

# **The Span**

**(Touching Carhault)**

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# **Part 1**

## **Qert**

# 1

Due north, where the sun rolls, are the mountains with the cleft between, the far fault in the horizon. Thus the position of the city on this fingered coast: at midday on the winter solstice the sun sits in the cleft as seen from Reagh's Temple, and shines for nearly two minutes.

He said, in k2or: They say there's a weather on the way. Reagh corrected him, enunciating the word for weather slowly and clearly: r2nsial.

He tried again, and she said: Good. Better.

The second phase points to contraction, he said, in his own language.

Does it say that in the book?

R4en-s3ial, he said. Wheel of air.

Clever, she said.

The word for a weather system describes what it looks like from above. Where does this language come from?

From the stars, said Reagh. Your people. She looked up, checking the time in the sky.

She must go, she said. They'll be finishing. She turned and made her way back to the temple.

The god refers to herself in the third person.

Yrre peered upwards, trying to see what she could see. The day-stars, Reagh's Span. He could make out Tungel of course, and the Three-Beyond, and perhaps yellow Tenes if he didn't look straight at it: two hours to sunset. But the people of Huld claimed to be able to see the whole Span, naming the orbs, catching the flash of their colours. Knowing perhaps where to look, what to look at, how the Span was angled? These were also codes of seeing, of making.

Sight, for the Gleaners, was a giving, not a receiving.

Why is it called Reagh's Span? he had asked.

She regarded him gravely. Study the names, she said. You will see.



There was a trample of feet in the courtyard and the Gleaners came in, weary but cheerful, Teod beaming. Reagh appeared on the balcony with the libation. Teod gave a cheer and the six Gleaners trudged heavily up the steps to take the cup from her and pass it round. Then they kissed her one by one, and one of the women embraced her lightly, laying her forehead for a moment on her shoulder; there was a moment of peace. Then laughter again, and they went in to eat. Coming, Yrre? called Teod over his shoulder.

Yrre got up and followed them in.



k2or is a phasal language, Teod had told him. You have to learn the phase of every word, or you might say something wrong.

Better not to say anything wrong, thought Yrre. But he decided to ask all the same: What is a phase?

It's the first thing you learn in grammar, said Teod.

Yes, but what is it?

It's the True Way of Speaking, said Teod. You'll learn.

It was a violent weather, a defiant gesture of departing winter, with winds gusting to n4ast, according to Teod, bringing a cruel drop in temperature and a dusting of snow. The Gleaners stoked up the fire in the great hearth, shuttered the windows, and took a second libation to be on the safe side. Yrre joined them, for he guessed they would use the bad weather as an excuse for an evening round the hearth. He made himself comfortable on the flet so that he could see their faces as they sung.

Pileo began the song as usual, low and soft and at first hardly discernible in the general chatter. Yrre tried to concentrate on the language, although his eyes saw only Pileo. She began in dipphase, but even so he was soon hope hopelessly lost in the complexity of her syntax. Soon the music took control.

It had taken him several weeks to realise that Teod was not

the leader of the group, and still longer to find out who was. Finally he had decided for Heleui, and had plucked up the courage to ask her. She smiled apologetically: Well I'm supposed to be. Until we decide otherwise.

That was a half a cycle ago. Yrre had come to realise what a fine leader she was. And had been, he learnt, for the the best part of three cycles. She seemed almost to be a fixture. Why change a good leader?

This was Reagh's attitude, too. Yrre had challenged her once on this point, for it offended his Marian upbringing. Others should be given the chance too, he said. The group benefits from the collective experience.

Yrre you are a know-all, she said. Gleaning isn't like Traffic Control. What works on the pasdaghe won't wash out on the Moors. Besides, leadership obviously doesn't mean the same to you as it does to us. You should join the group for a season; you'd soon find out. It's time you went to Qert and saw the elves.

He had meant to, and told himself he would one day. But he felt he couldn't give up flying yet. Another couple of cycles at Traffic, he thought. It was bad enough during the off-periods, with space clear for sometimes days on end; the prospect of a whole season was unnerving. Another half-cycle.

Why do you write the word k2or without a capital? he asked Teod.

Teod's smile was genuine. Do you? he said.



The weather passed over during the night, but Yrre was not present to witness the calm that followed. By the time Seli9 rose over the far teeth to the east and the crystal light flooded the city, Yrre was no longer sure which of the drifting motes beyond his toes was Seli9. Not that he could see his toes against the stars; but he had been five days aground and the sensation of embodiment clung to him. The illusion of vision was too strong. He flexed his toes and squinted through them at the revolving dust. For him, sight was a receiving.

Reagh sat with Teod to watch over Yrre's warm, empty body on the flight couch. Ah how she longed to enter it, and fly! She turned and smiled ruefully at Teod.

When you fly again, you will leave us, said Teod. That time will come. But we are happy to have you amongst us, for the while.

The god Reagh leant over and kissed him on the cheek.



Trace in four, said Yrre, turning in to the nosing ship. It was a passage homing on Eile, forty thousand migrants from the Bases. Yrre's heart gave a little skip of joy as he encountered the crew in the pasdaghe, the vibrant relaxation of a Geordian crew at its best: some forty men and women and children working on



a cyclic rotary system charted on a consensus of ability. His host was a young male completing the first third of his lifespan, a good deal taller and lankier than Yrre, with a typically enviable Geordian physique and a muscle-tone whose spring made Yrre soar. Trace in four it is, said the smiling reception crew, touching him closely, warmly: Welcome Yrre, how do you like Terei?

He's lucky, said Yrre smiling back, knowing he could break protocol with these happy Geordians. I left him in a shoal of ice in some sort of a vibe-pattern. Just watch and lose yourself. And how are you my lovely black brothers and sisters? What a body!

He lurched a little unsteadily to his feet, reaching for their shoulders, unsure of his height. He noticed the crew exchanging glances as they sensed he was a male, and the thought came to him that they had been expecting a woman. A young crew, still experiencing, no fatigue in them yet. Of course, drivers had to deal with all sexes, quite apart from alien hosts, although some crews were sticklers for compatibility. But only Geordians hosted their drivers with merriment.

Terei had been comfortably hungry, according to protocol, and Yrre sat down to eat with the off-duty drive crew that had received him. They had a few hours of group-orientation before they took over the drive, as was usual with democratic crews.

Fewer and fewer of the newer generations of drivers were

completely happy with the old range of democratic pasdeighe: hierarchy was simpler, easier to manage. Quick introductions to subordinates trained to a short rota of hosts with a narrow range of flight-feeds, standard eye-and-muscle reactions at the drive pad. But Yrre was brought up in the spirit of the early Tessel colonies under a dedicated Marian People's Democracy of several centuries' standing, every soul on fire with the quest for personal and group fulfilment. This was the life blood of these Geordians, and Yrre experienced an ancient taste of childhood on his tongue: here he was at home. They touched hands round the table before they ate and Yrre looked briefly round at the shining faces, verbalizing the old questions in his driver's mind, in his host's body: Where are the knots? Who are the searching ones?

Three of the fourteen.

Some protocol was necessary, of course, if only to demonstrate one's competence. His errand was the ship's passage, and his job was to assimilate their *modus operandi*. They talked him gently and easily into the group, following standard patterns. His host Terei had some overbearing tendencies which the crew were on guard against and it amused Yrre to see them probing this new Terei. One of the three, one of the searchers, a young woman without a headband, took up the thread: easy into criticism. You're putting on a front, Yrre, she said. Anyone agree? There were a few nods.

Yrre bit his lip. It's difficult, he said. Please be tolerant. My culture is early Tessel; I have tendencies I must guard against. Besides, this is a powerful body for my race, and many of you here attract me a good deal. We drivers don't get this sort of company every day of the week.

We can see that, said the woman evenly; but looking at her Yrre could see the glint in her eye. Terei likes men more than women. We were expecting a woman driver.

So he had been right. But why had they been expecting a woman? Surely they had received the necessary data from Traffic? He clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. And this is supposed to be a migrant passage! Where's your sense of responsibility? What will the cargo think?

The woman seemed to take the question seriously. We've located a pocket of Geordian sympathisers in the cargo, she said. We've had some of them up in the pasdaghe.

She seemed to have no hesitation at betraying this rather startling fact to Yrre. He was, after all, a driver working for Traffic, supervised from Carhault under licence from the Bases. He noticed the warning glances of her comrades, but she seemed to wish to flirt her trust towards him: We do it a lot, she said. Had a couple of Custs up on deck during the last passage. Lovely people. Absolutely sexless culture. Fantastic music. My name is Roinje. I claim him, people. Anyone object? Donnai?

Why should I object? sighed Donnai, raising his eyes to

heaven. He might even manage to calm you down a bit.

There was laughter round the flet.

Yrre took her hand and looked into her smiling face. I accept with gratitude, he said. And part of his mind reasoned that a Geordian who talked openly of Geordian sympathies with a driver would perhaps be willing to discuss other matters which Geordians usually preferred to keep to themselves.

The laughter continued, gentler now and warmer. Seven hours to orbit, sisters and brothers.



With three hours left before orbit, the group reconvened.

My lovely black sisters and brothers, so happy, so free—  
And they laughed at his easy use of their formulae.

Geordian on-flight uniform was of course nakedness. Off-duty, Geordians often draped themselves with bright woven cloths; these were leisure garments which hampered most activities. Now as the group reconvened for orientation. Yrre noticed several faces he had not seen at the first session. The Geordians clearly appreciated this new driver. Two of the women wore *neiri*, a garment for menstruating crews on-duty. Yrre was honoured by their presence.

He looked around at their friendly faces.

With you I make light of flight protocol. You offer me the joy of your companionship. But you have finer protocols you do

not wish to break.

A silence.

It was the driver's prerogative. He was irreplaceable; even the Lords of the Bases had to tolerate their drivers—up to a certain point. The Georgians waited in silence, wondering where his fancy lay.

Yrre sought out again the three faces he had seen when he first came aboard, faces that had searched his with the ancient demand: acknowledgement. His orientation with Roinje had been optimal; but time was short and he had not been able to broach the matters that moved him. Now he was seized with the desire to probe, to stir: Roinje, Donnai, Tuusa: what is it? Why this anger?

You see us very well, Yrre, said another, speaking with authority: an older woman. You have talents beyond those of a driver. Why do you wish to ferret out dissention on the pasdaghe?

A strange word, sister, replied Yrre gravely. Varying opinions I expect amongst a Georgian crew: “dissention” is not a word I would have expected. Is there really an angry minority aboard?

His overt use of the Marian phrase “angry minority” jolted them a little, and told them more than several hours of orthodox orientation would have done. Few could look Georgians in the face and evoke tabus of such an order. The

crew grinned and exchanged glances. A Marian! and a driver! Roinje's look was triumphant as if she were saying: There, what did I tell you! And I claimed him first!

Donnai, said Yrre. Can't you tell me?

I'll try, said Donnai. If everyone agrees.

The driver is not entirely without scruples, said the older woman.

Donnai spoke slowly, but without hesitation.

We carry forty thousand migrants from the Bases, he said. You haven't seen them, Yrre. You'll put them into orbit round your p-star, and jump them trans-par and they'll never notice. They've got other things to think about. What are forty thousand people doing leaving the Bases? Why should they be inveigled into going to Eile? There's nothing there for them but asteroid-mining. You should see them. Their conditions aboard this passage are distressing according to our standards, but they think they're in heaven. We've put the older children to school with them—they've learnt more in the two months since we left the Bases than they would in ten years on one of our own worlds. There's one thing clear enough, Mother,—he turned to the older woman who had spoken before—there's no doubt how the children will ride their future pasdeighe. How are you going to answer them when Nakie and Eriyan ask you how it is we carry forty thousand refugees from one slave-camp to the

other—are we not Free Geordians? Why do we consent to it?—Like you, driver Yrre, we keep the wheels turning. For whom? In whose interest is it that we leave a trail of refuse and dead bodies across the universe? While we live our lives of peace and happiness on the flight deck?

The time will come, Donnai, snapped his mother. You can not force it.

Not alone, muttered Donnai, seeking Roinje's eyes. Not alone we can't.



The Geordians watched the dark, cold star as it turned. Yrre searched for the p-orbit, his head heavy on the drive pad, his body relaxed. He had said his farewells, touched faces all round the flight deck, thanking them for their love and hospitality. Roinje had hugged him long, saying: I am hugging you for Donnai and Tuusa. Nonsense, said Donnai. You are a selfish witch, Roinje. Admit it.

Drivers seldom meet the same crews twice.

The star turned. Yrre's breathing slowed, became regular, as he felt the drive coming under control. Roinje reached out and clasped his hand briefly as she lay beside him on the flight couch. The orientation had been faultless—in driver's jargon, the drive crew had loosened their belts. He had no barriers to put up against them, he loved them all, he was free to ride the

orbit. So free, in fact, that he smiled to himself at the absurdity of the metaphor. Geordians with belts on.

He felt the orbit and held it. The background of the stars arranged itself in his mind. Out in the ice-shoal, Terei swore as he felt the blessed consciousness fading from him.

Trace in five, said Yrre indistinctly; and was gone.

And looking up from the flight couch beside Roinje, Terei saw that the skies had changed around the dim, silent star.



## 2

The winter dragged stubbornly on, keeping spring at bay. The Gleaners stoked up the fire every evening, the libation went round and the shileq began its music.

As his linguistic ability increased Yrre began to take part in their conversation. It was a struggle for him to keep from slipping into the Evenspeech, but he found them more tolerant of his hesitant attempts in their own language than of having to resort to the Evenspeech themselves. It was not long before he began to realise why. The Gleaners' talk was of concepts the Evenspeech simply could not handle. In the Evenspeech, they spoke of other things.

And of course, there were concepts which k2or could hardly handle, either.

A p-star lies at a node, said Yrre.

So does everything else, said Maro neis.

An easy node, said Yrre.

It's in two places at once, said Heleui. The Eile drivers call it a cusp.

That's close, said Yrre, but I would say it's in one place: it just depends how you plot the place.

In what combination of dimensions, said Manhra.

You can do that with any star, and any position, said Maro neis.

Even Qert? said Maro p4lei. Everyone laughed.

What's the joke? asked Yrre.

You'd know if you'd ever been there, said Maro neis, winking at his namesake. Tell us more about the par. You move positions about?

That's getting close, said Yrre. But position is only where you are and where a star is; we sit in our three-dimensional reality. The p-stars are cold and quiet and have no companions. Drivers can use them to plot positions without reference to the current frame. The node becomes free. The cusp comes loose from the wave.

Two positions at once, said Heleui

The skies change, said Yrre. And the ship moves out of orbit into new skies.

The Gleaners were quiet, picturing.

Could you change our skies?

No, said Yrre, flatly.

But you can leave us at will, like a god.

Not like a god, said Yrre. My body remains, and I must come back to it. I'm not like Reagh, I'm a man, like you.

That's right said Maro neis, turning to the others. When Reagh leaves us she will not come back. Her body will rest in a barrow up on the Laer. That will be a heavy time for the

Gleaners.



I think the thing that puzzles us most, said Maro neis, is why you're here. Why with us?

Yrre mistook the question. Traffic decides, he said. Within comfortable distance of a p-sta; that's one consideration. This is a beautiful planet; your language is fascinating, your culture a never-failing mystery—

That was not our question, said Maro neis. We have no interest in Traffic. We have learnt about Carhault at school: it is a planet in a system too far away from us to imagine, and the story of its conflict with the evil Bases, even further away, makes for tedious study. Its traffic office in Tanquish is a place we do not visit. Our question is, why do you, who work for the Bases and report to Carhault, why do you stay us, the Gleaners? Why not in the city, at Traffic Control?

Of course, said Yrre's mind. My work represents all they turn away from. And yet I am here. And the realization of how much he wanted to be amongst them, for them to accept him as a friend, came upon him in a rush. He spoke without weighing his words: Please my friends, tell me if I'm unwelcome here.

You are favoured by the gods, there is no question of your not being welcome, said Maro neis; the answer came without

the slightest pause, as if Maro neis had had it ready.

But you must admit Yrre—now it was Pileo speaking, her clear, bright voice a little higher than usual—you must admit it's strange for a Driver to move his flight couch out of Traffic Control where he has all he needs at his fingertips and set it up in a disused corner of a heathen lodge on the slope of Tanquish Laer—

I like you, said Yrre. I want to be amongst you. If you don't mind me here.

He paused. I want to stop driving, he said. But it's not as simple as all that—

What about Reagh? asked Maro neis.

And then Yrre saw what they wanted to know.

I love her, he said simply.

Like a sigh, the tension was gone. The Gleaners were looking at him with bright eyes.

So do we all, driver Yrre, said Pileo softly.



This Roinje seems to have made quite an impression on you, said Reagh. Or the man who hosted you—what was his name?

Terei, said Yrre. Both of them, I suppose. Although impression is not the right word. They reminded me. Things I had forgotten. I was brought up a Marian.

You don't look like one, said Reagh.

Not all Marians are Geordians, said Yrre. I was born on Terenz in the Bases. We emigrated to the Loiedes when I was a child. Tessel colony. Marian democracy with close ties with Geordian systems. My father was an ardent Sympathiser.

And your mother?

Yes, I suppose she was too, said Yrre, trying to remember his mother.

And Roinje and Terei? said Reagh. Are they Marians?

Yes. But they needed help, said Yrre.

Were you able to help them?

I pushed them a little. It might have worked.

Pushed them how?

Yrre thought. After a while he said:

No one has ever really been able to describe what it's like to enter a host and drive a passage. No one really remembers. Functional memories are not transferred. At least I think not. I saw things as an outsider, but I felt at home with them. There were new points of view I could express, that's all. I could put them to Roinje with a single word here and there, or an action. I was interfering, I know; some people might think it unethical. But I don't. Opinions are there to be discussed.

You were manipulating, said Reagh accusingly.

I was indeed. But if I'd been there in person I would still have tried to influence them, although as Yrre I'd have had to go about it differently. Roinje wants to defect. I believe Terei

does, too; or at least that was the impression I got from Roinje. And I have a feeling there's a majority in the pasdaghe for joining the Fleet if only it were coherent. I was only pointing that out.

Is that your job? asked Reagh.

As long as it doesn't interfere with my job I don't see that it's Traffic Control's business. They still allow their drivers freedom of opinion, in spite of everything.

