home, Cherisoche is my Abbess. Amfer is my friend, Qno is in his grave. But I miss Hwicce. And I miss the mountains and the papaver.

They sat and gazed. And they both saw the far gesture of yellow light that swept for a moment over Luce.

Was that the Chariot again? said Meer.

No. Chariot green, not yellow. Chariot wait for Samuesil.

Then something just happened in Luce, said Meer.

Mereg, said Klimpt.

Mereg is in Luce?

Mereg is in Pyzan, said Klimpt. Merereg is strong woman.



In Luce, the yellow light flooded the room where Oswicus lay in bed.

Did you see that? called Hwicce from the adjoining room.

See what? said Oswicus. He lifted the red cloth from his eyes and saw the red scar floating as always in the air above him.

Were you asleep? said Hwicce.

I never sleep, said Oswicus.

A yellow light, said Hwicce. A curtain of yellow light that swept across the sky.

Look to the stars, said Oswicus.

Hwicce's bed creaked, and she came into his room with bare feet and stood by the window.

The night is clear, she said. Tungal is not up yet.

You see the Three Beyond?

Yes.

They are three or four?

Four, as usual.

You see the Lace between them?

Yes, clearly.

Then the Canopy is gone, said Oswicus.

He was silent for a moment.

Sandre has revoked the agreement, he said. This is Samuesil's doing.



Those are my wings, damn you Meer, said Samuesil. I want to fly again. She was hobbling on two walking sticks which the monks had found for her. There was a collection of sticks in the Abbey, bequeathed on their deathbeds by generations of ancient hobbling monks. Samuesil was having difficulty standing upright; the long weeks in bed had frozen her lower back.

Klimpt said these wings are too large for you, said Meer. There was no time to find the right size when you escaped from Luce. We are going back to Luce to fetch better wings for you.

I need better legs, said Samuesil. And my heart needs mending.

Have you heard from her? said Meer.

Samuesil did not answer.

Something is happening at Luce, said Meer. Klimpt and I were flying late last night and we saw a flash of light from that direction.

Samuesil stood upright, her eyes wide, her back almost straight. Another explosion? she said.

No, more like a gesture, said Meer. Like someone waving. Klimpt said something interesting.

Everything Klimpt says is interesting, said Samuesil. What did she say?

She said Mereg was doing something.

It was as if Samuesil had shrunk again.

Mereg is in Pyzan, she said.

She knows that, said Meer. Ask her yourself.

I'm not interested, said Samuesil.

Amfer has had letters from Mereg, said Meer. You should come up to the farm with me and find out what she has been doing. And meet my mother.

I am afraid of your mother, said Samuesil.

Why on earth?

I am afraid of everybody, said Samuesil. Of those who are left.



Samuesil found her way down to the Meadow Behind, where the school was taking shape. The sound of sawing and hammering filled the meadow. Mara waved to her from the roof of the school, and she lifted her stick. The old refugee huts were being refurbished as winter dormitories for the children.

Wing and Eye were sitting at a table with seven or eight young children, eating crowberries. The children were examining each others' blue tongues. Eye moved along the bench to make room for her. The children beside her shuffled along to one side, and the last one fell off and sat on the ground and looked around for the berries she had lost from her bowl. Two other children sat beside her and helped her fill her bowl with them. Their fingers were purple.

How's it going? asked Eye.

It's not, said Samuesil, stuffing berries into her mouth. I'm not a Chair any more. I'm an old crone with crutches. You are no longer aides to the Chair of Kirfa. You are nannies.

It's a nice job, said Wing. You should apply.

Fat use I'd be, said Samuesil. I can't walk.

You could tell them stories, said Wing.

I've forgotten all my stories, said Samuesil.

You're depressed, said Eye. It's natural.

Nothing's natural, said Samuesil.

Roseli, said Eye. Tell Samuesil what you saw today in the meadow.

Butterfly, said Roseli.

A big black moth, said Eye. What does that mean?

Lots of berries, said Roseli.

Cirsc says that when there are lots of crowberries, there are lots of black moths, said Eye.

Samuesil looked at her in disgust. Eye, your brain is shrinking, she said. When did you last write up the minutes of a meeting?

Samuesil, said Wing, when are you going to start flying again?

As soon as Klimpt can tear herself away from Meer, said Samuesil. I watch them closely for the smallest signs of fatigue.

What is the prognosis? asked Wing, smiling.

Bleak, said Samuesil.

Perhaps we could get them to help with the children, said Eye, her eyes on Wing. Nothing like Kind Garden work to widen one's horizons.

Speak for yourself, said Wing.



So Samuesil allowed Klimpt and Meer to drive her in the Abbey cart up the rutted road to Upper Crop. And Samuesil's worst fears were realised as soon as they entered the kitchen. Tesil sat with Amfer drinking coffee.

Samuesil stood at the door, leaning on her stick, with Meer and Klimpt on either side.

Tesil turned and saw her, and froze. Amfer put down her mug of coffee. Welcome at last, my Lady Chair, she said. She came forward to take Samuesil's arm and lead her to the table. You have had an accident, I am told.

I am sorry we have never met, said Samuesil.

Now we have put that to rights, said Amfer. I don't often leave the farm. But I recognise you. Mereg has described you well.

Tesil sat motionless with her mug in her hand and her elbow on the table as Amfer set Samuesil down in her own chair, opposite Tesil. They looked long at each other.

Samuesil managed to say: I have missed you so much, my lovely Tesil. And she began to say something more, but her voice was stifled, and her mouth awry, and the tears flooded her face.

Tesil put down her mug, and stretched her hands across the table. There, there, she said mechanically.

I saw Ella a while ago, sobbed Samuesil, working on the school, but he pretended not to see me.

Hush, said Tesil.

Klimpt took the chair beside Tesil. She glanced up at Amfer, as if to ask permission. Then she said in a business-like voice: You tell why this sorrow? Explain to Calimpeto?

It was Tesil who spoke.

Samuesil sent my husband Ella as a hostage to Pyzan, she said.

From Kirfa? After the battle? Why?

The tyrant Oswicus took hostages, said Tesil. My father the tyrant, as it turns out. But he deserted and brought Ella here to the Hald.

Ella is Migrant? said Klimpt.

Yes, said Tesil.

Me too, said Klimpt. And I break Samuesil legs.

Samuesil began laughing crookedly through her tears.

I did that, Calimpeto, not you.

No, I, said Klimpt. I take too big wings from the tower. You too light for wings.

And they fit Meer?

Meer, he fit wings, said Klimpt.

You are an angel, Calimpeto.

Yes, said Klimpt. And you save Ella and Tesil?

Save? said Samuesil.

You send them here to Crop. So they not die in Kirfa, when the Migrants kill the Inborn and the Huns and Migrants kill each other?

Tesil looked long and hard at Klimpt. Then she leant over and laid her head on Klimpt's shoulder.

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



Klimpt and Meer took wing and spiralled up over the Moor in the early morning breeze. Then they slid together north east over the flanks of the Moor and came to their trysting place on the north-eastern flank of the Moor towards the end of the afternoon. They had thought to continue over the flatlands and fly into the night, but the south-westerly breeze gave them no uplift on the leese side of the Moor, and they were content to take the night early. They found their sleeping-place in the shrub lands on the lower slopes of the moors, and knew the place as their own. They slept close and deep.

Klimpt woke in the early hours, listening. Not a whisper, not a sigh, not a movement in the grasses, but nevertheless a presence. She sat up and looked around her in the dim of the night. Meer had opened his eyes.

What? he said in a low voice.

She nodded towards a shadow among the bushes below them, crouching in the grass like a huge animal, sleeping, and yet awake.

It's the Chariot, said Meer.

Black, burnt, said Klimpt.

It was looking for us, and now it has found us, said Meer. I wonder why.

It is looking for Samuesil, said Klimpt.



They slept little for the rest of the night, feeling the chariot's waiting presence. Horses dead, said Klimpt. Still it go like chariot.

The mares never actually drew the Chariot, said Meer. Samuesil told me they only ran before it. They were the Chariot's pathfinders.

On the ground, said Klimpt. Now it fly, and it smell us. Ambassadors said Chariot not leave Luce.

Something has happened in Luce, said Meer.



The wind was not helpful, and they had to sweep a good league back along the flank of the Moor to find an updraft. It was not strong, and they spent all morning and well into the afternoon slowly rising. The day was easing into the west before Klimpt decided they had made enough height to set out over the grasslands. There was no sign of the Chariot.

By evening the south-eastern breeze had dropped. They had barely a thousand fathoms of air beneath them, and the Luce uplands were still a far smudge on the horizon. They had long since crossed the old road of the legions to Kirfa, and the grasslands had given way to dark grey sand with sparse vegetation. Meer was losing height faster than Klimpt, not having her knack of riding the still air. Finally he touched down on the grey sand, and she spiralled down from three hundred fathoms to join him.



From the ground, the grey sand stretched out on all sides towards the enclosing horizon. The Luce uplands had disappeared.

Long walk tomorrow, said Klimpt. Wings heavy. I mark direction, she said, pointing to a clump of bushes close to the horizon. OK if we see sun tomorrow.