Reagh was looking wistful.

She wishes she could fly, like you do, she said.

I thought you could, said Yrre. Can't the gods fly? How did you arrive here at Tanquish Laer without flying?

She looked at him, uncertain.

You sound like a believer, she said.



A god is a living entity whom the people worship. The habitations of the gods are not usually those of men, although gods may assume the shape and habitations of men at times. Reagh, God of Love and Peace, was, particularly worshipped in Har; moved by her relationship with the Gleaners, she resided at Tanquish in Har for many terms. Further east from Har, in the areas controlled in former times by the military empire of Pyzan, Reagh's brother Rufor, God of Love and War, was more

popular. Rufor is not recorded as consorting with humans, except occasionally on the battlefield.

Yrre lay on his back and gazed up at the night skies of Huld through the high windows of the room in which the Gleaners had allowed him to set up his flight couch, waiting for Tungal to kindle at the edge of the mullion.

I love her, he had said to the Gleaners. What did that mean? The Gleaners all loved her, too. Because she was the Goddess of Love and Peace, because she was beautiful, because love and peace are beautiful. But Yrre was hardly *that sort* of a believer: he did not assume a world of men and a world of anthropomorphic gods which enjoyed some sort of intercommunication. Perhaps he could accept the gods as ideas which had significance for human societies. Reagh, Goddess of Love and Peace, and her brother Rufor, God of Love and War, were concepts which made sense to him as a young man looking for physical love in a world of Peace and War. For Yrre, Reagh was a wonderfully beautiful human woman.

You are a metaphor, he said to her.

I suppose you are a bit of a metaphor, too, she said. If that word means what she thinks it does.

Geo-human, to be exact.



The dominant mammalian life-form on Huld was

geohuman, of some considerable antiquity, although at least two of the language-groups spoken in Har were clearly implants from a non-human culture. It was rare for humans to speak polyphase languages, and Yrre, who loved languages, was having a hard time with k2or. Many of the population of Har employed a fairly accessible version of the Evenspeech as a lingua franca, however, and the Evenspeech was the language of global communication on Huld.

Huld ecology was also an implant, probably dating from the time of the first humans; it was well suited to humans at any rate, temperate geo-oos with highland predominating; a human-g planet with a local day to which humans adapted well, orbiting a small narst-star, Seli9, about three times a cycle. The planet Huld was remarkable for an impressive halo of orbiting bodies known in Har as Reagh's Span.

There was Tungel, suddenly, just below the lintel. The wandering spark, outrider of the Span.

Reagh of the elves: it sounded like one of the fairy stories of his childhood. And the Gleaners were so serious about it! The elves had brought her to them. Whisked her down from the Span presumably. Where all good elves go when they die.

For they were all dying, all the good elves. That much was true.

The gea-oos implant on Huld was thought to have occurred



thousands of cycles ago. The original ecology, as far as could now be established, had been generally classifiable as geo-pps, involving long-term incompatibility with the implant. The geo-oos implant was dominant, adapting well to the biological substratum, whereas native life-forms reacted sluggishly to the alien microbiological systems. Marine and amphibian life had however shown a certain tolerance. And on the southern land-masses the elves remained, having retreated from the tropical and temperate zones. In the northern hemisphere they had become extinct.

The Gleaners claimed that the elves, like the humans on Huld, recognized the godhead in Reagh. As everybody knows, Reagh sets the elves as tiny lights, one by one, up in the Span when they die; that is why the Span is as it is, ever growing. But the Gleaners tend the elves, to prevent them dying. That is why the elves, when they found Reagh lying on the hillside, brought her to the Gleaners.

The picture seems fairly consistent.

We have no gods in our culture, said Yrre. Not now. We have angels, though.

Messengers, said Reagh. Angels and gods. We are mediators.

Of what?

The gods mediate between mankind and the One Consciousness. Sometimes, at least. That's what Teod says. Do

you have the One?

I suppose so, said Yrre. And we do have elves still, said Yrre.

There you are, said Reagh. Goblins and angels. They're all there.

You sound like a Paulian, said Yrre.

Reagh was intrigued. Is that what they sound like? she asked.

Devils, not goblins, said Yrre. Heaven and Hell.

Lucifer! said Reagh, her eyes wide. But Teod says they're monotheists. Is it true they're lesbians?

They cultivate it, said Yrre. Religion tends to do things like that. Cultivate. And then exclude the other. That's what annoys me about religion.

You seem to tolerate the Gleaner's religion, said Reagh, mischievously.

This isn't religion, retorted Yrre. You're as human as I am.

So they tell her, said Reagh cheerfully, looking into his eyes.



I still don't get it, said Yrre. I can accept the idea of a Goddess of Love and Peace. And I can accept that you partake in that. But not that you *are* that goddess.

That's not true, he said, after a pause. I continually accept it.

You're sweet, said Reagh.

But she felt mist of weariness rising before her eyes; why

did he always have to do this? These Marians could be like cactuses trying to find soft spots on each other.

Cactuses making love. They had to resort to yoga.



Tell me about the elves, for instance, said Yrre.

Reagh sighed. Elves are to be thought of as manifestations of earlier conquered cultures, she said evenly.

The text-book answer. Yrre was taken by surprise.

At least that's your definition, she added.

Not yours?

She thinks it's a silly definition. It's the guilt-ridden definition of the the dominant civilization, and it doesn't usually appear until the time of the elves' final eclipse.

Which is why the humans here don't apply it said Yrre.

Or perhaps, said Reagh, they don't apply it because they see their contact with the elves as symbiotic. The elves cannot live without men; the Gleaners tend them and harvest their milk.

They give their milk freely?

But Reagh's mind was away. She turned to him suddenly, seeking.

We think of it in different ways, she said, almost whispering; but I think our loves are the same.

What symbiosis obtains between gods and men?



So Yrre left Traffic Control. Or rather, he pleaded that his addiction was becoming difficult to handle, he needed a period of grounding; and in fact this was true.

Whereupon the latter-day bureaucratic tendencies of Traffic Control came to the fore. There was a new fear of piracy abroad, now renamed Terrorism. Yrre guessed that Traffic Control would be keeping their tabs on him: he pledged to stay grounded on Huld until further notice, and to refrain from flying on his own account. Which could prove dangerous in any case—free flying was notoriously more addictive than flying missions. He needed both grounding and physical action. He approached the Gleaners as a formal applicant

We know you well enough, Yrre, said Teod. Better than you know us.

My command of your language is not good enough, said Yrre, stating the fact.

That's a minor problem. Language isn't really that important out on the Moors. But you've never had any contact with the elves; they're not part of your upbringing. On the other hand, the gods favour you

Gods? thought Yrre.

Are you sure you wouldn't rather join the fishing fleet for a month or two? The sea can be a perfect antidote to space addiction.

I'm not a seaman, said Yrre. It's mountains I want. I grew up among mountains on my home world. I like planets knobbly.

Teod smiled; or rather his habitual grim broadened. I won't beat about the bush, he said. We've already made up our minds. Reagh has spoken to us, and we're willing to try you . Towards the end of this month we make a reconnaissance trip down into the south west counting family groups and stocking outposts for the summer. At least it'll keep you out of the arms of the beautiful women of the pasdeighe.



Mother! Light returns.

Creep closer, children.

Reagh's Span is a long skein of colour falling low over the north-western horizon; now almost parallel with it, with Tungal approaching its greatest elongation. The sun rolls below the mountains in the east.

The mother moves a little over the top of the knoll and settles herself on a flat rock, watching while the Span slips along the horizon, counting the planets as they drop one by one. Her children snuggle up against her, searching to lay their faces against her warm teats, not sucking, their bellies full. The mother watches a lone male moving quietly away from the close knot of still sleeping elves at the foot of the knoll. He makes long tracks over the new snow that has fallen in the night

making for the river to wash and drink. He walks freely, at his leisure, sweeping his toes luxuriously through the light snow that powders the black sand and the remains of the winter's drifts. She watches him with warmth and love, for him, and for her people: his stride proclaims his freedom from fear. It will be two, even three weeks before the little people appear on the far horizon. Until then the planet is ours, the skies are ours. She watches him disappear below the bank of the river.

Only the Three-Beyond and Tungal remain above the horizon; the dark line of mountains in the far east stand out against the brightening sky, pale green above the dark. Her people are stirring under their skins. There is low laughter.

The figure reappears against the silver gleam of the river, rises to his full height and looks around, the water glistening on him as the light catches. The mother rises too on the rock and shows herself, and the far figure turns towards her and waves, freely. Disturbed from their warm nest her children move on down into the waking knot of bodies; yawns and squeaks as they push their way in. Tungal touches the horizon, and snuffs out. An hour to sunrise.

The old ones will have slept warm in this calm, she says aloud to herself as she makes her way down the rocky slope. They'll be wanting to travel while this weather holds. We'll move along the shoulder and strike up over the bluff by the observatory. From there we can see Qert and the sea beyond: it

might be opening. Then the copes will start coming ashore.  
Before the little people arrive. How fine to see the copes again.  
And eat the fresh fish!

There is laughter as she slides in under the skins of her  
drowsy companions, bringing the cold with her. Brr, you're up  
early, Reagh! Are we to be moving today? They lie close to her  
and spread the cold of her flesh amongst them; she laughs  
gently. Where are my children?

Away chasing Taarh down by the river. They fill up with  
your milk, Reagh, and roll about in the snow.

The mother lies quiet amongst them, drinking in their  
warmth, their great smell of peace and security; under her own  
skins. They become quiet around her, waiting.

We'll move out to the bluff and look at the sea, she says  
contentedly. The copes will be coming ashore.

And the sun squints over the mountains.

### 3

Five hundred leagues from Qert, Yrre woke on the slopes of a less glacial hillside, and Seli9 rose on his frosted sleeping bag. He lay snug and content and listened to the surface noises of the waking planet

He was three days from civilization, eight hours yesterday from the mountain hut alone in the foothills of the high moors. It was his own decision: a week's walking in the foothills, lest he make too great a fool of himself on the reconnaissance with the Gleaners. It was a different kind of solitude, one that he had not experienced for many a long cycle, planet bound, but wandering, and free. In this startlingly three dimensional frame of reference, sloping hillsides, broken gullies. The planet turned beneath him.

He lay and watched the shadow creeping down the mountain slope across a steep ravine. From where he lay, he could not see the bottom of the ravine. Suddenly the desire to fly was upon him. There would be no problem about leaving his body in the sleeping bag; there was nothing moving within twenty leagues to disturb it except perhaps the odd mountain fox, who would steer clear of the human bivouac. To soar now over the walls of the ravine, watch them turn and spread.



He had never flown deep in the Seli9 system. As an trainee driver he had done some illicit deep flying among the moons of his home planet and he had discovered then where the temptations lay. He had kept strictly to duty flights, which were usually far from the more spectacular in-depths of space, seldom even approaching a p-star in a true state of disembodiment.

His mission was usually to contact the passage and enter the host. It was the host who spent long hours exiled from any body, who was in danger; except of course that the driver controlled his return. Theoretically, of course, the host could be resettled into the driver's body on his flight couch for the duration, but in practice this was out of the question: the driver needed to return to his body untouched. Interfering with the body of a driver in flight was nearly always disastrous.

Yrre had quickly realized when he first came to Huld that if he ever took to free flying in-deep in the Seli9 system, amongst the fabulous asteroids of Reagh's Span, he would soon be lost. He would wander bodiless and timeless and later mindless amongst the riches there while his body lay in a coma on the flight couch. Free flyers often failed to come back. And when their bodies died they probably never even noticed.

The lilting, repetitive song of a bird reminded him where he was. It reminded him of a copper thrush from his home world. The murmuring surface of a living planet came back to him,

countless invisible brooks speaking on the opposite face of the dale, a gentle movement of wind on the mountain. It was many years since he had experienced these sights and sounds. He was surface-bound again; he had to learn again to live within his own physical self. He would clamber down to the bottom of the ravine using his own four limbs, pinned to the surface of the planet like a lizard on a wall. Presently. After breakfast.

He stretched a bare hand out of the sleeping-bag and touched the cold stones. And the old disciplines slipped back into place. The inexorable order of chores that faces the human who wakes in a sleeping-bag on a frosty mountain slope.

Number one: crawl out into the cold air and empty the bladder.

The warm bag, the cold air. He closed his eyes and sought for Reagh in his mind. But his mind fled out across the universe in search of Roinje in the pasdaghe of the Geordian passage, untold pars away, trailing its skein of debris across the face of another dimension.



And Roinje wept as the fury left her. She leant heavily on Tuusa's shoulders and the two women rocked with Roinje's sobs: the beasts, the inhuman beasts, the scurvy misshapen goblins! They play with us! And we nod and smile and trim our boats like the lackeys we are, oh yes my lords and no my lords for we are the free Geordians and to what depths will we not

sink to remain free? Oh my sisters and brothers.

The flight committee sat silent round the flet avoiding each others' eyes. They listened while Roinje's sobs subsided.

The yardstick of democracy in a Geordian pasdaghe is the status of the minority. If it is an open, satisfied minority, who can see and experience its rights and duties, then the flight deck, is healthy. Marian doctrine holds that minority views are less likely to be correct than than majority views: this is what the minority must recognise. On the other hand, the majority must recognise that the odds are not heavily weighed.

But a stifled minority, convinced that they are right, embittered, driven to strategy, is an indication of sickness, an indication of impending division and collapse.

And Roinje's point of view was this: a minority does not become embittered by itself. If it is stifled, then it is the majority who is stifling it. These are the ancient self-evident tenets of the Tessel colonies. My lovely black brothers and sisters: these are things we must discuss.

Sit down and talk further with us, sister, said Terei, who was chairing. We have not yet dismissed your point of view.

A man's voice flared suddenly, sharp and angry: this is ridiculous Terei. If Roinje cannot accept a majority decision after a full session then that's her funeral. This hysteria indicates her inability to discuss. We all know how she feels: we share her feelings. But we have to do what we think best. I

suggest we have already decided the issue, and that we embark on the next phase and implement the next jump; then we can take stock again if need be, and Roinje can have her say.

A short silence. And then another voice:

I think Roinje has not yet made her point clear. I had heard her arguments and weighed them against our own and found them lacking. But it seems to me that this outburst of hers is an indication of her own dissatisfaction with the way she has stated her case. I thought I had understood the direction of her argument but now I am not sure. I feel that she deserves no censure. She has made many valuable judgements since she joined the flight deck and has become a valuable spokesman for minority opinions, often materially influencing policy. In my opinion Roinje is to be encouraged.

There was a polite murmur of agreement.

Roinje exploded.

You talk so fucking beautifully, Beren ! You express yourself so mother-perfect! Brother how I envy you. While I splutter and yell and turn into a valuable spokesman for the minority! What am I doing in the mothering minority? I'm a free Geordian participating in free Geordian decisions made by a free Geordian crew and you tell me, Beren, why am I in the minority? What's happening? Who's giving us orders? My god we've had seven centuries of this excrement. We sit around with stars in our eyes and our hands in each others' lovely crotches and feed

a rota will take a loving crew from one end of the universe to the other—seven centuries and where have we got? All right we've got peace and fulfilment on Geordian systems in twenty pars. But when a miserable band of primitive warlords makes just one decision—just one, who knows, the first of how many?—then all of a sudden I'm not a free Geordian, I'm a mothering minority!

The first man's voice overrode the ensuing clatter of talk: The question is quite simple, Roinje. Do we continue working as free Geordians within the system laid down by Traffic Control or do we throw everything we have built up overboard and split finally into the True Minority?

You mean join the Fleet said Terei.

You and your Fleet of Liberation, said another voice. There is no Fleet.

There were chuckles around the circle.

A woman's voice: It's not that simple. There may well be a Fleet of Liberation; but there is also the question of how effectively can we fight a rearguard action here within the system. We made a contract with the Bases and we have a right and a duty to insist on it. The Bases cannot give us orders outside our contract; not yet. We have forty thousand souls aboard to take to Eile. They trusted us; they took a Geordian passage. Now the Bases want them elsewhere. We cannot betray them.

There were bursts of talking from all parts of the circle round the flet. Roinje had again risen to her knees, her body tense with fury and passion.

But Terei was on his feet in one bound and crouching behind her, taking her by the waist and pulling her back into his arms so that her head was flung back onto his shoulders: No Roinje, please, he whispered into her ear, not now! Can't you see it's turning. You mustn't spoil it. Just once more, Roinje, please!

The ugly demon of strategy: he tightened his hold, pressing her cooler back against him, his mouth against her ear, warming into her skull and down her spine. Oh Terei I want to speak. I want to say that Consai is right. That is the choice. We cannot go on like this for ever. Either we accept what we are doing and maintain our dwindling freedom under the rule of the Bases, or we really do join the Minority. Terei, I want to join the Liberation Fleet. I want to find the Fleet and tell them they can have me, body and soul.

Not yet Roinje, whispered Terei. Not yet.

But this is my belief, Terei. We mustn't silence our beliefs. We have no right to. It's not democracy.

No, whispered Terei fiercely against her ear. It's not democracy. That's the point. It's strategy. It's underhand. We are outlaws. We have to be. That is how we know we are right.

And she relaxed against him, sensing from the silence of the

group that something had happened, that a shift had occurred. That once again, as often before on the long road from the Tessel Colonies, a minority had suddenly become a majority, a heightening of understanding had been achieved within the group.

Perhaps it was a mystique: who could tell? But the group felt the new course that had been taken, and deemed it better than the old one. Hardly likely to be the One Way, but for the moment a better way. With a new minority to remind them of the never to be forgotten fair chance that they were making a mistake. As with all navigation.

Such changes of course were labelled “nodes in time” in Marian terminology.

Roinje listened to Terei’s breath in her skull and the silence of the group. And at that instant perceived that it was Terei who was holding her, and who was right and had prevailed; not Yrre, speaking thus into her ear, feeding her anger and her love; and that it was Yrre that she wanted, while this struggle was within her.

Terei left her and took his place again. He put the formal question: Am I chairman still?

Yes, replied the group.

Then here is our question, brothers and sisters. Do we change flight plans as the Lords request and take the passage into orbit round Carhault, or do we continue to Eile according

to our contract?

No one spoke. A rigid protocol obtained. The faces were turned towards the erstwhile spokesman for the minority.

Roinje said her piece, keeping her voice low and steady: We continue to Eile according to our contract.

Still there was quiet while Terei surveyed their faces.

So be it, he said at last And the committee spoke together:  
So be it.

Only Georgians know the joy of group fulfilment that comes with such unity. They feasted their eyes on each other over the flet.

But Roinje rose to her knees again and made another statement: I have a point of criticism, Terei. You always say Brothers and Sisters. You should say Sisters and Brothers exactly half the time.

Perhaps, replied Terei; and I apologise. But would that have been sufficient?



Since Roinje's arrival on the pasdaghe, Terei had been her closest companion. His homosexuality was her safeguard.

You're dreaming of the driver, he said.

Don't make fun of me, Terei. I really liked him.

Or did you really like what he said? asked Terei.



Pretty much the same thing, said Roinje. But I'd like to know what he looks like in the flesh.

Not all Geordian communication took place round the flet as a passing driver might infer. Stories of Geordian insistence on democratic communication have been greatly exaggerated: after all, most of what we know of Geordian on-flight civilization has been relayed to us through the media of the enemies of the Marian cause. It is true, however, that Geordians were suspicious of secrecy. They had reason to be. Thus there were areas of discussion which Roinje and Terei were uneasy about discussing in private.

We were only together for a few hours. We didn't really get to know each other. But he saw things, Terei. He understood what was going on.

She bit her lip, and looked at him. Was this prohibited territory?

Your problem, said Terei. It was nice out in space.

Yrre said he was worried about addiction, said Roinje. Be careful you don't get hooked. I like you too much. You shouldn't sleep without gravity. It can pull.

Not me, said Terei I like my body too.

Later, as they stood together under the showers, there were not the same strictures; the showers were in an open area of the gymnasium. They had to talk loudly above the noise of the water and the boisterous shouts of teqnat-players at the other

end of the gymnasium.

He would have let me say what I wanted to say, said Roinje.

Terei was used to being compared to his drivers. It was the way he got to know them.

Are you sure? he asked.

He would have understood.

I understood, said Terei.

They came out of the shower and began to towel each other.

He would have said it for me, said Roinje.

A typical minority man, said Terei. Hell-bent on keeping the minority a minority.

One way to turn a minority into a majority is to join it said Roinje.

And Terei, too, was serious now. He lowered his voice in spite of himself. Listen, he said. I want to join the Fleet too. And I think the whole flight deck does, at heart. Just be patient. It'll happen. Here and on many a Geordian passage.

It'd better be soon, said Roinje.



The Geordian passage went into shallow orbit round 7-Eile, the innermost of the Eile giants. The passenger carriages were detached from the pasdaghe and shuttled down into deeper orbit to await transit to the asteroid belt. Eile personnel had taken over on the carriages and the Geordian carriage-crews

had returned to their quarters on the pasdaghe. The full Geordian complement of thirty-seven adults and children were together again.

At first it felt a little cramped on the-flight deck after the long weeks of inter-par, but it was good to have the children and young adults back, and an atmosphere of festivity reigned. The six schoolchildren in the Geordian crew had been sorry to bid farewell to the friends they had made in the emigrant carriages. Their exposure to carriage life had had a noticeable effect on them, and they seemed to treat the comparative luxury of the pasdaghe with a new-found reverence. The adults wondered how long that would last. The children speculated eagerly on the next cargo, fifteen thousand Custs returning to Primje Lus after three cycles on the asteroids. If they could be persuaded to allow the Geordian children a taste of their highly structured education system it would be a worthwhile experience for them.

The Geordian crew considered themselves fortunate to have secured the Cust passage to Primje Lus. Custs were the easiest passenger cargo to manage, orienteering well to inter-par. The trip to Primje Lus was a long one and paid well, and the Custs were not a particularly time-conscious people so that the Geordians could sail at an optimum without depleting their power-resources. There was even a likelihood of their building them up in the tighter folds in towards Primje.

And the Custs were an everlasting source of joy and wonder to the Geordians.

They had a week or more to wait for the new cargo, and a trip was planned down to 7-Eile Delta. Everybody was excited. It was a long time since they had been on the ground, and Delta was a colourful, cosmopolitan satellite, a major terminal for the Eile asteroids. And it was a long way from the Bases.

As they soon discovered. No sooner had Customs and Immigration cleared the pasdaghe and left with the carriages than a small unmarked shuttle requested docking. A crew of two, journalists they claimed, looking for an interview. Sounded like either pushers or pirates. Shall we let them aboard? asked Ciertho from the bridge.

Why not? New faces.

It is always difficult for non-Geordians to come aboard a Geordian ship for the first time. You cannot ask "Who is the master of this ship?" because there is no master. No adult Geordian ever needs anyone else to tell him what to do. At least that is the theory.

The two newcomers were women. The younger one, a typical white-skinned Eile woman, cleared her throat nervously as they emerged from the port: My lovely black sisters and brothers, she began in an uncertain voice.

The Geordians politely suppressed their merriment.

Come in and make yourselves at home, they said. Take off

your swaddling-clothes and have a bath. Then we'll eat together. Business can wait.

Their protests were ignored.

News travels fast. The brush with the Bases was hot news in Eile, and the decision of the Eile authorities to support the Geordian crew's move was clearly popular on 7-Eile Delta. Can we bring a camera aboard? they asked.

The younger woman did most of the questioning: How were the conditions aboard the carriages? How were the immigrants equipped and organized? Did the pasdaghe crew have any idea why the Bases had wished to prevent them from reaching Eile? Were there trouble-makers amongst them? What were the Geordians' opinions of the part played by Traffic Control in this matter? Would the crew continue to operate within Traffic Control?

This last was a provocative question. Donnai gave a provocative answer, aimed at raising eyebrows in certain circles:

We haven't had any other offers so far.

After the camera had been packed away it seemed the older woman found her tongue. Was it a unanimous decision? she asked.

This was a direct question, which caught the Geordians by surprise. And an even more direct one followed:

Who was the spokesman for the minority?

Geordians don't answer such questions. There was a murmur of protest.

Forgive me, said the journalist, it was a untoward question. But there is another I would like to ask. I fear I'm being importunate, but we haven't the time to get to know you good people as we would wish, so our questions have to be to be direct and to the point. As you must know, we in Eile have a deep-rooted tradition of male superiority in secular matters—our heritage from the Bases. Awareness of the problem is, however, spreading. You Geordians are well-known for your individual and sexual equality. I represent an equal-rights journal on Delta. Would it be possible for me to have a private interview with one of the women members of your crew? I would appreciate privacy since I'm particularly interested in the personal side of your relationships.

Without waiting for a reply she turned a flashing smile to Roinje.

My dear, would you oblige?

Can we be overheard? asked Rewi Istas Turmegne as soon as they reached the privacy of Roinje's quarters.

No one will listen, I promise, said Roinje.

You were the spokesman for the original minority, I presume?

Roinje smiled ruefully. You were lucky, she said. You were

looking in the right direction when you asked that awful question.

Not lucky, said Rewi. You stand out a mile. Lift your head girl. That's better. You want to join the Fleet?

Roinje looked at her in amazement

Do you know where to find them? she asked.

Rewi shook her head, smiling.

Old wives' tales, she said. Forget the Fleet. We have to work here and now; this is where things are happening. Now about this interview—

You do know, said Roinje. I know you know. We've got to contact the Fleet.

Rewi hesitated, studying Roinje's face. Then she said, almost tenderly: I doubt if there 's a single person in Eile par who can tell you where the Fleet is. Or if it really exists. I certainly can't. And anyway you can't find them on your own. You haven't got the whole crew with you, have you?

Roinje sighed. Not yet she said. We've talked about it for a long time. But it's a big decision to make for some of them. We've lived comfortably under Traffic Control for as long as we can remember.

Maybe the crew has got a shock coming, all the same, said Rewi.

What sort of a shock?

They're not going to give you your Custs.

Roinje was aghast. What do you mean? she asked.

The best you'll get is copper back to the Bases, said Rewi.  
The Custs are being assigned to an Orotan passage.

How do you know this?

Everybody in Eile knows. The government supported your decision on the immigrants to please the asteroids. But that's all. They'll tow the line from Traffic from here on out. You're a marked crew.

Just wait till I tell the others about this! Roinje was beside herself.

Wait. What are you going to do?

We'll go extra-par and find the Fleet.

Find the Fleet! Rewi was scornful. You'd be quicker building your own Fleet.

But there must be a way of finding them, cried Roinje. You're hiding something from me, I can feel. What would you do if you wanted to find the Fleet?

Do you think I never wanted to find them? said Rewi quietly. Do you think I've never looked?

And what did you find?

Rewi hesitated. She gazed steadily at Roinje. I found friends, she said.

Who are they? Can they help?

Rewi was silent for a while. Then she heaved a sigh.

I'd go extra-par, she said wistfully. I'd go to Six. I'd take this



ship to Kerne or somewhere in the Outer Bases. And then I'd take your friend the tall lad, and go in, the two of you. I'd find Ellyonne in Goose Harquel on Six. If she's still there.

Who's Ellyonne ?

A friend. A long time ago. We used to keep contact sometimes. Ellyonne at 7102 Thiery, in the Third Level in Goose Harquel on Six. I expect you'll find out what that means when you get there. I never went there myself. Can you remember that? Don't key it.

What shall I say to this Ellyonne?

Say? I don't know. Use your common sense, I suppose. Wash up while she talks. She used to know a thing or two. Are you going to give me that interview or not?

Is there really nothing else you can tell us? Roinje pleaded.

Nothing. Really. Now to begin with, what are your first memories of the flight-deck?

Roinje took a deep breath...



Eile will cooperate, my Lord.

Of course. And the Geordian passage?

Returning from to the Bases from Eile, my Lord.

Why?

Copper from Eile, my lord. We are tracking them closely. There is a risk they will go extra-pa.

What does that mean?

Attempt to evade surveillance, my Lord.

Is that a possibility?

No, my Lord.

## 4

Mother! The sea!

It is moving. The sun glints on tracts of dark water between the shifting colours of the pack-ice. The mother rises to her full height on the bluff and gazes over the expanse of her summer home: anxious, her strong heart thumping, her nostrils wide.

Nothing.

She gives a cry, lifting her head to the skies, a long chime of freedom. Nothing, says the cry, not a breath of them. No little people; not yet.

The stragglers come up one by one and collapse panting on the ridge, feasting their eyes on the sea. There are snorts and squeaks.

Then a voice: I see the copes!

Everyone strains to see. The expanse of ice and water shimmers. And then everyone sees them. Far out beyond the point, they see the seals leaping in the open water. The copes!

And the group is moving again, slithering down the slope of the mountain in full view of sea and sky, jubilant, blundering towards the shore.



There were to be seven of them on the reconnaissance: Heleui as leader, Manhra and Ested as runners, man and woman, Maro neis and Maro p4lei as technicians, long-haired Pileo the sighter, and Yrre the neophyte.

Reagh watched from the top of the steps as Yrre helped Maro neis put the finishing touches to the lashings on the cars. There were three cars, for Heleui was using the trip to restock the south-western depots. Stores and equipment were piled high on the cars and there was hardly room for the members of the team, let alone the newcomer. But Heleui had been adamant. Three cars only. You can't overload the Tanquish carryalls. The fewer vehicles the better.

It had turned hot. Yrre was lightly clad, already sweating as he tussled with the traces. He felt vigorous and alert; his week in the foothills had toned and relaxed him, so that he seemed squatter, sturdier on his feet. His glide had become a walk. His wide unfocused driver's eyes were beginning to pucker with the sun and wind; his senses had returned to his body.

And Reagh had withdrawn from him.

She called him from the steps, and he turned to look at her. What about your flight couch?

Can't it stay where it is? he asked.

Will you be needing it again? It takes up a lot of room.

Maybe the Paulian can use it, said Yrre.

The Paulian was the new driver, a brisk young woman with a penchant for decoration which awed the Gleaners but struck Yrre as decadent. Reagh, he noticed, had taken pains not to reveal herself to the new driver, who in spite of an unusual volume of traffic since she arrived had found time to visit the temple on two or three occasions, ostensibly to benefit from Yrre's local knowledge. He had the feeling that she was looking for something more than his briefings. He wished he knew what it was.

Reagh's reticence was politic. Members of the Paulian Church were known to be deeply religious, and the Gleaners were thus put into a quandary: if the Paulian became aware of the godhead it might distress her, and the Gleaners didn't like upsetting their guests. Besides, the Paulian was a fine linguist and was applying herself to k2or with a will. The Gleaners were flattered by her attentions. Yrre stifled a tiny pang of jealousy.

The Paulian had been on flight for the past week, and Reagh had relaxed a little. But there was a distance between her and Yrre that unsettled him. Was she angry with him?

A little, Reagh admitted. You irritate me a little, Yrre. I wonder why?

But she came down the steps and put her arms around him as they prepared to leave, barefoot as always, clad in her light blue robe, like a priest. They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment and it seemed to Yrre that the old contact was

renewed. They are good together, Yrre, she said. They: Yrre and Reagh.

But Yrre was not a man who could confess love to a superior being: not without conceit. As a Marian, he loved only his equals, and admitted no inferiors but those who professed to rule him. Gods, however, were not so easy to categorize.

And so he resorted to conceit, and in doing so stumbled unwittingly upon the correct reply:

I worship you, Reagh; for ever.



She sat on the steps and waved as the cars moved out of the courtyard. And sat on after they had gone, while the dust settled. With her chin in her hands, alone on the steps of her temple.

Through the open gates she could see the stretch of the road beyond the town, on the far side of the fiord, the morning sun warm on the dappled hillside. She sat motionless, waiting for the three cars to come into view on their way south; and as they did she rose, and glanced up at the Span; a great weariness upon her. She was weary of the ways of men, of the everlasting cycle of the Gleaners' seasons, their narrow attention to the simple rhythms of their tiny planet. Their momentary lifespan froze them so irrevocably into the three dimensions of their senses that time was for them an eternity, an endless succession of solstice and equinox. Of the deeper rhythms they had only an

abstract intellectual knowledge, of which their senses could not partake. Reagh yearned to ride the tides again: to watch the skies forming, the great mind moving; and Reagh's Span a puff of troubled dust in the eye of a cooling sun.

She will stay a while yet, she said to herself, transfixed in this eerie flicker of days. For Yrre can see further than many, can slip into adjacent dimensions, is at least dimly aware of his own blindness. And she is fed by the alchemy of her own mammalian body and its quest for communication and identity. She is lucky to have encountered it.

Fourteen slow-motion revolutions of the planet, flat skies, barely detectable rhythms of gravity, until the driver returns. He will meet the elves; can he speak with them, and learn of them? Heleui, let him approach them as he will. Let him find his own way.

A fortnight. She has chosen. Perhaps she could kindle time with the new driver from Carhault—a believer, a member of the sect of Pauli, a woman like she. Reagh tried to think: I, we ...



Yrre shared the third car with Maro neis, carrying most of the stores. They were content not to talk. They kept up a moderate speed over the grasslands that billowed out towards the sea, the cushions keeping the cars some two span over the tallest grasses and hardly ruffling them. The grass had begun to

grow during the past few weeks and the road had not been mowed for the spring, so they rode gently. Further south the sea made a wide excursion into the land, the tidal estuary of the lower Tanquish basement and they picked up speed over the sand and mud flats, keeping single file to disturb the waterfowl as little as possible. There was no other traffic about.

Far a long time the mountains ahead seemed to keep their distance, receding from them as they sped over the flats. Maro neis dozed at the wheel, homing on Heleui in the front car. Yrre stretched luxuriously and lay back, propping his hands behind his head, watching the flash of sun on the intermittent water. He began piecing together in his mind the patchwork of information he had managed to gather: what were they, the elves that he was going to see?

It was difficult to form any clear ideas of the level of elven evolution—civilization, some termed it—before the implant. Three thousand cycles of intermittent contact with man had not persuaded them to make use of fire, although their social life was well organized: the nomadic family groups, numbering between twenty and fifty individuals, practiced care of their young, old and sick, shared food and organized its distribution, and associated freely on the rare occasions when they met, often exchanging individuals. The groups kept close to the coastline during the short summers, feeding on fish and marine growth (both still chiefly geo-pops), and wintering inland with



lowered metabolism, eating and moving little. An unlikely symbiosis had developed between the elves and a species of geo-oos seal known by the men of Har as the Southern Jumper Seal, a small tawny gregarious seal which rendezvoused regularly with the elves during the summer and provided them with off-shore fish. The elves, in their turn, allowed the seals to feed from the copious mammary glands on elven adults of all sexes. It was unclear which side had initiated this arrangement: was it the elves who had tamed the seals or the seals who had wooed the elves? Both parties benefitted: the elves recovered from their seasonal metabolic depression, fattening and becoming lively on the long southern shores, often taking to the sea towards the end of summer and swimming for hours on end among the seals. And who could blame the seals for their penchant for elven milk? The Gleaners had on certain occasions allowed Yrre a precious taste.

But a symbiosis between oos and pps life-forms could only develop in one way: the elves were becoming weaker, cycle by cycle.

The human discovery of elven milk was lost in the mists of antiquity: there was archaeological evidence of gleaning activity shortly before the end of the first millenium after the implant. For the past two hundred cycles the export of medicines extracted from the milk had been a source of income for the planet. It also appeared to have saved the elves from

extinction.

It was only over the last hundred cycles or so that the Gleaners had applied themselves scientifically to the study of the elves. It had become apparent long before the export of milk products had become a viable concern that the elves of the southern hemisphere were following their northern cousins into extinction. Every century that passed showed a substantial decline in aboriginal geo-pps levels, even in the seas. The Pepsis, as the Har version of the Evenspeech pronounced “pps”, was going: some day it would all be gone. Everything, that is, except the elves. They had to be preserved.

Unfortunately the elves themselves were not cooperating in the unequal struggle. They did not, it was thought, understand the practicalities of the problem, although they seemed to recognise a certain dependence on the Gleaners for their health, even occasionally taking the initiative by approaching humans in bad cases of sickness. But otherwise they fled from humans, hiding in the uplands. For while the elves gave their milk freely to the geo-oos seals, they shrank from the geo-oos humans in fear. Their distress on close contact was pitiful to behold.