It was cold during the night, the autumn far advanced on the northern flatlands, but they gave each other warmth under Meer's cloak. When they awoke in the grey light of morning they saw the dark outline of the Chariot lying like a sleeping animal at some distance from them on the sand, in the direction that Klimpt had marked. They ate dried fruit and nuts and drank sparingly of their water before packing their wings on their backs and setting off towards the Chariot.

As they cautiously approached it, it seemed to give a shudder. Then as they drew closer it rose to the height of its invisible wheels and seemed to be waiting, swaying slightly.

I not fear, said Klimpt.

Nor I, said Meer.

They came up to the Chariot and put their hands on its black surface. They had expected it to be charred, but to their surprise they found that it was smooth and clean—but black. It seemed alive to their touch; it responded by settling down in the sand so that they could step up onto the tailboard.

They stowed their wings and backpacks under the seats over the tailboard. Meer took the reins, and the Chariot rose again to wheel height. He flicked them gently and the three black mares surged forward.

## 8

It seemed to Mereg that she remembered every word she had said. And she knew their meanings, and why she had said them. And she knew she had known these things before, in the hushed ocean of her mind. But she did not understand why they were hers, Mereg Mereg, dairymaid from Upper Crop, foster daughter to Amfer, wife to the late Qno, mother of Hadr's unborn child, lover of Samuesil Chair of Kirfa.

The four Gentlemen of the Watch marched her through the pouring rain to some destination she expected would be a prison. It was more than pouring rain. Mereg was used to the autumn rains in the Hald, wet, cold and merciless, and to the violent thunderstorms that burst over the Halden valleys at all times of the year. But these rains were in another category. They had a clear purpose: to wash everything clean. The four Gentlemen of the Watch and their prisoner were becoming colder and cleaner with every step.

As they progressed down into the lower city the runnels in the centre of every street were swelling to rivers. They crossed a plaza by wading floodwater to their knees.

Constable, said the Sergeant of the Watch who had spoken in the Senate. Is your satchel waterproof?

Leather, sir. Sort of.

The sergeant felt in his inner pocket. I'm wet to the skin, he said. He drew out a limp and bedraggled sheet of paper, cradling it with both hands in the rain. It's falling apart, he said. Careful. Put it in your satchel. Don't let it fold—idiot. Now it will stick together.

We'll dry it in the station, Sarge.

I'll dry it at the station, said the Sergeant.



Taarh came to see her that evening in prison. He brought her dry clothes from the Colour House.

You rained a lot just now, said Mereg.

Rufor thought I should, said Taarh.

Not Reagh?

Same thing, said Taarh. —They'll take you before a magistrate first thing in the morning, he added.

Where's Hadr?

Pteleu has him somewhere safe, said Taarh.

Did you bring anything to eat?

Sorry, I didn't think. But there'll be coffee and salt bread straight after the hearing, said Taarh.



Case no. T854, said the Magistrate. Letter of Salt underwrit Mereg Mereg and Hadr Jent. Are those your names?

I am Mereg, Your Worship. My friend here is keeping me company. His name is Taarh.

The name of the god? This is a magistrate's court, young man, not a pantomime. Where is this Hadr, then?

Not apprehended as yet, Your Worship, said the Sergeant of the Watch.

Are you telling me this has to be done again, when you have seen fit to apprehend him?

If you sentence them both now, Your Worship, that will do for when we find him.

Very well. What is the fee of the Letter?

Not altogether sure, Your Worship.

Read it to me.

Can't quite do that, Your Worship.

You can't read?

Not this letter, Your Worship.

Give it here, said the Magistrate.

The text of the Letter of Salt had been written in green ink. The rain had washed it into a watercolour seascape. But Mereg and Hadr had signed it with a lead pencil, and their signatures could still be made out at the bottom of the sheet.

Mereg Mereg and Hadr Jent, said the Magistrate. I have here an illegible paper with your signatures on it. What, would you say, was the gist of the letter?

I'm not quite sure, Your Worship, said Mereg. It could be our marriage certificate.

Case dismissed, said the Magistrate.



Dearest beautiful Qno,

Well I spoke to the Senate in Pyzan, and there was utter silence while they listened to me. There wasn't utter silence for anyone else, always muttering and jeering. Perhaps you could ask Reagh what happened. Perhaps she knows where that terrible power came from. I don't think it came from her, her power is not like that. And not from Rufor, his power is violent and raging. And Taarh's power is soft, like summer rain. This power was dangerous. It silenced those who could not understand me, and the others it coerced into understanding me. I think I had the power from Samuesil. I think her blood was pulsing in my body as I spoke.

Perhaps Reagh would understand that. Taarh says he thinks I'm right about Sam's blood, but then Taarh always goes too far.

Taarh saved me from prison by raining enormously, but it was my speech at the Senate that put Pullentem and Sandre into prison. They won't be there very long, I suppose, because they are both appealing, and they have the best lawyers. So I think I shall have somehow to get back to the Hald as soon as possible before they get out. I have no idea how. I'm worried for Hadr's child. And nobody knows where Hadr is, or where Pteleu is. I hope they're together. You must all meet Pteleu, Jent and Jank and Cirsc, everybody will love him. Not you of course, you're dead. That's so unfair.

Could you please ask Reagh for me how I get home, dear beautiful Qno—Pyzan is a horrible city.

Your own,

Mereg Merereg.



Why did you say Ask Reagh? said Taarh. You could ask me. I am Reagh, after all.

I forgot, said Merereg. Taarh, how do I get home?

He looked at her. In the body? he asked.

Preferably.

The Ambassadors could take you, said Taarh. They have the dynaesthene. But they're probably not happy with the way things have turned out. Shall we speak to them?

We? said Merereg.

I mean, I could come if you wish. I'll keep in the background.

With Eileans, said Merereg, no one is ever in the background. They hear all thoughts.

Creepy, said Taarh. But they won't hear me. I'm a god, I don't have thoughts. Not thought-thoughts, at any rate.

Actually, I do need to speak to them, said Mereg. There are certain points that have to be settled.



The door had a new brass plaque on it: Embassy of Eile. They pulled the door-bell. After a short pause it was opened by a Pyzan woman wearing Eilean robes and a headscarf in the manner of minor Pyzan officials.

Yes? she said.

We have come to speak with the Ambassadors.

If you leave your name and address, we will contact you, said the woman.

If the Ambassadors are told my name, they will wish to speak with me immediately, said Mereg.

And your name is?

Mereg Mereg, First Secretary to the Chair of Kirfa.

The woman's eyes wavered. Please come in, she said.

Lo was seated, Halo standing.

Please come in, Mereg, said Halo. We were expecting you some time. And your companion is—? Her eyes showed surprise.

This is my friend Taarh, said Mereg.

Halo bowed slightly to Taarh. You are not human, she said.

Not a question, not a statement, thought Mereg. Why do they do that?

Almost, said Taarh, smiling. Superhuman, I think the term is.

Ah, said Halo. Can we offer you rush-water?

That would be very nice, said Mereg. How do you get rush-water in Pyzan?

Sandre supplied us, said Halo.

Am I right in thinking that Sandre is in prison? asked Mereg.

No, said Halo.

He is on parole, said Lo from his seat. Mereg thought: I have never seen an Eilean sitting before.

That is because I am sick, said Lo. I shall be returning to Eile very soon.

I wish you a speedy recovery, said Mereg.

It is a terminal illness, said Lo.

I am very sorry.

Thank you. It is indeed inopportune, said Lo.—And what is your business?

You have surely divined my business, said Mereg.

Yes, we would be able to take you to your home, said Halo. But it is not within our remit to interfere with events on Huld.

That is not completely true, said Mereg.

I hear your meaning, said Halo. But speak it aloud, for your friend.

He hears my meaning, too, said Mereg.

Then speak it aloud, to steady the discourse, said Halo. That we may unwind the thread.

Mereg thought: This is a new side of Halo.

My partner Lo is dying, said Halo. Such events often cause reassessment.

Mereg's mind wandered.

You have yet to process your father's death, said Halo.

He was my husband, said Mereg.

That is very strange. I heard your mind say Father.

My father is Oswicus, the Lord of Luce, said Mereg.

Lo and Halo looked at each other. That is the reason, said Halo. But there is more.

The Chair of Kirfa? said Lo.

Not now, said Halo.

For a while, no one spoke.

You were about to speak, Mereg. You questioned our remit.

Yes, said Mereg. You said it was not within your remit to interfere with events on Huld.

I admit I said that, said Halo.

And the mining of rift ore on Tenes? And the supply of opi from Luce?

The situation on the ground is always more complicated than it seemed to us in Eile, said Halo.

I would suggest that your remit was to insure the supply of teneti to Eile, said Mereg.

To ascertain the viability of the supply.

And you find it viable?

For the moment yes, although our technicians in Eile have begun to look at alternatives to teneti, said Halo.

The data from Antus and the Two Pen observers is convincing, said Lo. And we trust the data on climate change submitted by the previous ambassadors. But the question of the transible canopy at Luce was a complication we had to examine. The Council did not trust the previous ambassadors to provide unprejudiced information.

By unprejudiced you mean independent of global interests on Huld? Local, not global.

Global, surely, said Mereg. The transible canopy is responsible for serious perturbations in the orbit of Tenes. Climactic change is global on



Huld. There is a serious risk of orbit instability and collision, which could affect all life on Huld.

I meant local interests concerning the import of opi from Luce to Pyzan, said Lo.

So you will intervene?

Sandre has already dismantled the canopy, said Halo.

Mereg turned to Taarh. Did you hear? she said, her eyes shining.

I have been speaking aloud, said Halo.

It was well that you intervened, said Taarh.

Not we. It was the order of the Senate.

You arranged the meeting with Antus and Pullentem.

That far, we intervened, said Halo. I beg forgiveness.

Of your Council, not of us, said Merreg.

Forgiveness for our deception, said Halo.

Mereg looked into Halo's eyes. She returned the gaze.

And now you wish to return to your Hald? said Halo.

Mereg nodded.

Lo and I must discuss this. We will speak with you tomorrow.

When shall I come to you? said Merreg.

We will meet in the Form at midday, said Halo. We will drink coffee.



Mereg arrived early in the Form, and took a seat by a table under a large umbrella. There was wet in the air, but a few citizens were sitting and taking coffee. Taarh had procured some coins for her, and she ordered coffee and dried fruit. She waited.

Halo was alone when she appeared. She seemed to drift, rather than walk, over the cobble-stones to Merreg's table. Merreg stood up to receive her. To her surprise, Halo took a seat. The waiter who had been watching

Mereg came to take her order. Halo sat without speaking, staring at Merreg, her dark eyes wide open, questioning. The waiter stood looking at her. Finally Halo pointed at Merreg's coffee and fruit, and said: The same, please. The waiter nodded and disappeared.

I have never seen an Eilean sitting and drinking coffee, said Merreg.

I am experimenting, said Halo.

My friends the previous ambassadors never experimented in this way, said Merreg.

They have each other, said Halo. Now I am alone. I can experiment.

Lo has gone back to Eile?

To see our children before he dies, said Halo.

Mereg looked at the Eilean woman in astonishment.

You cannot imagine us having children? said Halo.

It had not crossed my mind. I am sorry. I know nothing about Eile.

And I know nothing about Huld, said Halo. I do not understand why you do not mourn your dead Qno.

Impulsively, Merreg reached over the table and took her hand. Her hand was warm. She felt it shake. Halo's shoulders were shaking. Merreg stood and came round the table to her, and the Eilean woman stood up and allowed Merreg to embrace her. They stood rocking and weeping together as the waiter came with the coffee and fruit.

Syrup in the coffee? he asked.

No thank you, came Halo's broken voice, muffled in the crook of Merreg's shoulder. Just coffee, thank you very much. Thank you, thank you, very much.

Eventually they sat down again, still holding hands over the table.

In Eile we use language to stabilise our thoughts, said Halo. We do not have these secondary meanings to words that you play with so

skilfully. You say husband and expect people to realise that was not your meaning. We cannot do that.

Mereg smiled at her through the tears still wet on her face.

But I made you smile, said Halo. I am learning.

Language is our freedom to make mistakes, and to create impossible meaning, said Merreg.

In Eile we use the dynaesthene to create impossible meaning, said Halo, and then to actuate it.

Impossible meaning can be a great blessing, and a terrible curse, said Merreg.

Now you are talking again the way you did in the Senate, said Halo. Lo and I assumed at first that you were a practiced speaker. But then we heard your mind afterwards, and saw that you were as surprised as everyone else was.

I am still, said Merreg. But there is at least one person at home in the Hald who will be able to explain to me what happened.

The Abbess? said Halo.

Cirsc, said Merreg, who loved Qno the same way as I did.

I must come to your Hald and speak with her, said Halo.

So you can take me back with you?

Halo looked hard at Merreg.—On one condition, she said.

Yes?

If I do this, I am disobeying the Council.

I understand.

You will speak to no one of this.

You have my promise, said Merreg.

Not even to your partner the Chair, said Halo.

Not even, said Merreg. But can you also take Hadr?

The father of your child? I cannot do that. Two people more than doubles the risk.

I must talk to him, said Mereg.

No. You have given me your promise.



The Lord Oswicus stood on the outer walls of the Citadel of Luce and experimented with his damaged sight. He sought the flash of colours over the poppy-fields and did not find them; winter was approaching, he reasoned, there were no colours to see. But neither could he see the green of the grass under the Walls - or was there any grass there? Was it not grey sand? Had there perhaps been an early snowfall?

The red cloud hovered in the focus of his sight wherever he looked.

How is the sky? he asked.

Clean, said Hwicce. The sun has set. There is snow on the eastern mountains, pink in the afterglow.

Tungel? said Oswicus.

Hwicce took his hand and pointed it to the spark of Tungel sinking after the sun over the western ridges. Do you see it? She asked.

Yes, said Oswicus.

After a while he said: The red cloud is softer.

The Eile doctors said it would fade, said Hwicce.

As it fades, I shall see the holes in my sight, said Oswicus.

Hwicce did not reply. Oswicus stared towards the south, where the horizon dipped towards the far grasslands. His mind sought out the grey sands there beyond the horizon, the merciless heat of the legions' march to Kirfa, the bodies of his comrades that lined the road. Were their bones still there, bleached in the sand?

What is that light? he said.

I see no light, said Hwicce.

Oswicus pointed due south, where the road ran towards the horizon. The black light, he said.

Hwicce looked at him. His eyes were focused, his features unclouded. She followed the line of his pointing finger. And she saw what he saw, the gleam of black light over the road; and her clear sight saw a narrow black pillar rising dim and high and far into the sky and deep into the earth, and a cross-tree at road level that spanned far to the east and to the west; and she saw a bright halo of gleaming black light around the approaching vehicle.

It is not red, said Oswicus. It is black. I see black again.

The halo approached at great speed. Soon they could make out the two figures steering the prancing black horses. It is the girl, said Hwicce. And the man Meer.

Meer, said Oswicus. Yes, I would like to talk to Meer.



Cleft will see to the horses, said Oswicus.

There are no horses, said Klimpt.

Oswicus looked, and saw through his red cloud that there were no horses.

It that the Chariot? he said to Meer.

Was once, said Klimpt. Now is burnt.

Oswicus looked at her. Klimpt? he said.

Calimpeto, Osuwiquea, said Klimpt.



We saw a new light over Luce, said Meer. This time it was yellow. We saw it well, we were gliding high over the Abbey. It seemed to be a signal.

The Canopy, said Oswicus. Sandre broke his contract, pulled the Canopy. He won't be welcome here again.

Sandre—is it Sandre who buys your opi? said Meer.

No more, said Oswicus. Now we must look to Carhault.

Bad trade. You stop, Osuwiquea. I tell you before.

Osuwiquea, said Oswicus with a strange smile on his face. Where did you learn to speak, girl?

Not in Luce, said Klimpt.

Klimpt is right, Oswicus, said Meer. You must stop this trade. Pyzan has deserted you.

Deserted? They have just found us. We are visible now to both Kirfa and Pyzan. They will never now leave us in peace.

They knew all about you in Pyzan, Oswicus. They have known for many years. The Canopy was to hide from Kirfa and the Ambassadors. But Kirfa is now a dead city, and our friends from Eile have surveillance powers no longer. As for Pyzan, she is not the military power she was, now the Tyranny has ended, and the legions weakened. You are under clear skies again. Cultivate papaver for food, as you told Sam you did.

Oswicus had shown no sign that he was listening, but he looked up as Meer talked of Samuesil.—She survived the flight, they told me, he said. She is in the Abbey. You flew with her, Klimpt? You taught her?

Tesamuesil learn easy said Klimpt.

Her name is Samuesil, said Oswicus. You must respect people's names, girl.

Etessamuesilo, said Klimpt.



There is much I do not understand, said Meer. When the Chariot was burnt, I saw the brilliant green light from far south, beyond the grasses, on the Kirfa road. I thought it was the destruction of the dynaesthene in the chariot that caused the light. But now the chariot drives as it did when Samuesil drove it. I rode with her many times. Now it is stronger, faster, and it flies. If this is the dynaesthene, I do not understand it. Samuesil always called it Imagination. We must ask the Ambassadors.

I had the white mares slaughtered, said Oswicus, and now they are black—did I see them?

You bad man, said Klimpt. Tesamuesil not forget.

Her name is Samuesil, said Oswicus again.

Many names, said Klimpt.

Not that name, said Oswicus.

## 9

Hadr, said Mereg, I am going home to the Hald.

When? said Hadr.

How? said Pteleũ.

I may not talk about it, said Mereg. You cannot come. You must come by ship, next spring.

Hadr looked at Pteleũ. Pteleũ looked at Mereg.

Why next spring? asked Hadr.

You are going to be a father, remember? said Pteleũ. Mereg wants you to be with her when the baby comes.

Really? said Hadr.

Yes, said Pteleũ. Fathers have to welcome their children into the world. I'll come too, if you like. I'd like to see your son being born.

Please come, said Mereg.

We promise, said Pteleũ.

I like it here in Pyzan, said Hadr.

I want to meet your family, said Pteleũ. And all your friends. Pyzan is a rotten city. You'll soon see.

Thank you, Pteleũ, said Mereg.

Thank you, Mereg, said Pteleũ.



Are you ready? said the Ambassador.

What do I do? said Mereg.

You do nothing, said the Ambassador.



Mereg saw the planet revolving beneath them, mostly swathed in cloud. Here and there were gaps in the cloud, blue sea and small islands. She recognised nothing.