And this was the skill of the Gleaners: to stalk the elves, inject them with the sap that kept them alive, and to gather their milk. These were the skills that Yrre was to learn.

The car lurched over a larger creek and Maro neis gave a snort and woke up. Yrre sat up and shaded his eyes against the

gleaming horizon: the foothills of the southern range were creeping closer over the sands. We'll be sighting Soreugh soon, said Maro neis, yawning and stretching immensely. Time for a libation coming up. He turned and squinted at Yrre from under his tousled black hair.

You're being very quiet driver Yrre, he said, with a twinkle in his eye. Indulging in thoughts of religion, I'll warrant—. He gave a raucous peal of laughter, disengaged the homer and headed off seawards to the right of the others so that the car took on a bumpier motion as the water deepened. Yrre half-opened his canopy so that the cold salt wind buffeted them. I thought you lot in the Temple were all for religion, he shouted back.

You're a favoured man, Yrre, said Maro neis cheerfully; and I'm glad that you've joined us. Reagh is sending you to see the elves, and Reagh is closer to the elves than we can ever be—shut that bloody canopy, I can't hear myself think.

Yrre shut it and waited. He wanted Maro neis to go on. Without Reagh around, his peculiar status amongst the Gleaners had suddenly taken on a changed aspect. He felt it immediately. There was a sting in Maro neis's tone that Yrre had not heard before. And his driver's training told him to start delving.

But he didn't know where to begin. On a flight deck you quickly discovered what your level of communication with the

crew was to be: everything from complete isolation to intense involvement. There was a clearly defined program to be carried out and your immediate task was to determine an acceptable *modus operandi*. Admittedly this could be difficult sometimes, with complex hierarchical crews which nevertheless expected a relatively high level of involvement: warm handshakes and cocktails all round, or the punctilious food rituals of the Kerio. Sometimes he had failed, once or twice miserably, and wound up with a hopelessly lost and thoroughly demoralized *pasdaghe* careening wildly through thickly eliding dimensions on the wrong edge of the wrong universe. All right to laugh over later; the crew can always go into sedation and the driver into isolation, but that's nobody's idea of fun. P-stars are monotonous company without people.

But this was different. Planet-bound, wedded to a close crew of six who had no real need for him, having to rely on the fumbling talents of his own body—this was a new experience. He had no idea where to start. Perhaps he should even keep it cool.

Maro *neis* solved the problem for him. It came to Yrre as a flood of relief.

You mustn't think I'm jealous of you and Reagh or anything like that Yrre.

Yrre found the tack and battened on to it.

I'm glad about that he said. It occurred to me.

Was Maro neis going to stop there?

But all the same—, said Yrre, hazarding a prompt.

All the same, you need some getting used to. We'd begun to think of Reagh as ours. She came to us, after all, and you don't find Gleaners' lodges with resident gods every day of the week.

It's difficult to get used to that idea, said Yrre. For me, a god is a mythical being with supernatural powers that people build temples to and worship because it seems to fill out their lives. Like the Paulians. Now they really would be dismayed if their god turned up and asked for a room.

I wonder what He'd look like? mused Maro neis.

Reagh looks like a god, I grant you, said Yrre doggedly, but she's no hand at thunder and lightening.

Maro neis chuckled. It's funny to hear you talking like that, Yrre, he said. I like it. Once upon a time I would have been horrified. But then Reagh turned up and—well, as you say, no thunder and lightening. Just a lovely person. Brews very well, too.

Why would you have been horrified once upon a time? asked Yrre.

Maro neis thought. I've never been off-planet he said, but I've read a lot of outside stuff. I flatter myself I know a thing or two about the Bases, for instance. My family have always been Geordian sympathisers since the Embargo, and both my brother and sister have been to Eile and beyond. I know what

you think about us. But we're not religious maniacs like the Paulians, you know. We've had cultural contact with alien civilizations for hundreds of cycles, and we don't believe the gods control our lives any more—even if we ever did. We keep up our temples and our modes of worship because we like them. We like our gods, and we like watching the stars. You can't ignore Reagh's Span very long. And we'd be silly to abandon a very pleasant religion and deny the gods while they continue to give us first-hand physical proof of their existence - now wouldn't we?

Was there a faint tone of self-justification? Yrre felt the driver's urge to delve. Physical proof? he asked.

Maro neis gave a sudden pulse of annoyance. You have the physical proof, driver.

Dangerous ground. Too treacherous? But Yrre leapt, taking advantage of the momentum he had gained. You know what I mean. How do you know that Reagh is *the* Reagh?

Maro neis was quiet for a moment riding his annoyance. The car had begun to buck a little: they had got out into open water. There was spray on the canopy. He flushed it, throttling back. Then he took a deep breath, and relaxed. He preened the cushion and they lifted further from the water, dropping to cruising speed. The car steadied.

Sorry Yrre, he said at last. He managed a smile. I was making a fool of myself. I wish she liked me as much as she

likes you, that's all. And in a way I know she does. But she was *our* Reagh; then you came long.

It's difficult, said Yrre. I don't know what the world is like without me. But I try, really. He leant over and took Maro neis's hand, as he had seen Gleaners do to settle a quarrel. Maro neis was surprised, but accepted it all the same, and lifted it to his cheek.

They sat in silence for a while, their hands together on the drive housing between them.

After a while Maro neis began to speak.

She was a full-grown woman when she came to us, getting on for three cycles ago now. But she knew nothing, she hadn't even language. We taught her everything. We taught her her name, and who she is. We knew she was Reagh.

The silence was Yrre's question. He pressed it.

A full-grown woman doesn't appear out of nowhere, Maro neis said. Without memory, without language. There were no records, no one missing, nowhere. A new face. But we recognized it. Even you recognized it Yrre, the second you saw her, we watched you; and yet you have no concept of Reagh in your culture. The God of the Span is one of our most cherished cultural possessions: peace and love. She has no need of thunder and lightning. That's Rufor: he's not the sort of god that's going to waste time consorting with people. Sephoz, now, there's a god for you. Lived for eighty cycles at Tonsach, I've got

all his homilies. Fabulous stuff. My great grandfather shook hands with him. Marvellous old fellow. One eye, big floppy hat. I'd take a libation with him any time.

The legend says she first appeared among the elves, said Yrre. She doesn't remember it. Do you?

Legend? said Maro neis thoughtfully. Yes, I suppose it's already a legend. Only three cycles ago, come next Turning. But it's no legend to me. I remember it like yesterday. Heleui and me, we found her. The elves brought her to us. They thought she was sick. You'll see the place.



## 5

The Paulian Izza (Guerlec) Isqad was entranced by Tanquish. She was enthralled by Huld. And the Traffic Control people in Tanquish were delighted with the new driver. They had been in a state of agitation over the prospect of a Paulian driver, for Paulians were rare visitors to Huld. Would she bring a lover with her? Or would they have to provide one for her?

(My dear, said the Comptroller to his wife one morning over the breakfast table. Do *we* have any lesbians?)

But all fears evaporated on her arrival. Izza Isqad turned out to be a pretty, efficient young woman with a charming manner, not at all the austere spinster they had been expecting. The Comptroller announced his intention to hold an informal reception for her as soon as she could find time from her duties; but it was almost a week before the party was at last held in the Comptroller's villa in the Base Quarter. It was a marvellous success. At first the men were bowled over. Izza (Guerlec) was stunning. And the women remained aloof, twinkling, waiting for her to strike. As they knew a Paulian would, however charming her exterior.

As the evening wore on, however, some of them began to wonder. They exchanged glances and refilled their glasses.

To everyone's relief the retiring driver had not appeared at the reception, having already left Tanquish—on some hunting trip, apparently. He had met Izza briefly on one or two occasions, but that had been all. Izza moved straight into his delightful Traffic Control villa, perched above the oldest part of the city, overlooking the tumble of terraced back streets above the harbour. He had never used it, they told her; he had found friends in some obscure religious fraternity of herdsmen (carefully avoiding the word “heathen”) who lived up in the old temple of, um, overlooking the Eastern Quarter. He had set up his flight couch somewhere in their temple, and kept up the most cursory of relations with Traffic. But there had been no complaints from flight crews, so they had let him alone. (A Geordian sympathiser, if the truth be told.)

Izza was interested: Are there Geordian pockets in Tanquish? she asked.

Pockets no. Sympathisers here and there, yes. Huld people are politically incredibly naive, thank—ah, luckily enough. Huld is a fine planet and Tanquish in Har is the best place on Huld. You're going to like it here.

Izza was sure she would. The fact was, she confided, she had been manoeuvring to secure a post under the exotic skies of Huld ever since she had read about the Seli9 system in the travel brochures. So she was delighted when the word came from Carhault that the resident driver here had broken down

and gone native; perhaps only temporarily they said, but she jumped at it. Luckily the Sector Supervisor is a male Paulian, a friend of my father's. Segvad Sodt. You know him?

Ah no. Not personally, that is. (A friend of her father's. Sweet heavens. And the sheen of her hair—)

At a quarter past midnight Izza (Guerlec) Isqad put down her glass with a smile, thanked the Comptroller with a peck on his cheek, signed her breasts in brief Paulian style to the Comptroller's wife, and was gone, politely declining several offers of escort. She wished to walk home alone, she said, to savour Tanquish by herself. The bottom fell out of the party.

But Izza Isqad did not walk home. She made her way into the centre of the town before striking off towards the West Quarter, walking with quick strides and pausing only occasionally to check her bearings. And as she walked, she ran mentally through her brief. She could not afford to make any false steps at the very beginning.

A tiny flurry of interpar crisis, rapidly resolved.

The Eile authorities had supported the decision of the recalcitrant Geordian crew—they had good use for 40,000 immigrant on the Eile asteroids. The Lords of the Bases were not perturbed, the incident was slight, the time not ripe; they had cheap labour enough to export to the mineral concerns on Kyle. Brief apologies were tendered and the incident was closed.

And then two seemingly minor details surfaced, insignificant and perhaps unrelated; but on the Bases certain intelligences took note. Firstly, the Geordian pasdaghe disappeared. Traffic Control lost it. If the crew had elided out of the sector they had done so without a driver from Traffic. A common enough occurrence, except for the fact that they were Geordians; when Geordians go extra-par there's little doubt as to their destination.

Secondly, the driver on Seli9 broke down and requested grounding. Again, a common occurrence . But it was noted that this driver had been the last to drive the Geordian crew before they entered Eile par. And it soon came to light that the Seli9 driver was a Geordian sympathiser. The intelligences pondered: Seli9! The asteroid fields of the eighties, where Berenice had hidden. Who is our man in Seil9?

A Paulian, my lord. Isqad something.

(Guerlec)?

I believe that is the name, my lord.

The intelligences exchanged glances. Aha. Of course. Carhault.

She wrapped her mantle closer about her shoulders as she climbed above the town: the early spring air was cooler up on the hillside. Only a few bright asteroids, vanguard of the Span, were climbing over the near horizon ahead. The long low line of

the Temple of Reagh stood out against the sky.

In spite of herself, she felt the tension mounting within her. The temple looked very different in the dark. Her first brief visit soon after her arrival had been in the light of morning: a formal exchange of papers with the retiring driver, an awkward, unpolished character who was making ready to set out on his walking-tour, and a brief sightseeing round of the temple in the company of the leader of the sect, a cheerful bearded fellow with an outlandish name. The sun had shone and the members of the sect had been bustling about preparing for some pilgrimage into the mountains. It was a colourful scene. She had sensed nothing unclean. Not that she was looking for it. Even if they were heathens. She had her job to do.

But now she hesitated. Heathen temples have their secrets, particularly in the dark. She stopped briefly and hallowed herself: Father, enter me. Her body responded. She felt better.

Teod was waiting at the gate, cheerful as ever. Well well he said as he took her hand and led her into the courtyard. Traffic is really doing us proud; they send us all their drivers. We Gleaners must be more important than we thought.

It was really very nice of you to let me come, said Izza. I hardly dared to call you. But I'm so worried about the driver I am replacing. Space addiction is no joke, you know.

Teod led her across the courtyard towards the lights and

sounds of music issuing from the windows of the Common Room. I think a libation is called for, he said—and perhaps a bite to eat? Or am I allowed to offer a Paulian heathen wine? Perhaps a taste of elven milk?

But Izza had been fortified by her brief prayer. That would be lovely, she said, squeezing Teod's hand. I'm not a very devout Paulian, if the truth be told.

The lie was strategic. Izza (Guerlec) knew exactly what such a confession would mean to Teod. She could not have spoken more clearly: I may be a Paulian, but I like men too.



The sounds of singing swelled as they made their way down the long passage into the Common Room. The Gleaners sat round a huge log fire, and they hardly looked up as Teod and the driver came in. Teod offered her bread and wine and a tiny goblet of elven milk which she pretended was the first she had ever tasted.

We're celebrating tonight he said. The first gleaning party of the season left this morning. I'm afraid you missed Yrre—he went with them.

Teod sat her down in a corner of the flet beside the chimney, where she could enjoy her bread and wine and listen to the music. He excused himself briefly—he had one or two quick chores to attend to. The singers would be leaving soon and

turning in, he said. Then we can talk in peace.

She settled luxuriously back into her corner and gave herself to the music. The singers didn't leave; their numbers increased and their song became merrier. The fire burnt high. Teod returned with sweetmeats and more wine, and Izza Isqad perceived that the night was running away with her. She wasn't unduly worried; after all, her job was to contact the Gleaners and keep an eye on Yrre. Contact with the Gleaners was in full swing, at any rate, and she was thoroughly enjoying herself. Their merriment seemed secular enough. The song resolved itself periodically into movement, one or two singers standing up and dancing with a delicious swaying motion for a while, and Izza's pulse quickened. She had been drinking moderately at the Comptroller's reception party, and possibly the Gleaners' wine was more potent than it seemed. The evening began to flow in a surprisingly un-Paulian pattern, and she let it. The outlandish grace of the dancers' bodies was for her a potion that she knew and desired. Izza (Guerlec) Isqad was aroused.

She turned and faced the man who addressed her, not understanding his words, but responding powerfully as he took her hand. As she moved into the dance with him and tried to adjust to the complex rhythm she realized that her style of dancing must seem as exotic to them as theirs to her. She felt herself falling luxuriously into the bunching, spasmodic pulses of the fashionable music of the Bases, originally Geordian—he

vibrant black music at the cultural core of the civilization. The Gleaners had stopped to watch; their music slowed and faltered, and then flowed hesitantly into her irresistible rhythm, quiet and attentive at first like the man who danced with her, and then gradually gaining confidence. Izza was lost in the movements of her own body.

And the night flowed on.

When had she first become aware of the slight figure in the blue dress? Who had moved once or twice at the edge of her sight during the evening—clearly a Gleaner like the others, but with her simple blue attire picking her out in a specific way: an initiate, perhaps? Or even one of the priestesses? Izza felt a thrill of unholy anticipation. It was almost as if the girl were hiding from her. She found herself watching for a glimpse of her.

Later—much later, she sat close to the dying fire and the room was quieter; six or seven remained sitting and talking with Teod, and Izza sat amongst them relaxed and happy, extracting disjointed strings of cohesion from their rippling conversation. And suddenly the girl was with them, she was there kneeling on the floor by Teod, holding a goblet in her hands. She lifted it and drank to them. The conversation stopped for a breath, and every eye was on her as she drank. Izza realized with a little shock that her drinking was a rite, an offering to the group, received with gratitude; a benediction.



The girl smiled at them over her cup and the conversation carried on as before. And then her eyes fell on Izza.

Welcome to the new driver, she said.

Izza was lost. Thank you, she said.

Reagh reached over and took her by the hand. I am a friend of the old driver, she said. Come with us; we have something to show you.

We, thought Izza, as Reagh led her away. It was a Paulian formula. We are three with the Father.

Please tell me who you are.

Reagh, she said.

The name of the Goddess struck Izza like a singing wind.

Don't be afraid, said Reagh. We're not dangerous.

She led Izza by the hand along a long corridor away from the Gleaners' living-quarters.

Where are we going? asked the Paulian.

Here, said Reagh, drawing her into the rooms that Yrre had used. I want to show you the flight-couch. This is where Yrre did his driving.

Here? Who watched over him?

I did, usually. I wanted him to take me with him, but he said he couldn't. I was wondering whether you would like to—

Hardly, said the Paulian.

Well of course you have better facilities in town, said Reagh.

Her disappointment was palpable. Izza stared at her in disbelief.

Who are you? she said.

She is Reagh, goddess of peace and love. Didn't they tell you?

I am a Paulian—

She knows you are, said Reagh, her brows knitting. But she thought, since you came to us, you wouldn't be too strict. Is she making a mistake?

She? said Izza.

I, of course. She talks like that.

Then tell me who this She really is, said Izza. The tone was at once sarcastic and patronizing.

Reagh, goddess of peace and love.

Izza decided to confront the abhorrence without flinching. As I said, I am a Paulian, she said carefully. You don't expect me to believe this filth?

Reagh was silent, thinking.

I have heard that Paulians believe in the One, she said.

The One God, said Izza.

Is this One God of yours a good god?

That is insolence, said the Paulian.

Reagh stood before her, her head on one side, looking at her in puzzlement. It struck Izza how very beautiful she was.

I'm sorry, she said. I did not mean to be insolent.

I accept your apology.

I meant to be solent, said Reagh.

As the bodies lose their separate identities in the act of love,  
so the one spirit awakens.



His Holiness Seguad Sodt in Carhault on the ninetieth  
baseday of the tierce of the Fifth Cycle of St Antel, being the six  
hundred and forty-second of Advent: My Lord.

I Izza (Guerlec) Isqad being my Lord's most faithful lover in  
the Father send His greetings and mine, reporting thus from  
Tanquish on Huld in Seli9:

It is as you feared, and I am fallen, albeit in furtherance of  
my mission; and surrender my rank and grace withal.

Yet I beseech my Lord read this my report and send me  
word, how I should acquit myself.

Directive 2047 63-3-42 completed.

Directive 0039 69-3-42 now operative, *ut seq.*:

In respect of the driver Hemming Yrre's suspected  
intermediation between the suspect Geordian crew and  
Geordian activists on Huld: his involvement with the suspect  
crew was high; his host on the drive Terei KL 03-0446-0698-  
7020 registered second-degree visual overlay in his login to  
Eile-par and from what I have gained from driver Yrre's closest

acquaintances here on Huld driver Yrre displayed retrocausative overlay on his return. A high level of emotional activity seems to have occurred on the drive.