She looked at her hands and saw only the clouds and the sea. Then she realised she was not looking. If I have no hands, she reasoned, I have no eyes.

That is a valid observation, said the Ambassador.

How long will this take?

We are not moving in time, said the Ambassador.

We could visit Tenes, thought Merreg.

Later, that may be sensible, said the Ambassador.

Then Merreg could see her hands again, and feel the mulch beneath her feet. They were under the great beech trees at the foot of the Hill of the Masters. The trees were leafless.

Lo and Halo, the old Ambassadors, stood together a short distance from them under the beeches. They stretched out their hands in Eilean greeting. Merreg ran to them and embraced them both together.

You knew we were coming? she said.

The Ambassador let us know, said Lo.

The three Eileans stood together in communion. Merreg heard snatches of their silent talk; but their thoughts were too rich and too swift for her to catch any meaning.

The new Halo smiled at her—Mereg was learning to see her smiles. I can no longer usurp Halo's name, she said. Did you hear my today's name?

Perhaps. Was it Hornai, or something?

I shall say it aloud for you, said Halo. *Haornaithj ti tun Karmair te hingierngernis Taairnarain hor te*. That is my name here today, under

the beeches of the Hill of the Masters, with colleagues whom I slighted and mistrusted, and my partner gone.

May I call you *Haornaithj*? said Mereg.

That is the peritonic form. Only I can use it.

So what can I call you? asked Mereg.

*Te hingierngernis Taairnarain hor te* would be the short version, but for today only.

I shall call you Daisy, said Mereg.

That is a lovely name, said the Eilean. I shall bear it with pride here on Huld. But now you shall leave us, Mereg, and go to find your partner. She is making her prayer in the Chapel. We Ambassadors have much to debate.



Samuesil sat alone, gazing up at the light which sank in through the blue and green glass of the high windows. There were rustlings and whispers in the deserted chapel, a few dead leaves moving over the stone floor; but she heard the soft footprints as they approached and knew them to be Mereg's. She turned and looked at her, silhouetted against the sunlight in the high open doorway..

Mereg sat on the bench beside her, bent forward and said her prayer to Reagh. Then she sat still, looking at the great tapestry that hid the entrance to the inner sanctuary of the Goddess, Reagh's white ring on its white background.

Welcome home, Mereg, said Samuesil. I was told you were on the way.

Pyzan was not a very nice place, said Mereg.

I hear you presented yourself at the Senate as First Secretary to the Chair of Kirfa, said Samuesil. And that you spoke in my name.

And were you told of the outcome? said Mereg.

Yes, said Samuesil.

They said nothing for a while, listening to the dry leaves.

Your breasts will soon fill up with milk, said Samuesil.

What were you told? said Mereg

That you saved the planet.

I did not, said Mereg. There is much still to do. But I achieved a reprieve. Now the main work is for you, with Meer and the Ambassadors.

And did you bring your child's father back with you?

Hadr found his true love in Pyzan, said Mereg. Perhaps he will bring him home, later.

Your belly will start swelling, said Samuesil.

It has already, said Mereg.

I can't walk straight, said Samuesil.

Mereg turned at last to look at her. Samuesil's face was gaunt, with bitter lines around the eyes and the mouth.

Samuesil, for her part, could no longer see the innocence, the haze of immaturity that she remembered in Mereg's face.

Is our time passed? whispered Samuesil.

No, said Mereg. Only some of it.



In Luce, Meer and Klimpt came into the Refectory looking for breakfast, to find Oswicus and Speaker Joel sitting alone, deep in discussion.

Speaker Joel, said Meer. Well met in Luce.

He came in the night, said Oswicus. Alone.

Alone? said Meer. Where are your Huns?

Dead, said Speaker Joel. Slaughtered in Gosste by Borl and his Migroes.

So Borl is Lord of Gosste—of Kirfa?

Borl and the Migroes are dead, said Joel. Slaughtered by my Huns. It was a fair fight.

Indeed. And how is Mrs Speaker?

You leave my Maggie out of this, said Joel.

Of course, forgive me, said Meer. So who rules now in Kirfa?

No one, said Joel. Gosste is empty. Sand.

Indeed.

Those as lived went up river, to the Falls, said Joel. Huns and Migroes. Building New Gosste. Good solution.

Huns and Migrants together?

That's what solution means, said Joel.

Solution means self-loosening, said Klimpt.

You have been talking to Cirsc, said Meer.

Cherisoche, said Klimpt fondly.

Tough for Maggie, said Joel. All alone on the farm.

Were they all killed, your men? said Meer.

Every one of them, said Joel. And those what was left absconded with the Enemy. That's why I'm here. Shortage of labour. How am I going to work a farm with only one?

There are two of you, said Meer.

Maggie is one, said Joel. And Os says he can't spare anyone. Opi.

Papaver, said Oswicus. Food, not opi.

Might ride over to the Falls, said Joel. See if they've got anyone to spare there. One or two hefty Migroes.

Mrs Speaker won't like that, said Meer.

Maggie loves Migroes, said Joel.

Maybe there'll be new refugees from the East, said Meer.

Need a good war, said Joel.



Meer's plan was to fly out to the mountains east of the Plain of Luce and explore the transible building that the denizens of Luce called the Depot.

Not go too close, said Klimpt. Tenes bad place.

If they are experiencing seismic disturbance on Tenes, said Meer, the transible may be damaged.

We go see, said Klimpt.

They took their harness and wings and launched themselves into a gentle south easterly breeze from the Tower where Samuesil had made her first flight, and glided eastwards over the dark sands, warmed by the morning sun. There were columns of rising air here and there over the sand which Klimpt seemed to be able to see, and Meer followed her lead. Before long the mountains drew closer and Meer could make out the far shape of the huge building, brooding on an area of yellow sand some half a league from the foot of the eastern mountain range.

No too close, called Klimpt again.

They landed on the edge of the area of yellow sand. Tenes ground, said Klimpt. We walk on the moon.

And also Carhault ground, said Meer. Is there yellow sand on Carhault?

Rift ore spill, said Klimpt. Everywhere, creep and crawl. Nose and ears and eyes.—No too close, Amre!

Meer had shed his wings and was walking towards the building. I must see, Calimpeto, he said. You stay here by the wings.

I come with you, said Klimpt.

There was a low rumbling sound, too low for their ears but pricking in their fingertips and pulsing in their chests. Klimpt gripped Meer's hand. Bad, she said.

I must look inside, said Meer.

Then you are on Tenes, said Klimpt. Bad place.

Or Carhault, said Meer.

I not see you again, Amre.

I have to find out, Calimpeto. Wait here. I shall be careful.

She crouched by a yellow rock, some hundred fathoms from the building, watching Meer make his way towards the huge doors at the northern end. Meer kept well north of the building, coming round to where he could see the doors.

They were open. He stopped.

Inside there was blackness.

What you see? yelled Klimpt.

Black, shouted Meer. Pitch black. Empty.

Klimpt screamed at him: Amre! Come back!

Empty, thought Meer. Limitless empty. He took a few steps nearer.

Klimpt was on her feet, running like a leopard towards him. He turned and saw her as she jumped on him, bowling him over on his back, and began pummelling his face with her angry fists and screaming incoherently. He tried to grab her arms, but she was too strong for him, holding him down with her knees, hammering at his face. She stopped as she felt, rather than saw, the blood on her hands.

Then she collapsed sobbing on top of him.

What? Calimpeto? he said indistinctly.

Black transible, she sobbed. Open to nowhere. You never come back.

Let me up, Calimpeto.

You come away from here?

Yes, I promise.

She stood and helped him to his feet, still trembling with emotion. The blood was flowing from a cut under his eye, and her knuckles were

red. He allowed her to lead him back to the yellow rock where their wings and harnesses lay.

What, Calimpeto? he asked again.

Black, she said. But then his mind caught hers, and he heard her speak: The transible is working, but there is no alignment. It is open to nowhere. I saw this on Tenes. A whole shift of workers sucked into the black.

Transibles cannot be used for people, said Meer.

On Tenes yes. They move everything by transible. Ore, supplies, workers. Hwicce was there. She found me in Tenes and took me here to Luce.

You saw this on Tenes?

But she shut her mind to him again, and showed him no more of Tenes. Instead she spoke:

I bloody you, Amre. You not go there.

Cirsc had transformed the old Abbot's dark quarters. The great curtains over the tall windows were gone, and the early winter sun shone in. The monks passing on the wall above looked down into the Abbess's bright and open study and saw the working hub of the Abbey. They saw the large oval conference table with Cirsc at its head, flanked by the monk Sne and the nun and erstwhile water-lady Nuus. They saw the three tall, black Eileans, the Astronomers Elri and Ynglà, the Chair of Kirfa, and the sisters Mereg and Tesil. And looking up, they saw the two tiny figures high in the sky above the Abbey, spiralling gradually down to land in the Meadow Behind.

Cirsc held up one hand. Before we continue, she said, I think I can feel in my knees that Meer and Klimpt are about to arrive. She rang a small pewter bell on the table beside her.

A young and rather small monk put his head round the door and said: Abbess?

What happened to the rush-water? asked Cirsc.

Oops, said the young monk.

And bring more bowls, will you Elif? There are more people arriving.

—I was saying, said Cirsc. This Pullentem—there was another Pullentem in Kirfa, wasn't there?