Conversely I have had a clear negative in respect of suggested contact with Geordian activists on Huld. Driver Yrre has become deeply involved in Haric heathenism (*quod absit*), has become an initiate in their cult and is clearly attempting to sever his ties with the Trades. He has intercourse with demons. This is not Geordian activity.

However I would suggest continued surveillance. The psychomotive ties between driver Yrre and the suspect crew are such that the danger of re-involvement is not to be underestimated; and if my Lord the said crew are indeed extra-par and seeking an illegal driver then Hemming Yrre might seem to them a viable choice.

My Lord, in furtherance of my mission, I too have had intercourse with demons. My Lord with unfeigned delight. And shall continue so. Pray for me, my Lord and Lover.

Izza (Guerlec) Isqad



The report was a masterpiece of design. His Holiness Seguad Sodt's heart went out to her. His reply was short, but said everything:

Child, continue. You are in my prayers.

Sodt (in the Father).

He had of course limited sway with the the Holy Mothers, by reason of his sex; but his secular rank made him their equal, if not technically superior, and Izza's mission was undoubtedly secular. For even if her soul were lost, as she herself reasoned, her body was still operative, and the mission was obviously not to be aborted. She set out again to visit to Reagh with the news.



Ever the human questions orbit the same nodes.

So you and Reagh were lovers, said Yrre, speaking his thoughts aloud.

He could have bitten off his tongue. Too late. He had been dreaming at the controls of the car, mechanically following Manhra in the car in front as they wound their way up a steep slope into the foothills of the Moors south-west of Soreugh. He had been dreaming of Roinje. He had been on the pasdaghe amongst the gentle black brothers and sisters that he loved so much, talking to them freely of matters that came naturally to them, of their loves and desires, of their fears and hopes. He had been trying to reconstruct his love-making with Roinje, and found that Reagh was continually flooding his memories. Maroneis had been Reagh's lover, too. How long ago was that?

He stole Maro neis a glance, and his worse fears were confirmed. The question had been a fatal one.

Should he forget about it? Wait for it to blow over? Try to explain? Make light of it?

Maro neis, he said, in as brisk a voice as he could muster. What is it?

You have to understand that that was a thoughtless question. I did not mean to offend you.

You cannot offend me, driver Yrre, with your questions. Maro neis's tone was crisp.

I had forgotten where I was, and with whom, said Yrre, trying to sound at once casual and sincere. In my culture we ask such questions as a matter of course.

There was no response.

Please forgive me, Maro neis.

The leading car had turned up onto a fan of scree which spread down from a cleft in the hillsides to their right. Heleui's voice came from the pad: Don't follow me, Manhra. I want to look over the top. Wait here for a bit to see if I dislodge any loose stuff. If it's firm, go round the bottom and wait for me on the other side. Maro neis follows Manhra. Hear me?

Heard you, said Manhra's juicy rumble.

Heard you, growled Maro neis.

Yrre settled the car onto the sloping rock face and flushed the cushion. He reset the gyro and then turned to look at Maro

neis.

I hope you can forget it, he said.

Maro neis stared stonily up at the slopes above them.

Heleui's car lurched perilously up into the mist.

Looks firm enough to me, he said.



For the next two hours they followed Manhra ever higher into the foothills. Maro neis remained silent and Yrre did not press him. By the time the terrain began to level out onto high ground they were in thick fog, navigating mostly by sonar and making very slow progress. The Gleaners were beginning to feel hungry. Heleui called a stop and Maro p4lei jumped out of the forward car and spun out the group tent on a gentle slope of sand. They flushed the cushions and came into the tent for a meal and a libation.

Heleui cut delf bread.

We'll not make the Crater tonight in this visibility, said Ested.

Why did you take this route, Heleui? asked Pi leo.

Ask Maro neis, said Heleui, handing out the bread. Do you recognise where we are, Maro neis?

Maro neis scowled. I've had other things on my mind the last couple of hours, he said.

Everyone except Yrre looked at him. Anything wrong, Maro

neis? asked Helui quietly.

Nothing that won't mend, said Maro neis. He took his bread from Heleui. I think I'll skip the libation for once, he said. I'd rather eat in the car if it's all the same to you. He ducked under the flap and was gone.

The Gleaners looked at each other and then at Yrre.

Has something gone wrong, Yrre? said Heleui.

Yrre was unable to lift his eyes from his bread. I'm afraid I said something rather thoughtless about Reagh, he said.

No one spoke. Then one by one the Gleaners looked away, and began eating their bread in silence. Yrre did the same. It was same time before he could bring himself to raise his eyes.

Only Pileo's dark eyes were watching him. For a second.

We'll take no libation, said Heleui, when they had finished chewing. Reagh will understand. Maro p4lei, you will drive my car. Yrre will take my place with Maro p4lei and Pileo. I shall ride with Maro neis. Manhra and Ested will lead, keeping as close to a south westerly course as the terrain allows. In about half a league we will hit a beacon-road Maro neis and I planted here some years back. Follow it left—it'll take us to the Crater. Maro p4lai will follow. Maro neis and I third.

She turned to Yrre.

Spin in the tent Yrre, would you? You should be able to manage without help by now.



It took Manhra less than an hour to find the beacon-road. Simultaneously the visibility improved, and it began to look as if they would reach their destination by nightfall. Yrre had his first tantalising glimpses of the High Moors.

In fact he could see almost nothing from his nest of packing-cases behind Maro p4lei, in what must have been Pileo's seat while Heleui was driving. It was uncomfortable, and Yrre realised for the first time that the Gleaners had made sacrifices to have him with them. From where he sat he could see a little out of the side canopy. Pileo's head and shoulders blocked most of the forward view.

Far a long time, he simply watched Pileo. He could see nothing of her face, but the way she held her head as she took in the terrain in front of them was fascinating. It was clear she was the sighter.

He could not make up his mind whether she was aware of his gaze or not. At first he felt a little ridiculous, staring at the back of her neck, and the curve of her cheek, and he tried to ignore it and look past out of the window. But all he could see there was a small patch of moving ground, lit now by the spill from the car's headlights. Pileo's silhouette kept falling into focus.

They said little, for the terrain had worsened, and without the beacon road they would have been in trouble. It had started

to rain heavily. Manhra kept up a cracking pace, too fast for a high cushion, and the cars had to weave back and forth to avoid the heavy boulders which strewn the terrain. They bucketed from side to side.

Suddenly Pileo swivelled round and looked at Yrre.

You all right back there? she asked.

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment. The questioning face seeking his. He was overwhelmed. But Pileo's face turned away.

The car lurched, Mara p4lei swore. I've blown the cushion, he said. Bloody hell. He throttled back and the car shuddered as he lost cushion. Manhra drew ahead of them. Finally Maro p4lei flushed what was left of the cushion and put the car down among the stones. Heleui drew up alongside and opened her canopy.

You're peppered along your starboard side, she called. I'll leave you to it. It'll be a good experience for Yrre.

Maro p4lei and Pileo looked at each other and sighed. Ever stripped a cushion, Yrre? asked Maro p4lei.

No, said Yrre.

You're sitting on the tool kit, said Pileo coldly.



As they lay under the car and clawed the caked mud and sand from the latches Maro p4lei lapsed into his normal

talkative mode. He had to shout against the wind, which sent the rain flying almost horizontally under the car.

Not exactly what you're used to, driver Yrre?

Yrre was struggling with a stubborn latch.

I've done my share of repair-work in some pretty narrow orbits, he answered. Never crawled round a fuselage this deep, though.

Push inwards on that one and slide to the right, Pileo called.

Yrre did, and the latch shifted.

Beginning to regret your decision? shouted Mara p4lei.

You like it, said Yrre. Why shouldn't I?

We're born here. We have nothing else going. Can't see why you want to leave Reagh all alone in Tanquish and wallow in mud on the High Moors.

I could ask the same question of you, said Yrre. You left your partner on the hearth back in Tanquish, didn't you?

My partner isn't Reagh, said Maro p4lei And I didn't—

As he spoke the coping came loose and fell onto them, and the three muddy bodies manoeuvred it laboriously over their heads and out from under the car. They crawled out after it and Maro p4lei flashed a light into the cushion housing. One two three—four, he counted. Four gone. Bloody hell. Where's the box, Pileo? Damn. They're still too hot. Might have guessed.

They straightened their backs and moved away from the car, leaning into the driving rain. Pileo turned to gaze over the

darkling wilderness.

What were you going to say, Maro p4lei? asked Yrre. You didn't what ?

Maro p4lei took a deep breath. Pileo turned to look at them.

You share her bed, driver, he said. But you left her behind in Tanquish.

Was I supposed to bring her with me? asked Yrre in amazement.

We did, driver Yrre, said Maro p4lei. All of us. In our hearts. Why not you?



Why not I? thought Yrre as he lay awake that night among the sleeping bodies of his companions. Because I am not Huld born, and have not Reagh in my heart as Maro p4lei put it? I who have seen deeper into the heart of the Goddess than they have ever done? These men of Huld, who have no word for love between minds in their miraculous language, this k2or. When they talked of love they talked first of peace and social friendship; to talk of bodily love they added a so-called paraphrase, an independent tonal modulation which introduced the sexual proponent registering in core phasemes throughout the unit of clausation. A merciless language! And then they had a different paraphrase to introduce what they called mind-love, whose import escaped Yrre.

The people of Huld practiced a system of permanent sexual partnerships which formed the social unit of procreation. Homosexual couples frequently raised their own or adopted children. They changed partners rarely, and never easily. Many Gleaners chose not to form fixed relationships, however. Sometimes such people were celibate, like Heleui; but more often they shared their beds when the opportunity arose.

Yrre's flight training had provided him with the tools for coping with the most alien of social patterns. But the Gleaners were not aliens; their code was very close to his own, although there were differences. Their insistence on formal male sexual initiative, for instance, a stricture that Yrre recognised from Eile and the Bases, was offensive to his own Marian upbringing.

What was it that he had seen in Pileo's eyes? It was a pure light. There was no darkness there.



In the days that followed Yrre experienced a growing coldness towards him. Only Heleui and Maro p4lei were relatively open and friendly. Pileo avoided his eyes, dismissed him again and again with the language of her body in the company of the group. He was sure the others noticed it. He felt group pressures upon them both that were unrelated to her. And to his dismay he found himself weighed down by the same social strictures that he reasoned must apply to Pileo. He

became ashamed of his glances, hiding them from the group. Mandatory male initiative and predation lay on the same cline. It was intolerable.

Sometimes he considered the possibility of broaching the subject with the group, a natural reaction from the flight-deck, where such problems simply have to be resolved for the flight to continue. But he knew he could not. The danger-signals were too clear.

We'll be reaching the Flats tomorrow, said Maro p4lei on Yrre's third day of jolting about in the back of Heleui's car. You'll be able to stretch your legs before long, driver.



Pileo, buffeted by the wind on a knoll of higher ground, crouched to steady herself and put her glasses to her eyes to scan the wide expanse of moor before them. She said something in four syllables, toning between the threes and the fives, as Yrre judged. Yrre followed the direction of the Gleaners' gaze.

Heleui turned to Yrre. You see the area of whelft to the right she said. There is a small group on the top of the ridge beyond. Can you pick them out?

Twelve adults, said Pileo, speaking to Yrre's surprise in single phase for his benefit. Can't see any young. Moving group, I think. They look healthy.

There's a small one on the back of number three, said Ested.

You're right, said Pileo. Anyway they're a moving group. We'll scan them off later. See them everybody?

Maro p4lei nudged Yrre. I can't see anything either, he said. Never do. Don't worry. Pileo's the sighter.

They made their way down to the foot of the knoll where they had left their cars.

Round the back by Kent Hole and straight over the Flats to the Depot, called Heleui as they climbed into the cars. Don't stop if you see any groups on the Flats, give them a wide birth. See if we can make it by morning.



The Flats at last, said Maro p4lei joyfully as he preened the cushion and set off after Maro neis and Heleui in the leading car. We're getting there, driver Yrre.

And what happens then? asked Yrre from his tool-case. He was bored and tired by the endless travelling, catching rare sights of dismal upland and nothing at all of the elves.

That's up to Heleui, said Maro p4lei. She'll split us up into groups for the footwork. Me and Pileo usually take the Overlie. I expect Heleui will keep an eye on you herself.

Yrre's eyes rested on the curve of Pileo's cheek for the thousandth time that day. He knew she would not turn round again.

He longed to be back in Tanquish, to talk of these things

with Reagh. She would tease him, as she had about Roinje. But her basic response would be interest, and enquiry.

He closed his eyes to banish Pileo from his mind. As the car bucketed his aching knee pressed into the back of her seat. How he hated that cramping seat! It was the epitome of all the barriers erected between him and Pileo. The car lurched, and the aching knee intruded.

And suddenly it came to him as he rearranged his bruised bottom on the tool-box that the form he was creating in his imagination when he thought about Pileo was probably nothing like her. When had he ever looked into her face and watched the tone of its expressions? Such was the strength of the barriers between them; he hardly even know her face. As he thought about it he was surprised and amused to discover that the Pileo of his imagination was probably closer to Roinje than the Pileo of real life.

And so he left his bafflement and settled back amongst the packing cases and turned his mind to Roinje; as this narrative now must.



## 6

Roinje walked hand in hand with Terei through the teeming plazas of the Inner Bases. It would have been futile to attempt to pass unnoticed, although many in the upper levels were relatively tall and dark. In the lower levels the two Georgians were as sentinels stalking among the diminutive white populace. So they played tourist and aimed their pads at every monument.

Until they came to Goose Harquel under the bright moons of Base Six, walked lovingly together into the interlevel, and disappeared.

The ancient city of Goose Harquel had once been a major seaport on Six. Situated on the tidal estuary of the mighty Tarry River, it commanded the Middle Seas. But by the time of the Lords of the Bases little remained of the quays and wharfs that had once lined the waterfront of the city's Third Level. Once the financial centre of the Northern Hemisphere, the Third Level was now a depressed area, a vast and crowded burrow of ancient slums. Waterborne transport, being profitless, no longer existed on Six.

Roinje and Terei smiled politely at the police guards as they boarded the interlevel.



They've gone to ground in Six Goose Three, my Lord.

Then follow them.

We can't do that my Lord. Not in Six Goose Three.

Silence.

Six Goose Three has been cordoned off, my Lord.

Differentially.

Silence. Then, acidly:

Differentially cordoned off?

Free access, restricted exit my Lord. Political quarantine.

Pending clearance.

Are we to understand that you have lost control in this  
Goose place?

Temporarily, my Lord. Temporarily.



As soon as Terei and Roinje alighted from the interlevel in Six Goose Three they were arrested. Not by the Base Six police, for there were no police left in the Third Level of the city. They were arrested by two young men with green head-scarves and stolen police stunners. Just come along with us, if you please, said one of them politely.

Roinje looked at him carefully. He was a girl.

Where are we going? asked Terei.

Just a routine check, said the girl. We don't see so many Georgians around. Follow the exit signs, if you please. We're right behind you. She waved her stunner at them politely.

As they came out onto the boulevard the two Georgians began to realize that the situation in the Third Level was not at all what they had expected. To begin with, the police tabs that had been surveying their progress across the plazas were all clearly dead, their ashen surfaces bringing back memories of the power-cuts on their home planet. And there was a strange silence on the boulevards, few people about although it was in the middle of the morning, and no traffic whatsoever. The traffic lanes were probably dead, too.

Hey, what's going on? asked Terei, turning to their escorts.

The young people grinned.

You really didn't know, did you? said the boy. A nice pair of Georgians you are. Straight into the hornets' nest. You'll not be getting out in a hurry.

Roasse! Quick! Rollers!

It was the girl who had shouted. The few people in sight were suddenly scurrying for shelter. Roinje could hear the wine of an off-traffic vehicle approaching.

Down the next turning, quick as you can,—if you don't mind, said the boy, and the Georgians and their escorts broke into a run, making for a narrow archway that opened to their left.

They dodged in and stood tight up against the wall as the noise of the vehicle grew louder.

It went by with a whine and a roar. The observer in the turret looked neither to right nor left.

That's the first roller for days, said the girl, when the noise had subsided. He was in a hurry, too. Dead scared.

Scared of what? asked Roinje, although she was beginning to guess the answer. The young people grinned again.

Us, said the boy.

Who's us? said Terei

The Union, said the boy, touching his green headscarf. We drove them out. They don't dare come in any more. Lost too many rollers. Only a token patrol every now and then, just to show they're still there. But it's best to keep out of their way. Sometimes they shoot.

What's the Union? asked Terei.

The Union of Third Level Workers, said the boy. Freedom from oppression.

Then we're allies, said Roinje. That's what we're working for, too.

The girl looked at at her briefly; and then away. Could be, she said.



The man with the straw moustache looked up incredulously.

7102 Thiery? he said. Ellyonne? They sent you there? From Eile?

The fat woman at the window took the pipe from her mouth. Women's rights, she said. Ellyonne has had articles published here and there.

Father, said the man. It takes all sort to make a revolution.

The woman puffed at her pipe. They seem to be waking up to things on Eile, she said. Not like some.

So you know Ellyonne? said Roinje. Does she live far from here?

The two Geordians towered above the tiny clay head that bowed itself over the cluttered table. Roinje had never seen so many pieces of paper in her life before. The little man was hunting through them, muttering to himself. Since he didn't seem prepared to answer her question, she tried another:

Is it a tradition here to keep information in paper-writing? Why don't you use tabs?

The little man gave her a quick look of disgust.

Have you tried using your tab recently? he asked.

Terei's hand move instinctively to his pouch. He turned to Roinje in alarm.

Dead, he said. How about you?

Roinje tried. So is mine, she said. And then the full implications struck her. There's no power, she said. How are we going to contact our pasdaghe?

The little man seemed to have found what he was hunting

for.

Your ship, you mean? he said. You can't contact it That's all there is to it. Where did you leave it?

We're extra-par, said Terei. We'd rather not say where our ship is.

I understood the last bit, said the man. We can only hope your crew have the sense not to come looking for you. We don't want a hoard of Geordians barging in on us. Now you're here, you're here, you've been logged off. No changing that. You won't be getting out of here in a hurry.

Roinje was aghast. We've been logged off? she said. You mean they logged us off as we came in?

The man nodded. They've cut all power and they're screening off the whole Level. We depend on runners with written messages. And apart from Ellyonne's kid and a few like him, we have no information from the outside. If you can call the witch-boy's ramblings information. So we'll be drilling you, for a start.

Are you sure there's no way out? asked Terei quietly.

The woman at the window took the pipe out of her mouth again.

You heard what the slob said, she said. You've been logged off. They'll be onto you the second you try to put your head up out of the Third Level, and you won't be found again. Take your choice. You call yourselves Marians: you can join us, and

organise, or you can keep out of our way and wait for the rollers to move in in force and clean us up, like some of the slobbs are doing. It won't be yet. Might not even be in a month or two. But they'll come. They have to. And we're going to be ready.

Roinje looked at Terei helplessly. At least you can tell us how to contact this Ellyonne, she said, turning to the man at the desk.

You'll see her tonight, he said. At the Quarter Committee meeting. We'll want you there.



The boy Elluasse stood by the banks of the great Tarry River, weeping, listening to the voices in his head. Taarh, they called. Taarh, come.

As the bloated orange sun of Six drops towards the horizon during the summer months in Goose Harquel, its rays reach further and further into the deep recesses of the Third Level of the tiered and towering city. Depending on the weather, and depending on their orientation, the boulevards that reach back into the depths, once the crowded arteries of the city's waterfront, gradually fill with sunlight; slowly at first, the shadow creeping at a snail's pace over the ancient stone. As the sun sinks lower the shadow moves faster, becoming ever less distinct, until it is racing up the great boulevards with the speed of an interlevel shuttle. At last a few seconds before the sun

touches the rim of the Middle Sea, its orange light falls on the farthest walls, a league or more from the river, deep under the city; and the inner denizens of the Third Level come out onto the boulevards, and shade their eyes as the orb traverses the distant skylight, a bright spark that flames for a few minutes, and then snuffs out.

Once, perhaps twice or thrice a year, if the skies are clear.

Why is the boy Elluasse weeping? Is it because he feels his filamental shadow dancing the long leagues behind him down the boulevard? Or is it because of the voices calling him from a distant star? Or is it because he can see the Geordian in his mind's eye, because he is overwhelmed by the black beauty of her alien body? He gazes out at the setting sun, dancing on the horizon through his tears. Never have the voices been so clear in his head, they have followed the Geordian, they seek her as he does. Come to us, Taarh, little brother, they call. Leave the banks of your mighty river and bring her to drink with us by our tumbling mountain streams. Leave your smoky sun and come and lie with us under our glittering necklace of stars. We are your brothers and sisters, Taarh. We are calling you.

The sun sinks into the empty reaches of the Middle Sea.



Ellluasse glanced at his watch. It was an ancient electronic



contraption given to him by his grandmother, and he kept quiet about it, for it was one of the few timepieces which still worked in the Third Level. Time to move back into the city, not to be late for the meeting. For he was Elluasse, and they needed him on the Quarter Committee, much as they disliked him. They called him the witch-boy behind his back, and Elluasse the Seer to his face; since the blockade, he had suddenly come into his own, for he was one of the few in Goose Three who could see the outside.

And now he would be allowed his first sight of the Geordian of his admiration.



Roinje was a little out of her depth. To begin with, the squat whites around the table used turns of phrase that taxed her understanding. Their whining accent was fathomable enough, but incredibly ugly, seemingly intoned through the nose. More unsettling was the fact that they seemed to be concerned with phenomena entirely outside her range of experience. Of a chaotic complex of rivalry among the opponents of the oligarchy, of meaningless mass ballots on polarized decisions, of widespread social disasters and alarmingly hostile climactic conditions.

She let Terei do the talking, for she was a newcomer to the Bases, and found it difficult to adjust to the fact that these pallid

straw-haired dwarfs, all so very much alike, were her comrades in the United Front. Since her early childhood their shape and sound had been associated with those of the enemy: greed, ignorance and prejudice. And yet of course there were Marian sympathisers of all races. She had to remind herself that the revolution was not the prerogative of the tall and the black.

As they were introduced to the group she became absorbed with the problems of orientation, and found them of a calibre quite outside her experience. This was physical confrontation in a wide-open arena, with none of the the cloistered comforts of the flight deck. It was quite a shock for her to realize that the carefully formulated intercourse with alien drivers camouflaged in some familiar host-body on one's own flight-deck was very different from the real thing.

It crossed her mind in a flash that very probably Yrre looked something like these people. Although hadn't he said he had black hair?

She tried to concentrate on what was being said around her. The tortuous circumlocutions and occasional obvious untruths were a formulaic protocol which she recognised from her flight-deck training. Here in the flesh, however, they took on alarming dimensions. At least half the people who shook her hand and claimed they were pleased to meet her were clearly lying; out of the corner of her eye she saw the same thing happening to Terei.

After introductions had been made all round there was a

call for silence and the two Georgians were asked whether they didn't want to address the group first and explain the purpose of their visit so that we all know where we stand? Roinje was about to reply no, she didn't want to in the slightest, she'd much rather find out where she stood by listening to them, when Terei answered for her:

My comrade will be delighted to put you in the picture, he said, as if telling patent untruths were second nature to him. She looked at him in amazement, but he stared back at her blankly. Perhaps he's right, she thought. Better I do it.

She opened her mouth to speak. My lovely Black Sisters and Brothers was what she was going to say. And for the first time the emptiness of the formula was revealed to her. How should she start? My Strange Squat Smelly White Comrades? What would Yrre have said?

To these perhaps his own people?



He was late. There was a single voice speaking behind the door. He stood with his hand on the latch, listening. It was a voice he didn't recognize, a woman's, and it was speaking with a most astonishing accent without a trace of honorific modulation, and with a gurgling vowel-sound every now and then which was quite embarrassing. It made Elluase think of things he ought

not to think of. It was a licking sound. And the voice was talking in riddles.

It's not going to be easy for us to communicate, it was saying. I have already begun to see that our cultures and modes of communication are very different. This means that some of the things I say may sound very strange to you. Improper even. In flight we are used to contact with drivers from sometimes very alien cultures. This is necessary because of the way we make p-jumps in space. We find that we often have to work out our personal and social relationships with newcomers on a fairly intimate level, because it's only on a level of mutual trust and close communication that the p-jumps can be made.

It was the Geordian talking. It must be. Dare he go in?

So you see it comes naturally to us to approach the problem of communication with strangers in this way, the voice continued. But of course we are not on the flight deck, and you may not agree that all this is necessary.

There was a hushed silence from the room. Elluasse stood like a statue, his hand on the latch, hardly breathing. He tried to picture the scene inside the room. The speaker standing at the table, all eyes turned down, no one daring to look at her. Her arms bare, perhaps even more of her bare. The exquisite black flesh—who of them there could suffer the sight? Let them keep their eyes down!

The voice was talking again. The delicious licking. Please

say something, it was saying. Please tell me if I'm being offensive.

So that was why Geordian speech was always dubbed on the newsreels, so that it sounded like a Kerio talking. This was a real Geordian speaking. No wonder no one dared answer.

An uncertain voice broke the silence inside the room.

I think we're a bit out of our depth, comrade Roinje, it said. At the moment it sounds as if you're preparing in a rather roundabout way to make some heavy criticism of us. If so, please don't beat about the bush.

Roinje was completely thrown. She beat about the bush? She ignored Terei's warning glance —

Why, for instance, she asked, her voice a little louder than she intended it to be—why don't you look at me while you speak to me?

The speaker bent his head lower.

Why is no one looking at me while I speak to you? Is it really your custom to look away from those who are speaking to you?

The hush was explosive. Roinje turned to Terei in despair.

Xeristei, she said simply. (Geordian expletives are untranslatable.)

The terrible silence was broken by a tiny noise at the door. It opened slowly, and a fearful tear-stained face peeped in. In an ecstasy of relief all faces turned towards it. But it ignored

them. Its gaze had flickered briefly over the room like a far beacon before finding Roinje's eyes and locking with them, a scimitar of anguish and desire.

Xeristei, said Roinje once again, slowly and carefully.  
Xeristei kruseis.



In the lower reaches of Goose Harquel on Six, Marian sympathies were not necessarily Geordian sympathies. It was, of course, grudgingly admitted that Geordians had built thriving Marian societies on a number of worlds; but Goose Marians did not see their Future Society in Geordian terms. What's right for the tall and the black is not necessarily right for the squat and the pallid. Or as they said in Goose: One man's fish is another man's fortune.

Fish from the great Tarry river.

The taller and darker you were in Goose Harquel the less fish you ate, the higher you lived in the city, and the less you worked. Some of the aristocratic elite even affected Geordian dress, and were only distinguishable from Geordians by their dialect. The blaring advertisements for consumer goods that flickered on the skycasts throughout Six pictured the tall and the dark in various tableaux of cornucopia. The skycasts did not speak of fish.

Ellyonne took a careful spoonful of dull yellow powder from

the well of a seed-grinder and added it to the pot on the stove. She covered the pot and turned off the heat.

We'll let it mash for five minutes, she said to Roinje. They'll just have to wait.

Somehow, the meeting had come to an end. The Geordians had been questioned inside and out about matters of which they knew nothing: had Hoban surfaced ? Was the Corn Council still in session? What was the news of the transport workers on Four? Was anyone, anywhere, aware of what was going on here in the Third Level?

The assembly was not encouraged by their answers. Nor were the Geordians by the results of their own enquiries. The Goose Marians knew little of the Geordian Fleet of Liberation and cared even less. And anyway it seemed the Geordians had no hope of leaving the Third Level without surrendering to a pad check as they left and spending the short rest of their lives in police detention.

And then the meeting appeared to be over. Ellyonne stood up apologetically and scuttled for the kitchen. There was an uncomfortable silence.

The—ah—women retire to the kitchen, someone said.

Looking round, Roinje saw no women. Ellyonne had gone.

Terei nudged her. Go and pick Ellyone's brains, he whispered.

Why me? asked Roinje. And then she saw the point.

Xeristei, she said for the third time that evening.



As the coffee—or whatever it was—“mashed” in the pot, Ellyonne gave Roinje the Goose view of the Marian revolution. Like Geordia, Six was one of the seats of the Commonwealth from which the Tessel Colonies sprang, but Six did not share in Geordia’s isolation. Six had taken vast numbers of immigrant workers from Four and Seven, and even from as far afield as Kerne; their survivors formed the white working class of present-day Six. But Geordia in her physical isolation had remained black, and class tensions on Geordia remained non-racial. Thus while Geordia became the homeland of the new Marian movement that quickened amongst the smouldering ruins of the Commonwealth, Six’s contribution to the Tessel Colonies was confined to a handful of intellectuals who managed to escape in the early years of the Bases. And good riddance to them.

Which is why we’re here, and you’re there, said Ellyonne. And which is why the men reacted to you as they did.

I don’t see the connection, said Roinje.

Ellyonne sighed. The Geordian Fleet, she said reflectively. The blessed Geordian Fleet. Old wives’ tales, that’s what they call it. And perhaps they are—who’s the old wife around here? Look at you lass, with your girl’s breasts and your lad’s rump



and the black sheen of you, it's little wonder you're on the rampage after the Geordian Fleet—so was I when I looked like you only white and smaller, and could have gone, too, if it weren't for my Elluasse—not that ever he's mine, that one—what was the name?

Whose name? asked Roinje.

The Eile woman's.

Rewi, said Roinje.

Red hair, said Ellyonne.

White, said Roinje.

Ah, said Ellyonne.

From the other room came the murmur of men's voices. Roinje broke the silence:

And was it an old wives' tale? she asked tentatively.

Wasn't it my tale? said Ellyonne. They'll not have it in there, you know, she said, nodding towards the door. Upset a few cherished ideas it would. Oh no not they.

Roinje took a deep breath. And whee are they? How do I contact them? she asked .

I knew a lad once, said he was going to join the Fleet, said Ellyonne. We were good together. He was like a god, that lad. Then he went. Perhaps he joined the Fleet. He left me my Elluasse. Did you see my Elluasse?

The door opened and a straw moustache peered in. Is the

mash ready, my love? it asked.

Ellyonne jumped to her feet. Coming, she said, and made for the pot. But Roinje was quicker—I'll take it in, she said. It's heavy.

She lifted it by the two wooden handles and turned to face Ellyonne.

Can you tell me? she asked.

Ellyonne shook her head. Old wives' tales, she said.

And Roinje stood still, the steaming pat of mash in her hands, watching the older woman's face. There were tears welling behind the creased eyelids.

You don't know what you're asking, said Ellyonne. You'll take him, I know you will.

The pot was getting heavier. Roinje strained against its weight and against the weight of the old woman's gathering grief.

Who? she asked.

My Elluasse, he talks with the Fleet, said the old woman at last.



Terei, what are we doing here? said Roinje.

It was supposed to be a lead, said Terei.

We have to get out, said Roinje.

At last you're making sense, said Terei.

The heat was stifling. Roinje lay under a single sheet in the narrow bed in the small windowless room which Elluasse had vacated for them. Terei lay on a rug on the floor. They had drawn lots, and Roinje had won the bed.

Elluasse won't mind, Ellyonne had said. He'll sleep in with me. We'll find a better place for you tomorrow.

Terei, said Roinje. I don't think there is a Fleet. People just need a Fleet of Liberation to believe in.

It's an idea in people's minds?

Yes, said Roinje.

Then it exists, said Terei. As an idea. As a potential.

Roinje was silent.

We must activate it, said Terei.

Rock pock said the knuckles on the door.

They looked at each other. Come in, said Roinje.

There was a long pause; then pock pock said the knuckles again.

Roinje rolled out from under the sheet and went to the door.

The boy Elluasse stepped back into the darkness aghast. Roinje regarded him with a puzzled expression.

Won't you come in? she said.

He stood motionless.

Oh heavens I'm sorry, said Roinje, suddenly realising what was wrong. She turned and took her robe from where it lay

folded on her pack. Come in, she said, pulling the robe over her head as she turned towards him again. Forgive me. It's our custom, you see. I really didn't mean to offend you.

He had not moved. He appeared unable to.

Please forgive me, said Roinje, reaching out her hand towards him. She had to go out into the corridor to take his hand and lead him into the light. I'm really sorry, she said. I wasn't thinking.

No, said the boy, speaking thickly, as if with difficulty. It was very nice. He stared at the floor.

Roinje brightened. Really? she said. I thought I must have offended you. I much prefer it too, particularly in this heat And she made to take her robe off again.

No, no, please, said the boy in sudden panic.

She stopped, nonplussed. There was a baffled silence. The boy swallowed fiercely.

I know you wear no clothes on the pasdaghe, said the boy. But this is my room.

Come in and talk to us, said Roinje. Terei was sitting up against the wall.

He sat beside her on the bed.

The two Georgians looked at each other. What had he said? You know about Georgian pasdeighe? asked Terei.

I have been on a pasdaghe, said the boy.

There was a silence.

In your thoughts? asked Roinje.

Yes, in my thoughts, said the boy. And three times in my body.

Was that when you were a child? asked Roinje, again after a pause.

I never knew my father, said the boy. He was a driver.

He gave a small, dry laugh.

My mother says he was a god, he said.

Roinje waited, but he stayed silent.

And you have been on a pasdaghe? prompted Roinje.

Three, said the boy. Astra, Vestra and Systra.

Geordian pasdeighe? With those names? Geordian ships don't have names, they have code-signatures, said Roinje.

Yes, said the boy. So I gave them those names.

Again, the Geordians looked at each other.

And how did you get to these ships? asked Roinje.

I flew.

How, flew?

I went to Traffic Control in Goose Two, before the Closure, before we threw out the police, said the boy. I wanted to become a driver, like my father. They laughed at me of course. But I knew I could drive. Since the Closure the voices have become louder, and clearer. Come to us, they say, come to us. So I went by myself. I knew I could. Three times. I named the ships for them. Next time I'll go for good. Tuls has said I'd be

welcome. I can take you with me.

Elluasse, said Roinje gently. This is very difficult to believe. Who is Tuls?

Tuls is the captain of Astra.

Tuls is not a Geordian name, said Terei.

No, said Elluasse. Tuls is a Cust. He is captain of the Geordians on Astra.

Geordian crews don't have captains, said Terei, and they don't have Custs.

There were tears again in the boy's eyes. He raised his voice. You don't believe me! he said. Nobody here does. And yet they never stop asking. They hear what they want to hear.

Roinje took his hand. When we get out of this place, she told him, we'll take you with us to our ship, a real Geordian pasdaghe, I promise.

Why not come with me now, to Tuls? said the boy, choking on his tears.

Elluasse, said Roinje, tell us more about Tuls.

Please call me Taarh, said Elluasse.

Again the two Geordians looked at each other. What would come next?

Taarh, the god of water?

Water and rivers and rain, said Elluasse. He sat upright on the bed, his eyes closed, his hands on his knees, palms upwards.

Perhaps his father really was a god, Terei murmured to

Roinje.

The boy seemed semi-conscious, but tense, his eyes closed, his lips making small movements. The suddenly he spoke:

Tuls, can I come up?

Perhaps there's something rather wrong with him, said Roinje.

I'm going up, he said, his voice indistinct. Do you want to come with me? Take my hands.

He sat rigid on the bed, and they sat on either side of him. They looked again at each other. And they each took his hand in theirs.



Custs cannot smile, but their eyes shine when they are pleased. Tuls shone his eyes at Elluasse and his Geordian guests as they came out of the entry port and stood on the flight deck of the ancient Geordian pasdaghe.

Welcome, Taarh, he said, standing alone in the middle of the flight deck, spreading his delicate fingers.

Elluasse ran to him and flung his arms around him. The fine fingers patted the boy's straw hair. The Cust towered above him. And who are your friends? he said.

Roinje and Terei from Nostra, said Elluasse.

Nostra? said the Cust. A fourth ship? You have been busy!

Roinje and Terei bowed, and gave the code-signature of

their own pasdaghe.

Can this be so? said the Cust, his eyes still shining. You are from the passage that defied the Bases in Eile?

News carries, said Roinje.

I am Tuls, said the Cust. I was to take passage home to Primje Lus with you, fifteen thousand Custs. The Bases intervened. We heard you had gone extra-par.