The Northerner? said Halo. The one with the oil in his hair?

His brother, said Mereg.

Pullentem was a problem, said Samuesil.

The Migrants slit his throat, said Mereg. Ella told me.

Ella wasn't there, said Tesil.

The children told Ella. Ask Wing and Eye.



Samuesil reached for Mereg's hand.

This Pullentem, the Pyzan Pullentem—he was importing opi from Luce? It was Lo who asked.

He and Sandre, said Mereg.

But that is not the main issue?

It is a terrible issue, said Mereg. Opi is everywhere in Pyzan. They die on the streets.

But it has been stopped?

It will become scarce, said Mereg. The demand will continue. The price will rise. Where there is need, there is profit.

How can there be profit? asked Tesil.

I used the word in the Pyzan sense, said Mereg. Profit only means more money in Pyzan.

And price only means more money, said Cirsc.

How on earth do they talk together? said Tesil.

By a consensus of misunderstanding, said Cirsc.

It seemed to Mereg that the three Eileans were smiling.

A very young nun appeared at the door with a tray of drinking-bowls, followed by the young monk with large amphora of rush-water.

Thank you, Elif and Mais, said Cirsc.

The two young people smiled proudly and turned to the door, hand in hand. And as they did so, Klimpt and Meer appeared in the doorway, hand in hand.

You wished to see us, Abbess? said Meer.

I did indeed, said Cirsc. We have been waiting for you. Are you hungry?

We can wait till dinner, said Meer. Is this a council?

Yes, said Cirsc. Come in and tell us about Luce. Run along now, Elif and Mais. Well done.—And Elif and Mais bowed awkwardly and withdrew. Outside they put their arms around each other as they walked. Klimpt and Meer are gorgeous, aren't they? said Mais.

Yes, said Elif. Meer has been in a fight.



Have you been in a fight, Meer? asked Samuesil.

Yes, said Meer. We have various things to report from Luce.

Tell us about the fight, said Mereg.

I hit him, hard, said Klimpt, raising her fists. Amre very stupid man.

Everybody looked at them in silence.

Sometimes, said Klimpt.

Is this part of your report from Luce? said Samuesil.

Ye, said Meer and Klimpt together.

So start at the beginning, said Samuesil.

Meer took a deep draft of rush-water.

To begin with, we found that the Canopy has been dismantled. The immediate cause of the wandering of Tenes has been removed.

If true this is momentous news, said Sne.

Oswicus and Hwicce confirmed it, said Meer. There is no longer any screening.

We must check, said Elri. If this is so, then the gravity gradient has been removed, and we should expect the effect to be seen on Tenes. However we must not forget that its orbit has already been broken. How it will move now has still to be seen.

I spoke to Antus before I left, said Mereg. He said the same.

You knew of this? asked Meer.

Daisy told me, said Mereg.

Who is Daisy? asked Meer.

The erstwhile new Halo raised her hand. That is my new name, she said.

Did you talk to Sandre? Meer asked her.

My partner did, before he returned to Eile. Sandre told him he had pulled the Canopy. He wanted no more to do with Luce. He was afraid.

Afraid of what? said Samuesil.

Perhaps the Senate. Perhaps Carhault. Perhaps both. Opi was his and Pullentem's private sideline: Pullentem profited from the sale in Pyzan, and my guess is that Sandre was selling to Carhault. But Sandre's main source of income is the flow of teneti ore to Carhault. He was afraid of risking that.

The flow continues? asked Lo. Did you examine the transible?

Yes, said Klimpt, holding up her fists again. Too close.

The transible building is a danger area, said Meer. Klimpt stopped me from going closer. The transible is running, but not aligned.

What does that mean? asked Mereg.

Hwicce explained to me. If the alignment with the remote transible post is broken while at full power there will be uncontrolled cargo loss until control is resumed. Hwicce sent a surveillance team as soon as we informed her, and it seems that control was temporarily regained shortly after we were there and the power shut down. The transible is now dead.

If Tenes is now on an irregular trajectory it must be very difficult to re-establish alignment with the Luce transible, said Halo.

We know nothing of the actual conditions on Tenes, said Meer. They could be terrible.

Where are they now, Pullentem and this Sandre? said Samuesil.

I believe they are under house arrest in Pyzan, said Daisy. They have money, and lawyers. They will go free.

Unfortunately, said Meer, they are not our main problem. Our main problem is that we have a runaway moon in the Span. This is a problem for the teneti mining companies no less than for us. And I have no solution.

There was a silence.

There is more? said Samuesil.

We found your Chariot again. Or rather, it found us, said Meer.

You have talked of this before, said Samuesil. But my chariot was destroyed. I was there. You saw the green light. It was terrifying. So how can this be?

It was burnt, but not destroyed, said Meer. We think it must have torn itself free in the fire. The green light was its defence, not its destruction—a great surge of energy. It followed Klimpt when she returned to Luce, and also when we set off together back to the Abbey. Lo and Halo saw it. They thought it would not leave Luce.

You did not mention this to me, said Samuesil, looking at the Eileans.

That is our fault, said Lo. We left for Eile, and when we returned we were no longer ambassadors. You lay in the Infirmary. We did not wish to trouble you.

You say my chariot followed Klimpt? said Samuesil. By itself?

Meer said: You always said it was Imagination that powered the chariot. I never fully understood. Can the Eileans explain?

We can only surmise, said Lo.

Please do, said Meer.

Dynaesthene is an Eilean concept which we rendered as *Imagination* when we introduced the technique to the people of Kirfa, said Lo. For doing so we were severely criticised by the Council in Eile. It is a political matter in Eile, an internal matter which is irrelevant for us here and now.

We taught the engineers of Kirfa certain aspects of its use. Samuesil's chariot was one example.

And it was the burning of the dynaesthene which cause the green light?

No. You cannot burn dynaesthene. It is not a material, or a device installed in the chariot. Perhaps you could think of it as a technique.

But you need teneti for the dynaesthene to work?

Not necessarily. Teneti can be used to focus the dynaesthene, but it is an aid, not a necessity. We use teneti in the power-plants in Eile. We apply dynaesthene to the teneti to produce the energy.

So there was no teneti in the chariot?

There were tiny collars of teneti on either side of the main axle, where the wheels would have been. Too small to be noticeable. They served to focus the dynaesthene.

And where was the dynaesthene? asked Meer.

In Samuesil's mind, mostly.

Now they tell me, said Samuesil.

So why the green light, the great explosion? asked Meer.

We do not know, said Lo. We have had accidents with teneti on Eile which have caused flares of green light, causing red-blindness and damage to the retina of the eye. These are effects we do not understand. Samuesil knows the chariot best: perhaps she can clarify?

Samuesil shook her head. At times it seemed to me that the chariot was alive, she said. That it heard my mind and responded as it saw fit. Mostly, it followed my horses.—You say it followed Klimpt?

It tried, but it seemed to us that it could not leave Luce, said Lo. Perhaps that was while the Canopy was intact. It stayed in Luce when Klimpt and Meer returned to the Abbey. And then we left for Eile.

But now the Canopy has gone, said Meer, and it came to meet us on our way to Luce. We drove it.

You drove it?

It allowed us to drive it to Luce.

Where is it now? said Samuesil.

It came with us to the Abbey, said Meer. It is in the Meadow Behind the Hill of the Masters.

Samuesil clambered to her feet, leaning on Mereg. Let me see it, she said.



The chariot lay still at the edge of the Meadow Behind, not far from the path down from the Abbey. It did not stir as Samuesil and Mereg approached it. Meer and the others stood on the path and watched. The hammers of the builders rang in the Meadow. The school was taking shape.

Samuesil put her hand on the bodywork, as Meer and Klimpt had done. Not now charred, but smooth and black. Samuesil leant on Mereg's shoulder and stepped up into the chariot. Mereg followed her. There was no movement.

Meer said it rose for them, and drove to Luce, said Samuesil. It does not rise to us.

Where do you want to go? asked Mereg.

I don't want to go anywhere, said Samuesil.

So why should it rise for us?

Do you wish to go anywhere, Mereg?

Not now, said Mereg.



Perhaps tonight, perhaps tomorrow, then for two or three nights, said Elri, Tenes will align with the Small Fourth, that Antus calls Payle.

We should go up to Upper Crop to see it, said Ynglà.

Will that be better than here?

No. But I want to see the brothers.

What is happening to you, Ynglà?

The same that is happening to you, said Ynglà. They will be in the Tavern later today.

The Brothers? said Elri. This is crazy.

Amfer is nice, said Ynglà.

Yes, said Elri. It would be nice to see Amfer.



Later that night, Elri and Sextus lay on their backs side by side in Mereg's Secret Place above the farm at Upper Crop, looking at the stars.

Watch carefully, said Elri.

I see the Three Beyond, said Sextus.

Look carefully.

There's a small one between Two and Three, just below them, said Sextus.

That is the Fourth. Your eyes are good, said Elri. Like mine.

Tenes is so bright, it's difficult to see them.

Watch the Fourth carefully.

But Sextus was watching Elri.

No, said Elri. Watch the Fourth.

Dutifully, Sextus watched. Six minutes of silence passed.

Any time now, said Elri.

What happened? said Sextus.

What did you see? said Elri.

Tenes went past the Fourth. But I saw the Fourth all the time, just above Tenes.

So did I, said Elri. There was no eclipse. We must check with Ynglà.

Later, said Sextus. In the morning.



Did you see it? said Elri at the breakfast table.

No, said Ynglà. We forgot.



The Brothers took the Astronomers back to Tarrant in the milk cart. The Market Place was full.

Thanks for the lift, said Ynglà.

Any time, said Septimus.

Soon, said Ynglà.

We have to report to the Council, said Elri.

They watched the sisters disappear down the alley that led out to the Abbey.

That was wonderful, Sextus, said Septimus.

This is serious, Brother, said Sextus.

Four children, said Septimus.

Two each, said Sextus. Feasible.

Easy, said Septimus. Are we crazy?

Amfer is on, said Sextus. Now Qno is gone.





There was no eclipse, said Elri.

What does that mean? asked Meer.

We must watch again tonight, and tomorrow night. After that the system moves on, and we have to wait for three weeks.

You're sure?

Sextus saw it too, said Elri.

Three of you? said Meer.

No, just me and Sextus.

You didn't see it, Ynglà?

I forgot, said Ynglà.

They're lovely boys, said Cirsc happily.



The next night, they all watched. The gap between Tenes and the Fourth was quite distinct.

The gap will increase for the next two or three nights, said Ynglà.

What does that mean? asked Meer.

Tenes is not as far out of orbit as it might have been. It could be we were right about the Canopy, said Elri.

Could be? said Samuesil.

We have to wait for three weeks to see the next alignment, said Elri.  
We must write to Antus.

No post until the spring ship arrives, said Meer.

I am returning to Pyzan, said Daisy. Lo and Halo wish to accompany me. We can take a letter to Antus if you wish.

Thank you, Daisy, said Cirsc. I hope we will see you again soon.

If you will have me, said Daisy, I should be honoured.



The winter set in unusually early, with heavy snow and bitter winds. The Kind children were enormously excited, never having seen snow in Kirfa. The Astronomers' children had seen the occasional frost, but hardly snow. Cirsc had the sledges brought out, and the Hill of the Masters became a toboggan run.

The builders had managed to finish the windows and the roof of the school, and the building was more or less weather-tight. Work had begun on the interior, but had not progressed well, since the snow was deep and hampered all work, and the Tarc timber lay buried. Samuesil's Chariot had also disappeared under the snow. Sextus, Septimus and Mereg were snowed in at Upper Crop, Ella was alone at Middle Crop, and Jank and Jent were holed up in Lower Crop. The Kind Children were all moved out of the refugee huts and into the Refectory where a roaring fire was allowed to burn most of the day. Tesil and her sons slept with them, as did Wing and Eye and the two Cwints girls. Writing and Arithmetic were taught in the mornings, and Dancing every afternoon unless the weather allowed toboggan runs on the Hill of the Masters.

Samuesil stared listlessly out of her window on the featureless snow. Meer and Klimpt took their wings whenever there was the smallest breeze and toiled up through the drifts to the top of the Hill of the Masters, where they launched themselves out into the wind and snow, sometimes managing to rise a few hundred fathoms or simply glide out over the Meadow. The Astronomers spent most of their days poring over their figures, or in the library trying to make sense of old records.

And then three weeks had passed, and the snow continued to fall, and it was time to check the Span for the next alignment of Tenes and the little fourth moon. Miraculously, the weather cleared during the evening. The Astronomers climbed to the top of the tower of the Chapel and stood

in the bitter cold out on the parapet where they could escape the lights from the windows of the Refectory far below. In Upper Crop, Mereg had a good view from the window of her room.

It was obvious as soon as the Span rose what the outcome would be. Tenes was high above the Fourth: there would be no eclipse.

Tenes is moving away, said Ynglà.

Or at least up, said Elri. Let's hope Antus saw it: then we can work out the parallax.

In, before we freeze, said Ynglà.

But Mereg in Upper Crop sat by her open window swathed in blankets, and watched on. Half an hour later she made a pencil drawing on a sheet of Tarrant paper.

The next morning at breakfast she showed it to her brothers. This has to go to the sisters, she said. Any volunteers?

I'll go, said Sextus and Septimus together.



The two boys came over the shoulder of Tarrant Ridge on skis, skirted the town and clambered through the drifts to the Bridge. The wind had blown the Bridge almost clear, but they had to dig their way in through the gate.

Kto heard them scraping at the snow, and took a shovel to the drift from the other side. They met in a flurry of white.

Did you bring any milk? said Kto.

Very funny, said Sextus. Where are the girls?

Which girls? said Kto.

Very funny, said Septimus.



The refectory was crowded: hardly large enough for the burgeoning population of nuns and monks, it also saw to the hungry needs of the children, who now sat on the dais where the old Abbot and the senior monks used to eat. Cirsc disliked eating on the dais; today she sat with Samuesil, Wing, Eye and the Astronomer sisters. Sextus and Septimus left their snow-caked cloaks in the vestibule and made their way towards Cirsc's table.

Not enough food for you up in the Hald? asked Eye. Elri and Ynglà busied themselves with their soup. Cirsc's twinkling eye shone over the company.

Letter from Mereg, said Septimus dramatically.

For me? said Samuesil.

For the astronomers, said Septimus. He spread it out on the table in front of them.

The sisters put down their spoons and studied the drawing. Ynglà gave a yelp. Elri's eyes were wide.

What does it mean? asked Samuesil.

It's not possible, said Elri.

We should have watched a bit longer, said Ynglà. But it was so cold.

Come on, explain, said Wing.

She doesn't write anything, said Eye. Just a drawing.

No need to write anything, said Elri. Look. We all saw the Fourth well above Tenes, free of the system. But Mereg shows One and Three both traversing Tenes a few minutes later.

Traversing?

They can be seen against the surface of Tenes. One about centre, Three just entering the orb.

Which means?

Tenes is behind them.

Which means?

One and Three ought to be in opposition. Tenes ought to eclipse them.

And?

Tenes is way behind them. Elri, we must check our data. We can calculate the distance between One and Three, and then if Mereg's drawing is accurate we can see how far behind them Tenes is.

Mereg's drawing will be completely accurate, said Samuesil. And her eyes are perfect. But you still haven't told us what this means.

It means that Tenes has completely reversed its drift, said Elri. It means that dismantling the Canopy has catapulted Tenes out from the subsystem of the Four Beyond. There will be a minute effect on our orbit, but on Tenes it will be huge. It means that the mining companies on Tenes must be feeling sea-sick. Or worse.

Worse?

Seismic disturbances, at the least, said Elri. We have to go back to our rooms and look at the data.

We'll come with you, said Sextus.

Elri looked at him under lowering eyebrows.

You look hungry, she said. Stay here and have some soup.



Seismic disturbances? said Samuesil. Where is Meer?

He and Klimpt are over there with Tesil and the Cwintses, said Wing.

Get him, Wing, said Samuesil.

What does seismic mean? asked Eye.

Earthquakes, said Septimus. Volcanoes.

Meer came over with Wing.—Mereg sent the astronomers a drawing, said Samuesil. Tenes is being thrown about.

Mereg has fantastic eyesight if she can see that well, said Meer.

The girls worked that out from Merereg's drawing, said Samuesil. Meer, we need to talk to the Ambassadors.

They're in Pyzan, with Daisy, said Meer.

You can call them, can't you?

They can probably hear me. But I can't hear them. But then I expect they can hear you, too—and probably Merereg. They'll know if something big is happening. And if they're in Pyzan they'll be in touch with Antus, He'll know.

I want to do something, said Samuesil. Go somewhere. To Luce.

You want more flying lessons? said Klimpt, who had come up to take Meer's hand.

Everything's easy for you children, said Samuesil.

Grumpy old woman, said Klimpt.

She's right, though, said Cirsc, bubbling with laughter. You can fly.

Samuesil can fly, said Klimpt.

In this weather? said Samuesil. Are you crazy?

Soft snow, easy landing for broken legs, said Klimpt.

How can you stand her, Meer? said Samuesil.

Nothing wrong with my legs, said Meer.

She says the snow will be gone by next week, said Cirsc. He's always right about the weather.

Cirsc, said Samuesil. Can you lend me a monk or two to dig my Chariot out of the snow?



In Pyzan, Ambassador Daisy and her two compatriots, Lo and Halo, pored over Antus's calculations and drawings. Antus stood watching his guests' purple-black, hairless heads leaning towards each other over the

table, and saw how they had opened their thoughts to each other and were reading his drawings with one mind. It made him feel very small and insignificant.

The drawings are very elegantly executed, said Daisy. Who is the draughtsman?

Teleus, of course, said Antus. Under my supervision. He has the knack of drawing things as they really are.

Pteleũ, said Hadr, bringing in the dishes. You can't get it right, can you Antus?

What will I do when you go back to the Hald and take him with you?

You will have to come with us, Antus.

So your drawings show that the Tenes subsystem is breaking up, Antus?

Pteleũ's drawings, said Hadr.

And the consequences?

For Tenes itself, said Antus, it is clear that erratic changes of orbit such as these will cause tremendous tension in the moon's crust. There will be major seismic disturbances and probably volcanic activity. I cannot imagine what has happened to the mining installations.

This is what happened on an Eile Six moon, said Lo, after a near-collision with a large asteroid. There were terrible casualties, and for a time we feared further collisions and asteroid strikes on Six. But we managed to avert them.