And did you get to Primje? asked Terei.

We were assigned to these good people, said Tuls, waving his fingers over the empty flight deck. It was a good passage home, and my people were grateful. Georgians are our friends. They invited me up into the pasdaghe, and I have been with them ever since. It's wonderful here. Together we fled from Traffic.

Just as we did, said Terei.

For the same reason, I think; and that would be why you sought out young Taarh here, said the Cust. What a splendid coincidence. Do you like his names? Astra, Vestra, Systra and now Nostra—we are already a Fleet.

Forgive me, Elluasse, said Roinje. But it was an unbelievable story; and to be honest I'm still having trouble.

Taarh, said Elluasse.

Taarh, of course. But Tuls, my honourable friend, said Roinje, this is a Geordian passage?

Indeed, said the Cust. The good ship Astra.



And where are the crew?

Down in off-duty, I should think. Unless they are out visiting on Vestra or Systra, or even further afield.

Leaving you alone on the flight deck?

I am a Cust, said Tuls, a little indignant. I need no help on the flight deck.

Are you saying that a single Cust can man a flight deck as well as a crew of fourteen Geordians?

That I couldn't say. This flight deck had a crew of seven when I came aboard. I do it better than they could. But I forget myself. If I had known that young Taarh here was bringing guests, and Geordian guests at that, I would have had the crew on the flight deck to meet them.

He waved his fingers and a communication pad several metres away lit up. Yes, Tuls? said a Geordian voice.

Kai, we have guests, said Tuls. Could you come up and meet them?

What sort of guests?

Roinje and Terei from the good ship Nostra, said Tuls.

Coming, said the voice; and the tab clicked off.

Five Geordians wearing off-duty robes came clattering up the gangway. They bowed politely to Roinje and Terei, and said Hallo Taarh to Elluasse.

The good ship Nostra, did you say? asked the woman in the middle of the group.

The name is new to me, said Roinje. She gave the code-signature of their pasdaghe.

Ah, said the woman. We got your Custs.

You did indeed, said Roinje.

And where is this Nostra of yours? asked Tuls.

Our ship? said Roinje. We left it orbiting Kerne.

Again the Cust's eyes blazed with delight. It all comes together, doesn't it? he said. We, of course, are also orbiting Kerne. It seems that Taarh's whole Fleet of Liberation is orbiting Kerne. Let us do a search.

He waved his fingers. A pad glowed. There was a short pause, and then a voice clicked in. It said: Tracing.

Donnai! shouted Terei.

There was a crackling. Then Donnai's voice saying: It sounded like Terei. Terei! Is that you?

Donnai! shouted Roinje. It's us!

And Donnai's voice saying: Where are you?

We're —

Roinje checked herself. Then she said:

We're here on the good ship Astra.



I have a report to make on the two Geordians, my Lord.

We attend.

They died. I had their bodies identified.

The intelligences were mildly surprised.

We were under the impression that you had lost control in this Goose place.

Temporarily, my Lord. The situation has somewhat improved.

And you managed to kill the Geordians in the process, of course. The tone was withering.

Not so, my lord. They were already dead. Cause unknown. Personally I suspect some Geordian drug we have no record of. They were staying with a mining family. The son died with them.

Is this certain?

My Lord.

The intelligences pondered.

Lucky for them, they said.



There were the traditional shouts of welcome as Roinje and Terei stepped from the shuttle in the entry port and came out on their own flight deck, followed by two unlikely figures: a tall impressive Cust hand in hand with a diminutive white-skinned young man with straw hair and tears in his eyes.

What happened? said Tuusa breathlessly. Are you all right? We lost contact. You've been deleted. Who are your friends?

We've been what? said Roinje.

Deleted, said Tuusa. You're not on file any more. We thought you were dead.

We're not dead, said Roinje. We can't have been deleted. We're just logged off. They think we're still in the Third Level. There was a blockade.

You were logged off and deleted, said Tuusa. Try for yourselves.

They did. And they were.

But how? said Roinje in dismay. We're not dead. Are we? Elluasse, what happened?

My name is Taarh, said Elluasse. What's yours?

Tuusa. Welcome to our pasdaghe. She took his hands in hers.

Don't you understand, Elluasse? said Roinje. They deleted us. We died.

Yes, said the boy, dropping his gaze from Tuusa's and turning bright pink, his hands still in hers. We died. Please call me Taarh.

Elluasse—

Ssh, said Terei. Let him be. He's finding out about Geordia.

But we've been deleted! said Roinje.

I claim him, people, said Tuusa. Any objections?

The tall Cust coughed respectfully.

This is Tuls, said Terei. He is from the good ship Astra.

The good ship? said Donnai.

I fear I cannot produce the code-signature, said Tuls. I am a passenger aboard a Geordian passage known as Astra, which had the honour of sheltering your two comrades here who miraculously escaped from Goose Harquel. By splendid coincidence were are also orbiting Kerne.

An extra-par Geordian passage? said Donnai.

Three ships in fact, said Tuls. And you are the fourth. It begins to look as if the mythical Fleet is coming into existence.

I have named you Nostra, said Elluasse.

That's very nice, but my name is Tuusa, said Tuusa.

Tuusa is a lovely name, said Elluasse. I named your ship Nostra.

We can't use the code-signature now we are extra-par, said Roinje.

And your name is, what, Tarrh? said Tuusa.

That's right, said Elluasse, blushing again, his eyes quite dry.

I think they are lovely names, said Tuusa.



Taarh was not a practiced driver, that was clear. It took him several hours of tearful concentration to get through the first jump, and although he seemed to find the task easier at each p-star he twice lost his way completely, taxing the Geordians' nerves and navigational expertise to their renowned limits. The

imperturbable Tuls returned to Astra and negotiated the plan to make for Huld in Sel9 with the other three ships. The little convoy followed where Taarh led. The general direction of his jumps was in fact clear. His voices called him.

Donnai chewed his nails. They're bound to pick us up if we go eliding about like this, he said. How long will it go on for?

He'll get us to Huld, said Roinje. He can't help it.

I wish I shared your optimism about Huld, said Terei.

It's not optimism, said Roinje. It's just a question of accepting the situation as it is. Elluasse is taking us to Huld, simply because that seems to be where he's going. He'll never manage anything else. Effectively we're extra-par without a driver, which means we're either going to have to find ourselves a trustworthy illegal driver or find some good place to lie low. As it happens, Sel9 is the best place for both these possibilities. Yrre is as like as not still on Huld, and even if he isn't then the Huld Span is a perfect place for us to hide. There's mineral enough in the Span: we can maintain power. Berenice managed to stay on the loose in the Span for a whole cycle. That's more than enough time.

You put a lot of faith in Yrre, said Donnai.

I know him, said Roinje.

In fact she said: Ereighm'ge, 'we have walked the bridge', meaning that it was not a question of faith. It was a question of knowledge born of experience.



Tuls divided his time between the four ships. Everything is connected, he said. That Taarh should find us. That you should find Taarh. I have wanted to go to Huld since I can remember.

Why so? asked Roinje.

My genitor talked about Huld. I have studied the history of Huld. I have learnt k2or (he pronounced it Kay-two-or) well enough to read the stories of Berenice. They have always fascinated me.

Is there general interest in Huld among the Custs? asked Roinje.

Not at all. My brothers think I am a fanatic. They're probably right.

And your parents?

Custs don't have parents. I have a genitor, whom I love dearly. My brothers care for him. You mammals, with your sexes and your pantheon of minor gods, lead complex lives. I am fascinated.

Geordians don't have a pantheon of minor gods, said Roinje, laughing.

You have no idea how your own unconscious works, said Tuls. Awash in a sea of images. Swarms of gods. Fascinating. When we get to Huld, I shall go down to the surface to travel and learn.

Aren't you ever homesick? asked Roinje.

Of course, said Tuls: always. In the end, I shall go home.



Sleep, my children.

The Mother smells the Span wheeling above the Mountain. It is a familiar smell. She feels the laughter stirring in her belly.

I smell the stars, Taarh, she says.

But Taarh has not the Mother's gift He can smell the copes and the fish and the sea, and he can hear the ancient noises of spring, the sea pawing at the sand, the snuffling of the young copes amongst the stones, the occasional bark as an older seal addresses the stars. He lies outstretched in the sand with his back against a boulder and the smell of happiness in his nostrils. In his arms he cradles two sleeping copes who snore and snuffle.

The people are content, with fresh fish in their bellies. The copes are replete with the people's milk. The night is holy, with a bright clear smell of happiness and fulfilment The two alien races bask in each other's loves.

Only the Mother can smell the stars. Especially here, in the spring, under the Mountain. The Mountain is a qert, a beacon, a centre. It is the only such place the people know.

But Taarh's earthly senses are sharp enough. He smells the tiny shift of the Mother's attention.



What? he asks.

I am aware, says the Mother, gazing up at the stars.

Is it the Wanderers? asks Taarh.

Both, says the Mother. The Great Ones and the Little People.

Where? asks Taarh.

Far away, says the Mother. Perhaps they will not notice us.  
Have no fear for this Coping Time.

And Taarh chuckles as the copes lick sleepily at his nipples.

Yrre woke to find himself alone in the sleeping-bag. Heleui was obviously up and about; he could hear her movements in the darkness of the depot hut. He sensed the sleeping bodies of his companions on all sides.

The sleeping-bags used by the Gleaners were Tanquish-designed; they could be married at the seams. On the Moors the Gleaners married their bags and slept two or three together for warmth. Manhra and Ested usually slept huddled together, and so would the two Maros were it not Pileo's custom to join them, sometimes sliding in between them without bothering to attach her own bag, in order to secure the middle. The Maros always protested loudly, but the three unlikely bodies seemed to fit together like jigsaw pieces, sleeping in each others' arms like children.

Heleui had married her bag to Yrre's on the first night of the trip, and Yrre was grateful for the gesture. He could not help wandering with whom Heleui usually shared her bag. She was celibate, and back home at the Lodge she slept alone.

She stepped carefully towards him over Manhra and Ested. He felt her kneel beside him, and her lips move by his ear.

Yrre. Wake up and come outside with me and watch. Get

into your gear—it's cold.

They sat together on a nab of rock fifty paces from the hut, watching the horizon for the movements of dawn. The sky was clear and the first light was upon them, and for Yrre the fainter stars were dying in the east.

You see them better than I, he said.

I doubt it, said Heleui. I'm healthier than you I guess, but you're young yet and your eyes should be good. If you stay with us, and lead our lives, they'll stay good.

But you can see the Span at midday, said Yrre. It's difficult for me even to find Tungel when the sun's up.

Can you see the Three-Beyond-Tungel now? asked Heleui.

I wouldn't know where to look. You call them the Three-Beyond-Tungel but they never seem to be anywhere near Tungel. Anyway, Tungel's not up yet.

Aha, said Heleui. So you know Tungel's on the way up. You're learning. Where on the horizon will it appear?

Yrre pointed.

Not bad, said Heleui. And when?—No, don't look at the time.

Yrre hazarded a guess. Any time now, he said.

Heleui nodded. See those two peaks? She pointed almost due east. Follow the ridge south. You come to a drop, and then a tiny hollow before the next peak. See it?

The mountains were black and sharp against the growing

light It was some weeks since the equinox, and sunrise was moving rapidly north.

Yes, I see it said Yrre.

Watch, said Heleui.

Far half a minute or so he kept his eyes on the hollow. It was difficult, for they wanted to wander.

What am I looking for? he asked.

But as he spoke a point of light flashed in the hollow; far a second, and then snuffed out again.

What was it? he asked, turning to Heleui.

Keep watching, she said.

And a minute later the point of light flashed again, slightly higher and further north. This time it did not disappear. Tungel had cleared the mountain.

Heleui was smiling.

How did you know? he said. He had long since given up trying to figure out Tungel's erratic orbit. It was smaller and brighter than any of the moons of his home planet. The orb was just large enough for him to see its slender crescent. Sunrise in an hour, he thought.

Sunrise in an hour, said Heleui. We'd better go back and light the stove. Heavy day for you today. Chance to stretch your legs.

Did you know, or did you calculate it? asked Yrre.

I saw where Tungel dropped at Furze, she said. And I

always know where it stands in the Span. I know these mountains. We Glearners know the stars. They tell us where we are, and when. Yes, we can see the Span at midday, most of it. How else would we know the date? You would, too, if you knew where to look.

I rely on my tab, said Yrre. I don't need the stars.

But the elves don't have timepieces, said Heleui. You have to know their time, too.



Heleui heated the grain over the stove and added dried fruit to the pot as a concession to the cold. She cut the delf bread in her usual thin slices and the Gleaners passed it round amongst themselves. Everybody sat quiet for a while, eating. When she had finished her bowl, Heleui began the day's briefing.

Ested and Manhra will take the Overlie, she said. There won't be much sighting there, judging by the movement here on the Flats, but you'll have to move fast round Keel so as not to miss the stragglers over the ridge. Try not to get them moving too fast. On no account cut off the sick groups at this stage, we'll only get into a mess recounting below the Drays. That goes for all of you. Unless of course they solicit, which I doubt this early in the year. But take a kit and twenty files just in case. Maro neis and Maro p4lei, you will join me in Upper Drays. We'll keep this side of Erra and move down over the top. We'll need

forty phials, maybe some soliciting from the stragglers at the top end, and we can mark down sick groups towards the top without risk of recounting. All clear?

There was a stunned silence. Nobody believed what they were hearing.

Pileo and Yrre, said Heleui after a slight pause, you'll take Qert. The Maros and I will drop you off under Gaffel; we should make it by five this evening. You'll be able to give him some good sightings towards Qert, Pileo, and the walk will do him good. Give him every opportunity to watch them, but don't move in close unless they obviously need treatment. Take ten phials to be on the safe side. Rendezvous by the Undertow on Wednesday morning—that'll give you four and a half days. Any questions?

Pileo's mouth opened, and then shut. Yes, there was a question. But it could not be spoken.

The others turned away.



And so at last Pileo and Yrre stood together on the long black sand. The sighter and the neophyte. The sullen line of surf curved off into the thick mist.

Why? What was Heleui's intention? Although he did not understand, Yrre was certain of one thing: Heleui was not match-making. To be sure, sexual approach amongst the

Gleaners was a private affair, since (Yrre reasoned) the tradition of male initiative and female passivity turned it into a haphazard process which would hardly tolerate public scrutiny. But Yrre had the overwhelming impression that everyone in the party knew of his interest in Pileo and strongly disapproved. Pileo's own feelings in the matter seemed somehow not to enter the picture.

If it were clear, she said suddenly, we would see Qert.

He looked at her in surprise. She was facing away from him. He felt a wave of gladness wash through him like the lap of the sea on the black sand. For she had spoken in the Gleaners' lilting version of the Evenspeech, a language she rarely used. She was offering him truce.

Six hours' walk, according to Heleui, he said.

Longer, said Pileo, still avoiding his eyes. There are a couple of estuaries to cross, and if there's a lot of water in them we'll have to strike inland and wade through marsh. But Ested says it's cold in the mountains. The rivers will be low.

So we can cross on the sand?

At low tide, yes, said Pileo, looking out into the mist.

Which is when?

Pileo looked at him in surprise. The driver didn't know the tides. In about an hour, she said. Their eyes met for an instant.

You can tell from the Span, she said, looking away, looking up into the sky.

Yrre picked up his pack. Shouldn't we get going, then? he said.

But Pileo stood motionless. No hurry, she said.

The sea chided. We'll bivouac here, she said, and wait for the next tide. She bent and began undoing her pack.

Here? said Yrre in amazement. Camp now?

Pileo said nothing. She began laying out the tent.

Yrre pressed her: Don't you think we should use this tide to cross the estuaries and get in under the mountains? he said. Maro neis said there could be some nasty winds out here on the sand.

She hesitated, looking up from her unpacking. It was as if she were reacting to some authority in his voice. Then she turned away again.

No, she said. The fog is not good. We mustn't creep up on them in the fog. They've got to get used to us. We'll wait here over the high tide. And the next tide is lower.

Nine hours? said Yrre aghast. What'll we do?

Sleep, said Pileo. Tungal is turning. We set off early tomorrow morning, two hours before the next low, then Tungal kindles at the Wrist and we can cross both estuaries together. Then we camp again on the other side.

Seems a waste of time to me, said Yrre, unpacking resignedly. We've only got four days.

So we use them intelligently, said Pileo. If we go on through



this mist they'll smell us coming and think we're creeping up on them.

Aren't we creeping up on them?

We approach them openly, said Pileo. They always know. We mustn't rush things. Take my advice and get some sleep. You're going to have to be wide awake on this trip.

The mist was thickening.



The Mother stirs in the mist. She rises softly to her feet: is it her eyes seeing? Or her skin breathing? Her body tastes the tiny smell in the air.

Others have felt it too. They glance at each other for confirmation. But the Mother's monosyllable is a statement of fact: the Little People have arrived.

Everybody stands up. How is it in the wind?

Two, says the Mother, straining into the mist. One has touched us before. But the other—she looks round at her companions.

Can you feel him, children? she asks, perplexed. Taarh, can you feel him?

Hardly, says Taarh. What do you feel? Is he very bad?

He is very strange, she says.

Then her people begin talking to her: Reagh, say their voices, let us go back into the hills. They will go away. We will

return later, and the copes will gather again.

But Reagh utters the hated words that the Mother must: We will stay. We need them.



Yrre listened to Pileo breathing beside him in the tent. It was the breathing of someone awake, waiting.

He waited too.

She knew she would speak. And she knew that when at last she spoke, the silence could not be called back. And so she spoke, so softly that she could hardly hear herself: Yrre.

And perhaps he had not heard.

Yes? said Yrre, after a little while; and the trap closed about her.

Pileo had not married their sleeping-bags. She had laid them out side by side on the insulation sheet while Yrre was still spinning down the windshield of the tent. Yrre had left her to it. The onus of final decision was the woman's, and there would be no consultation. She had not married the bags. For a Gleaner, there could be no clearer statement of intent. The Geordian fail-safe option would be to marry them, mused Yrre. And then to ask questions. At least it would be warmer.

But now the silence had been broken. With the simple rising intonation of the Evenspeech vocative, without a trace of

the eddying phasemes of the Gleaners' language. She was simply voicing his name. Yrre.