You were able to intervene?

We stabilised the orbit of the moon concerned.. It was not easy.

How did you do that? said Antus.

Dynaesthene, said Lo.

I knew he was going to say that, said Hadr.

By dynaesthene you mean—imagination?

That would perhaps be the dictionary translation, said Lo. But you use the concept very differently. For you, imagination is something which happens in isolation inside the individual mind. You use language and art to exteriorise it, but you are careful to distinguish between imagination and reality. For you, imagination is a type of lying.

So you stabilised your runaway moon using lies? said Hadr.

Very well put, said Lo.

Could we use the dynaesthene to stabilise Tenes? said Hadr.

The Eileans looked at each other. It was as if they were unwilling to reply. After a while they seemed to make up their mind.

No, said Lo.

Why not?

On Eile, we have learnt gradually and sometimes painfully over the course of centuries how to control the dynaesthene, said Daisy. Outside Eile, its use has not been successful.

Samuesil's chariot worked by dynaesthene, said Hadr.

Again the Eileans hesitated. Lo and Halo were waiting for Daisy. Finally she nodded to them.

Halo and I were reprimanded by the Council for introducing the concept to Kirfa, said Lo. We used it in small ways—

Like Samuesil's Chariot? said Hadr.

Not exactly. Or perhaps not at all. We were experimenting. Samuesil did the rest.

What rest?

Samuesil had an intuitive grasp of nature of the dynaesthene. In her own way. In an unusual way.

Samuesil seems to be an unusual woman, said Daisy.

What was so unusual? asked Hadr. Don't you have chariots like hers on Eile?



Lo and Halo laughed. No, they said. You should come with us to Eile one day, Hadr, you and Pteleũ. You have much to teach us, and we have much to teach you.

Hadr glowed. Pteleũ watched him, glowing with him.

Humans, said Daisy softly, as if to herself.

Pteleũ's dinner was delicious. As was their custom, the Eileans sipped rush-water and watched the humans eating.

You don't know what you're missing, Eileans, said Hadr.

We are not missing it, said Halo. We are enjoying it. We can feel that the taste is delicious. When you come to Eile with us, Hadr and Pteleũ, we will show you the joys of Eilean nourishment.

Sounds eerie, said Hadr.

Sounds exciting, said Pteleũ.

And after the meal, Antus produced a flagon of the white water, and Pteleũ fetched six small stoups.

—But seriously, said Hadr, why can't we use the dynaesthene to stabilise Tenes?

The energy demand would be enormous, said Lo. Our power consumption at home on Eile is not high, but even so it puts high demands on our resources. We use the dynaesthene for power production using small local teams of workers on short shifts. Twelve workers together can maintain the power using teneti as a focus for perhaps an hour at a time. It would take years to train workers here on Huld to do this work, and it is unlikely that human dynaesthene would be identical to ours. Furthermore you would need an enormous amount of teneti to focus enough dynaesthene to shift a whole moon.

Tenes is made of teneti, said Hadr. Wouldn't that be enough?

The three Eileans looked at Hadr in amazement. Then they looked at each other in amazement. The silence of their amazement was profound indeed.

The boy is right, said Daisy. What fools we are! Tenes is the richest source of teneti that has ever been found. The degree of focus would be unimaginable. We three alone—

No, said Halo. We cannot interfere. We do not have the warrant of the Council. Lo and I were reprimanded for establishing dynaesthene here on Huld. The Council would stop us.

Samuesil could do it, said Hadr. By herself.

Again the silence was profound.

I think she could, said Halo.

We must return to the Hald, said Daisy.

Can we come with you? said Hadr.

Proteleus, you can't— said Antus.

Can we all come with you? Antus too?

There was a third profound silence.

When the water rises, the wise man swims, said Halo. Old Eilean proverb.

As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, said Antus. Old Pyzan proverb.

When one cow pisses, said. Hadr—that's what Qno used to say.

Oswicus woke, and clutched at the timbers of his bed. Hwicce, he shouted. Another quake!

Go to sleep, said Hwicce from her bed in the adjoining room. It was nothing.

It was another quake, I tell you. I felt it. Come and tell me what you see.

You are a pest, said Hwicce. She pulled on her gown and came to his window. I see nothing.

Are the skies clear? said Oswicus.

Clear and cold, said Hwicce. Tenes is bright. Tungal is up.

And the mountains?

The mountains are where they always are, Oswicus, said Hwicce.

Wait—

Wait what? What do you see?

There is a light in the Depot, she said. It flickers.

It's Sandre, said Oswicus. He's up to something. First the Canopy, now this.—There! You felt that?

This time Hwicce felt the quake.—There is more light, she said.

What light? said Oswicus, angry now at his own blindness.—Tell me, Describe it.

Above the Depot. In the Mountain. Lightning, perhaps.

Which mountain? The Crow? Damn my eyes. Damn Sandre, damn Samuesil.

Not Samuesil, said Hwicce.

No, not Samuesil. said Oswicus. Why is she not here with me?

You burnt her chariot, said Hwicce.

Damn you, Hwicce, said Oswicus.



The Depot was lit with flame; its massive roof was partly fallen. The dusty yellow ground it stood on was heaving and shifting. A great crack had appeared in the earth between the building itself and the teneti silo at its southern end. The silo was leaning drunkenly into the crack. There was a continual rumbling from the mountain behind from landslides high above the scree slopes, where great boulders thundered down onto the heaving plain around the depot. Lightning flickered among the palls of dust and smoke that rose from the mountain's flanks.

Perhaps two hundred figures were scattered on the level ground around the burning building from which they had fled. They wore heavy protective clothing, boots and gloves and airtight helmets over their heads. Some had removed their helmets, revealing pale faces and straw-coloured hair, men and women. Some sat, others lay on the ground. Some were burnt, others bleeding. Their suits had once been white, but were now blackened, torn and bloody. They were silent, watching the burning building as if entranced; but no further figures appeared out of the flames.

They were not at first aware of the five winged figures gliding high above. But as they spiralled down towards them they looked up and gave cries of warning, raising their arms to shield themselves. Hwicce tried to remember what she had picked up of the language of the Carhault Bases. She turned into the wind and hovered steady a few fathoms above them.

Peace, she called.

One of the figures seemed to understand.

Peace, he said. It sounded similar.

Peace, said Hwicce, trying to copy him. I give you peace, she said, not finding the right formula. The figures backed away as she touched down amongst them, drawing in her great wings.

Peace to the bird-woman, someone said.

Who are you? said Hwicce.

We are from Carhault, they said. We are miners on Tenes.

And you came by the transible? That is forbidden. What has happened? Why is the transible burning?

Tenes is burning, they said. There were terrible earthquakes. The mines are collapsing. We escaped through the transible, but it is not for human transit, and it was already beginning to collapse. The alignment was uncertain, always changing. There were many more of us, where are they now? Where is this? It is not Carhault!

You are on Huld, said Hwicce, but this ground is Tenes. The transible still holds, but not for long. You must flee from here.

She pointed in the direction of the citadel.—There is shelter there, half a league away, she said. Go quickly. Come away from the mountain. We will go and seek help.

And she launched herself again into the air, and the five airborne figures beat along the flank of the wind back to the citadel of Luce.



Cirsc, said Samuesil. Look after Mereg. Look after the child. Keep them safe for me. I am going to Luce.

How? said Klimpt.

I take my Chariot.

We will come with you, Sam, said Meer.

No, said Samuesil. I go alone to Luce.

We will come with you. along the flank of the Moor, said Meer. Then you can make up your mind.

Samuesil, said Cirsc. Come back safely.

Yes, said Samuesil.

The Chariot heaved itself up out of the snow. Samuesil took the reins as Klimpt and Meer clambered aboard, carrying their wings and harnesses. The Chariot rose, and the black horses leapt forward into the darkness, and up into the cloud and wind.

Over the High Moor, Klimpt and Meer let themselves fall backwards out of the Chariot, caught the wind and followed Samuesil, in V-formation behind her, riding the wave thrown back from the careering horses. The clouds rolled above them.

As the slow light of morning began, they saw on the ground far below them that the snow had been local to the Hald and the lower Moors: as they progressed east and north they seemed to leave the winter behind and return to cold and wet autumn. Samuesil found she had her old goggles on her forehead: she pulled them down over her eyes and saw the beam of black light blazing before her, the three horses now no longer in shadow but sharply focused against the rising morning; and she saw far and clear ahead the north-eastern headland of the moors. She turned and waved to Klimpt and Meer, a wave which said Go, return. They spiralled down once in front of the Chariot, waving to her. And then they were gone.

The grasslands between the Moors and the foothills of Luce were dark and brown below her, waiting patiently for the winter's snow. The Chariot rose on the updraught over the foothills, the black horses tossing their heads, their tails flying. And now as the day's light began to fade Samuesil sensed rather than saw the far dark towers of Luce and, to the

right, a rising red light as if from the throat of a volcanic eruption. The Chariot was pulling in that direction. She gave it rein.



The miners moved slowly over the rocky ground. Rich in teneti, Tenes had relatively strong gravity for its size, but a minute fraction of the gravity of Huld: most of the miners had been working on Tenes for several Carhault-months, and hampered as they were by their space-suits they found all movement exhausting. They dragged and carried the wounded as best they could.

As they left the yellow dusty area around the transible the terrain became more demanding, but the ground shook less under their feet. And as the last of their strength was sucked from them by the merciless gravity of Huld, the rescue parties arrived: Hwicce with some twenty flyers, two and two together with long wicker baskets slung between them, and Samuesil in the Black Chariot. The flyers could take ten at a time, and Samuesil rode with four at a time in the Black Chariot, which sped with the wind, and made three trips to the citadel for every one of the flyers.

Throughout the rest of the night they ferried the exhausted miners. By mid-morning the Spital was full, and the Tenders moved amongst the wounded, using the Ambassadors' medicaments on the burns and many other medical techniques taught them by the Ambassadors so short a time before. The Refectory was filled with sleeping bodies.



Oswicus stood with hunched shoulders and took both. Samuesil's hands in his. Forgive me, Tesamuesil, he said.

So you have found my name at last, said Samuesil. For what do I have to forgive you, old friend?

For the way I treated your mother, Tesamuesil.

You gave her six children, said Samuesil, which made us seven.

And then I left her, and went to war, said Oswicus. And took two of my sons with me to their deaths.

But I had already left her, said Samuesil.. I deserted her, and deserted the family, no less than you. I went to Kirfa, and began a new life. Should we both have stayed?

That would have been a different story, said Oswicus.

When did you realize who I was? asked Samuesil.

Klimpt, with all her names, told me yours, said Oswicus. And I saw that I had known from the beginning. First Mereg, my daughter, and then you, her sister.

Half sister, said Samuesil.

It would be good to see her again, said Oswicus.

You shall come with me to the Abbey, said Samuesil. You must return to your children. And you must make your peace with Amfer.

I have made my peace with my family.. They have no need of me. I shall not leave Luce, said Oswicus. I have lost the will to desert.

Then we shall have to visit you, said Samuesil. You must meet your grandchild.

Oswicus's eyes were unfocused. Perhaps, he said.

Samuesil stayed two nights with Oswicus and Hwicce, and then took the Chariot south to Asi.





We have a guest, Speaker Joel, said Mrs Speaker Joel. It's your Lady Chair, black horses this time. Coming from the north.

Joel went out to greet her in the farmyard.

I thought to visit you again, Joel. In passing, as it were.

Joel said nothing, as was his wont when he found nothing to say. He took her proffered hand, however.

We never signed the Agreement, Joel, said Samuesil.

No, said Joel. Pity, that.

I hear you lost all your men, said Samuesil.

I hear you lost all yours, said Joel.

And now you need farmhands? said Samuesil.

My Maggie is as good as ten, said Joel.

There are two hundred miners from Tenes waiting for you in Luce, said Samuesil. Men and women.

Joel said nothing.

Do you want them?

Not two hundred of them, said Joel.

Fifty?

Come in and speak to Maggie, said Joel.

My my, said Mrs Speaker Joel. It's the Lady Chair of Gosste again. Wonders will never cease.

So true, Mrs Joel, said Samuesil.

Time for a new agreement, then? said Mrs Joel.

Perhaps, said Samuesil.

Nice cup of tea? Biscuits?

Sounds lovely, Mrs Joel.

A shot of the white? said Joel.

Just tea, thank you, said Samuesil.

I thought I would drop by on my way east, said Samuesil.

East where? said Mrs Joel.

I am thinking of visiting the settlement they call New Kirfa, said Samuesil.

New Gosste, said Mrs Joel.

Of course, said Samuesil.

I told Joel, I said, you should pop over to New Gosste, I said. Sign up a few strong Migroes to help on the farm.

Splendid idea, said Samuesil. Or would you prefer a few strong miners?

Now you tell me, said Mrs Joel.

There are two hundred workers in Luce looking for work, said Samuesil. Miners from Tenes.

What's wrong with Tenes? said Mrs Joel.

A bit of trouble there, said Samuesil. Earthquakes.

Strong lads? said Mrs Joel.

Lads and lasses, said Samuesil.

We'll take fifty, said Mrs Joel. On trial. Food and boarding until they learn the job, then union rates. As for the others—

Samuesil waited.

There's farms standing empty all over the grasses, said Mrs Joel. Pity if they go to waste. Need to plant trees.



New Gosste? What do you want with New Gosste?

I am their Chair, said Samuesil.

Mrs Joel poured the tea. Biscuit? she said, pushing the plate towards Samuesil.

Thank you, said Samuesil.

For dunking in the tea, explained Mrs Joel.

Absolutely delicious, said Samuesil. The two women sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, drinking tea and munching.

Samuesil said: Lovely biscuits, Mrs Joel.

Maggie's the name, said Mrs Joel.

Lovely biscuits, Maggie.

Are you sure they'll be pleased to see you in New Gosste, my Lady Chair?

Call me Sam, Maggie.

Sam, then.

No, I'm not sure, Maggie.

They don't need you. They don't need no Chair. You have other things to do.

I do?

You have a baby to look after, or so I'm told.

Samuesil reached for another biscuit.

You'll stay the night, Sam?

Samuesil stared at her, munching.

And I have a moon to stabilise, she said.



Hadr and Pteleu sat on either side of the bed and watched Mereg Mereg sucking and humming.

Marvelous contraptions, breasts, said Hadr.

They're very aesthetic, said Pteleu. Classic.

Thank you, Pteleu, said Mereg.

Pteleu asked: Why is she called Mereg twice?

Mereg daughter of Mereg, said Mereg.

Which is also your name, said Pteleu.

Right, said Mereg. So she is Mereg Mereg Mereg.

What about the fathers? said Hadr.

Mereg Mereg Mereg, by Hadr Jent and Pteleu—what is your mother's name, Pteleu?

Marag, said Pteleu.

Really?

I'm translating, said Pteleu.

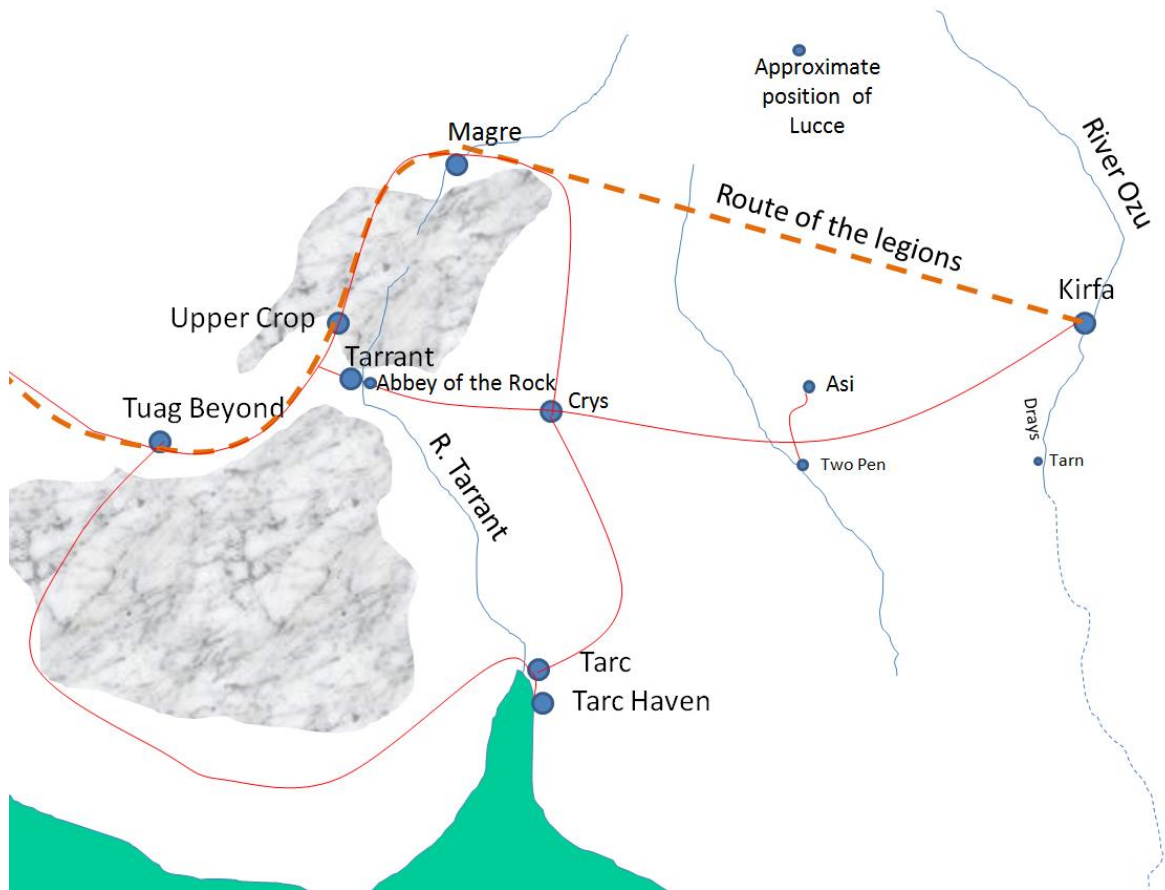
But what about Samuesil? said Pteleu, after a thought.

And Qno? said Hadr.

Two mothers and three fathers, said Mereg. It's going to be a rather long name. I think I shall call her Daisy for short.



14 May 2020  
03 December 2021



Map of the Hald and the Anamen Territories