Yes? he said again.

It was a new silence now. An easy, unhurried silence. She was searching for the right words.

Haven't you ever wanted to join the Fleet? she said at last.



What are they doing? ask the voices.

Talking together, says the Mother.

Are they approaching?

No, says the Mother. They have other business for the moment.



Yrre had sat bolt upright in surprise, staring unseeingly in front of him. Darkness had fallen. After a while he felt the cold about his shoulders. He lay back again and closed the bag over his head, leaving only his face exposed.

What do you know about the Fleet? he said at last.

No more than what they say. They say you're a Geordian Sympathiser. That means you would sympathise with the Fleet, doesn't it? I should have thought they'd want drivers like you.

After another long pause Yrre said: I didn't realise you

Gleaners knew so much about the Geordians.

Only some of us, said Pileo. Some of us admire the Geordians. Maro neis, far instance. And Reagh says you do, too.

Do you? said Yrre.

I'm a Gleaner, said Pileo. I love the elves. I wouldn't want to leave them for long. But I'd like to meet some real Geordians some day.

Does Heleui know about this?

Pileo chuckled. She knows everything, she said. She's my mother. Are you surprised? She was very young. Far too young. But we're good friends.

Yrre was silent again, struggling to assimilate this new mass of information. It reminded him of the first time he had eaten delf bread. One little bite, and your mouth is full. You chew and chew.

Do you remember when we looked at each other in the car? he said.

When was that?

On the mountain, he said. You turned round and asked me how I was. We looked at each other, and we desired each other.

This is not good talk, said Pileo.

There was a long silence, Pileo giving Yrre room to apologise, Yrre pressing his question. Finally Pileo saw that Yrre did not understand.

I love Reagh, she said, angrily. You desire me, just as you

desire Reagh. But you do not love her, as I do. You have no idea what love really is. That is why I will not share my sleeping bag with you, driver. Go back to your Geordians.

## 8

Finally, inevitably, Izza (Guerlec) Isqad broke down. She broke down and wept mightily. It was of course not the lovemaking that troubled her. That was if anything a palliation, for in their lovemaking Reagh revealed most clearly her humanity. It was Reagh's divinity that tormented her. This was not simple heresy, it was beyond. It was not even simple belief in heathen gods. It was making love with one of them.

True, it was a serious lapse to offer her body in holy communion with a non-believer, but not unheard of. The higher echelons of the Faith did so perforce in the course of their duties, even with males, for peace had to be kept with the Bases. Duty called for dispensation; she had no real fears on that score. It was her own personal relations with the Father that troubled her.

Minor gods, idols? In fact it was an unusually virulent form of idolatry. For these heathens made idols of the living, of those amongst them. Of Reagh with her gentle touch, her watching eyes. With the power she bore and bestowed to all around: and to Izza.

And so of course Izza had slithered. For idolatry is in the eye of the beholder, not the participant; and for Izza this was

full-blooded participation. Teod and the gleaners were good to her; perhaps because of Reagh's patronage. She watched them, how they worked and played and worshipped. And she watched Reagh. Disbelief had slipped from her, as the straw slips from the drowning man.

And so from Reagh herself, she had progressed to Reach's Span.

One could hardly blame her. On-planet she had a situation she could not control and did not want to control and was in any case duty-bound not to; and it was wrenching her apart. And Huld being a quiet corner, she found herself on-planet a lot of the time.

Of course, she had taken to flying. For a driver, the temptation is always there; and for a driver on Huld, with the fabulous Span of Reagh wheeling above her head, the temptation to get off-planet and wander disembodied amongst the asteroids was doubly strong. And doubly addictive. As a driver, she knew the symptoms. From temptation on-planet she had nowhere to hide but temptation in the skies. She fled back and forth from one to the other, slipping ever deeper into the pleasures of both.

It happened late in the second week after Yrre's departure with the reconnaissance team. She had watched the libation from the steps of the temple, how Reagh held the cup for the Gleaners, how they loved her, how she lent them grace and a

radiance that turned them all into gods and goddesses; her heart lifted at their beauty. And she turned and made her way blindly to Yrre's flight room and fell on the couch, exhausted and weeping; and loved too, and believed.

Reagh found her sleeping. She sat on the couch beside her and put her hand lightly on her shoulder.

Izza opened her eyes and looked long into Reagh's.

Who are you? she asked at last. Please tell me who you are.

It was difficult. Izza relied on language and gesture for communication. Which are often inadequate enough for human intercourse, let alone the business of the gods.

At one point it seemed to Izza that Reagh was claiming to be a figment of Izza's imagination.—You mean you don't really exist? she cried aghast, clutching at her.

Reagh thought hard. She exists for you and through you, she said at last. All of you. As you do to each other.

You always say She, said Izza. It means so much.

I mean me, said Reagh. It's difficult to talk of her as she is now. As I am now. This self-awareness of hers—of yours—is terribly confusing. I wish we could make it clearer.

So do I, said Izza.

The gods abide in the stones and the stars, said Reagh. You abide in your self-experiencing body. Your laws forbid immortality; what happens to this thing you call yourself when your body dies?



This was Izza's home ground. The mortality laws apply to the body, she said. I am no heathen who believes the body is all. My soul goes to the Father when I die. To abide with Him.

Good, said Reagh happily. But you may find it difficult. You live so close within your body.

That's not true, said Izza defensively. I'm a driver, I'm used to travelling outside my body and dwelling in others.

I suppose you're right, said Reagh, thinking of Yrre. You're neither of you as fettered as some of them. That's probably why they like each other.

They?

Us, said Reagh with a frown. Gods and drivers.



We don't have to talk about it, said Pileo from her sleeping bag. We know we both want to. Let's leave it at that.

I want to talk about the things that are stopping us, said Yrre.

You mean you want to overcome them, said Pileo. In my language that's called violence.

Yrre exploded. But you said you wanted to! That's not violence. Who wants to make love with someone against their will?

There was a silence.

What's happening? said Yrre, almost to himself.

But Pileo had heard the resignation in his voice. She knew the struggle was over.

This is what's happening. You're experiencing it. Does it matter what it's called? Your body can't have everything it thinks it wants, driver Yrre. This is what the Gleaners know. This is a lesson for Geordians.

Where are you going? she said.

I need some fresh air, he replied.



Don't think that awareness is the prerogative of the self-aware, said Reagh. Self-awareness is another stage altogether. It's great fun, I admit. I'm just not an adept.

Turn back into a stone and show me, said Izza, pouting.

Don't be silly, said Reagh. She's not a magician.

Where are you, then, when you're not here? Where did you come from?

The elves call us Wanderers, said Reagh. We are many, but not differentiated as people are.

There is only one of you? Izza was whispering.

No, wait, said Reagh, trying to understand Izza's concept of One. The One is not like that. The One is more like the All. Your One seems to be more like a god. That's a really strange belief.



As the night wore on, the slow, cold drift of air from the sea gradually ceased. At first the mist it brought thickened. But Yrre felt the change, unreflectingly assuming the patterns of weather to be the same on Huld as on his native planet. The wind drops, and a new momentum begins. He was right.

He sat on his pack and faced the sea. As the wind dropped the temperature dropped with it until it was a degree or two below freezing. He could just see the lazy line of the waves lapping the sand.

Gradually the mist brightened. Somewhere behind his left shoulder the day was breaking. He heard Pileo stir in the tent.

And then suddenly the whole body of air shifted. He looked up. To his right high in the mist he saw form. A grey and white patch of mountain. And as he watched, the curtains of mist peeled back, retreating in horizontal layers towards the sea, as a tiny breeze flowed over the mountains and planed down into the still air. Yrre stood and caught his breath. In the space of seven minutes a vast amphitheatre of mountains was revealed around him. The sea glistened in the morning sun.

Pileo put her nose out of the tent.

Lovely, she said, you get to see Gaffel. I love this place. And it's safe to continue. We'll have to take it gently, though. They can probably see us.

Where are they? asked Yrre.

She pointed: a distant headland beyond the wide curve of the shore, dribbling out into the sea from a cleft in the mountains. That's Qert, she said. It's a coping-ground. The seals will be coming ashore.

She took Yrre's hand in hers. Didn't you sleep?

I'm glad I didn't, he said. I wouldn't have wanted to miss this.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. We're passing the test she said. It'll get easier, you'll see.



Can you see them, Taarh? The Mother speaks from the foot of the cliff.

Taarh has gone round the headland and reappeared at the top. He shades his eyes against the sun.

Yes, he calls. There are two of them. They're approaching the Eastern Estuary.

The Mother thinks: They'll be here in six hours if they find the right fords. Perhaps we should try to eat a little first.

She glances up at the Span.

And turns almost immediately to look up at Taarh, frowning. He catches her expression and looks up at the Span too. He studies the pattern of planets for a moment. He turns and scans the rest of the sky. And then he disappears abruptly

from the skyline, and makes his way down the other side of the bluff.

The elves are nibbling at the copes' fish when he gets back to the group. None of the adults have any appetite, although the younger ones are eating well, and the younger still are clutching the adults' teats. Reagh and Taarh lean heavily against each other, as elves do when they talk together, savouring each other's smell.

There is movement he says. At only one place, beyond Tenes towards the Three. It is a big ship of the Little People, or a flock of small ones.

The pirates are back? asks Reagh.

It is a possibility, says Taarh.

We must hope the two approaching do not notice, she says. They might stop, and go back. We need them badly.

Taarh shudders involuntarily.

They will not notice, the little devils, he says. They know not how to.



Well done, Elluasse! said Roinje, thumping him excitedly on the back. You did it!

Taarh, he said.

The flight crew gazed out at the Span unfolding around them. They were silent as they gazed.

Deep among the swathe of yellow, reddish, black and crystalline asteroids, the crew of the Geordian pasdaghe experienced the physical disorientation that came with the rare occasions when they took their vessel deep into planetary systems. In inter-par passage they experienced no movement, lying ever at the centre of the universe, in the great unbroken shell of the changeless firmament enveloping them and travelling with them. But at this proximity to the heavenly nodes of gravity the crew felt a sense akin to vertigo.

A Geordian passage had no up or down, left or right about it. The flight deck of the pasdaghe lay behind the nose, the dome that housed the probes that fed the visual screens. The nose was the part of the ship which the crew usually pointed in the direction of travel, unless they had other things to watch, and the crew perceived it as the top of the ship. For Geordians, the natural direction of their ship's movement was ever upwards.

And so now in front of them—above them—revolved the orb of yellow Tenes, almost fully lit by its sun, Seli9, hiding below their feet. For its diminutive size, Tenes was was a surprisingly regular globe, its yellow fluid dust alive to the subtle desires of its tiny gravity; while beyond it, dwarfed by distance, the larger, brighter Tungel, blazing in the golden light of Seli9, was an irregular tuber of glinting crystal. Strung out between them lay the sombre grey rocks of Three-Beyond-Tungel. And everywhere lay the slowly drifting shoals of dust and rock. The

ship was alive, plotting the movement of everything it detected, gently side-stepping whenever necessary, partaking in the ponderous dance.

So this is where Berenice laid low, said Roinje. I can see why.

That was before Traffic, said Terei.

She scattered her ships, said Roinje. Traffic would never have found her.

Traffic has eyes everywhere, said Donnai. And now we are four ships in the Span. We are a fleet. And a fleet is what Traffic is looking for.

If we spread out in the Span we are invisible, said Roinje. But we must find Yrre.



The normal geo-oos human relies on sight as her prime means of topographical orientation. Thus a human driver, drifting in a state of disembodiment amongst the rolling tons of debris which form the Span of Reagh, feels that she sees the magnificence around her. A sonar Kerio would hear it; a dog would probably smell it. Izza's physical vision was poor: on-planet she wore lenses. Flying illegally in the Span, what she experienced as sight was more perfect than any non-driver can imagine. The shifting perspectives were defined not by the crude rods and cones of her retina but by the limitations of her

mind. They were not digital; they had no grain; they merely expanded.

It was this impact on the senses, said the healers, which caused the addiction. The brain thrives on stimulation. What it finds hard to accept is the paucity of normal perception when the senses have returned to the body. The brain overrules the mind.

So Izza flew.

And this is why she was the third sentient being in the Seli9 system to notice the arrival in the Span of the four ships of the would-be Geordian Fleet; and Izza's mind felt a surge of sordid responsibility which restored, however precariously, its ascendancy over her humming brain.



Well well, said the Comptroller with acid delight; how nice of you to call, Driver Isqad! And what is the news from the—ah—Gleaners' Temple?

Comptroller, said Izza in as brisk a manner as she could muster. I want a warded line to Carhault as soon as possible. How quickly can you manage it?

My dear young lady, said the Comptroller, turning to regard the tab with astonishment, you can't surely—

How long, Comptroller?

It'll take me hours dear girl, hours, and who do you think is



going to foot the bill—

You have my letters, do you not?

Of course.

Then you understand in what capacity I am here in Tanquish?

Of course we—

Then please do as I ask, Comptroller, as rapidly as you can. And I trust you will let as few people know as possible.

And Izza closed the connection.

She met Reagh in the courtyard.

I'm going down to Traffic, she said, pulling her mantle over her shoulders. I shan't be long.

Is anything wrong? asked Reagh.

That Geordian passage has turned up in the Span. The one that disappeared.

Yrre's Geordians? said Reagh.

Don't breath a word. They've come to contact Yrre, I'm sure of it.

Yes I suppose they have, said Reagh.

I'll be back, said Izza. I'll have to do some flying. Will you watch over me?

Of course, said Reagh. And Izza was gone.

Reagh turned and walked thoughtfully back to the common room.

Did Izza go out? asked Teod.

Yes, said Reagh, she did. I think we're going to have guests, she added.

Guests? said Teod. What sort of guests?

I think my brother's coming, said Reagh.



There was a sense of uncertainty on the flight-deck of the newly named Nostra, now alone again. The other three ships had departed and scattered, as they had decided. The screen detected nothing. Roinje proposed going down to Tanquish and finding Yrre, but Donnai said No; wait.

And when it happened, it was as if everyone had been expecting it. The instantaneous prophesy was realised as it was made: a single bleep.

Terei crossed the flight deck in ten bounds and knelt at the traffic pad. Everyone's eyes left the turning skies and focused on Terei.

He stood and looked at them all.

They've found us, he said. The Huld driver is asking to come aboard.

Yrre! said Roinje.

Let's hope so, said Terei. I shall be the host. OK Roinje? He started towards the flight couch.

Immediately? said Roinje aghast. Now?

So it seems, said Terei, his eyes shining. You know what Berenice said about flying in the Span?

Terei, don't, said Roinje urgently. Ciertho, you take it. Terei is getting flight-happy.

Ciertho couldn't take the Span, said Terei, composing himself on the couch. But I can look after myself. The driver will send me back.

But what if it isn't Yrre? said Roinje in anguish.

That'll be your problem, said Terei. I'll be out there in the field—

His eyes flickered, rolled. Trace in three, said his lips.

His lips said; No it isn't ...

Then he opened his eyes. Trace in three it is, he said. He looked around and raised himself on the couch. The Geordians moved forward to help him.

A half-smile formed on his face as he saw their confusion. Drivers seldom come aboard in such a hurry.

Good morning, he said, listening carefully to the sound of his voice. My name is Izza (Guerlec) Isqad.



They're waiting for us, said Pileo. They must have seen us hours ago. That means they're sick.

She sat in the black sand with her back against a hummock of bluish-green grasses and steadied her elbows on her knees as

she peered through her binoculars.

Yrre did the same, vainly sweeping his lenses back and forth across the base of the cliffs. I can't see a thing, he said. What am I looking for?

You see that big V-shaped area of chio an the top, where my glasses are pointing?

What's chio? said Yrre.

Blue and green, said Pileo.

No, said Yrre.

Right at the top, said Pileo.

Yes, got it, said Yrre.

Come down from there and slightly left—there's a small patch of bright yellow.

Yes, said Yrre.

Straight below the yellow, said Pileo.

And then he saw them. They were looking at him.

My god, he said.



We assume, said Izza evenly, that you are here to contact the previous driver. I am his successor, you understand.

Where is he? asked Roinje, before she could stop herself.

He is still on Huld, said the Paulian. She smiled briefly; in Terei's body her presence was superb.

Roinje caught her glance and felt the appraisal: a Paulian

driver. How strange. She's looking for someone. Is it me?

My purpose is to help you to find him, said Izza, her eyes on Roinje. Yes, she had guessed correctly. The young woman with the aggressive look.

Help us find Yrre? Roinje echoed.

Izza smiled.

Roinje saw the smile on Izza's face, in Terei's body, and understood. Carhault wanted Yrre.

Where is your driver? asked the Paulian. Or did you drive by yourselves? I presume you are still extra-par, she added, dryly.

There was silence. The answer, like the question, was superfluous. The diminutive straw-haired figure could as much hide amongst this crew of magnificent Georgians as she, Izza, would be able to in the flesh. Is this your driver? she asked.

Taarh was aghast. He moved closer to Tuusa.

You're not going to try to tell me you've registered with this crew, are you, young man? Taarh bit his lip.

I didn't quite catch your name— ?

Elluasse, said Taarh. I mean Taarh, said Elluasse.

Izza froze. The unholy heathen name rung in her ears: on such a boy! With an effort she controlled herself—

Which? she asked. What do you mean. Elluasse or—

But she could not bring herself to pronounce it.

Everybody calls me Elluasse, said the boy. But my real

name is Taarh.

It was almost as if he were taunting her, thought Izza savagely. In his ugly inner-city whine, speaking the name of the god.

Come here, boy, she snapped, angry now in spite of herself. Someone give me a tab. You there, pass me that tab.

A driver is obeyed without hesitation; always. The tab was offered to her, gracefully, courteously.

Come here young man, she repeated. I think it's high time we found out who this little pirate really is.

Taarh came towards her hesitantly. Roinje's thoughts were racing. How could she stop them? If Izza discovered where Elluasse came from she would be quick to ferret out the whole story. Already little short of a miracle could save the crew, but it would be terrible if the trace could be made back to Ellyonne and the cell.

How do you deal with an enemy driver who is inhabiting the body of your comrade? Izza was holding Terei to ransom, floating disembodied out in the Span, while Izza could retreat whenever she liked to her own body lying on the flight couch—as Roinje imagined it—back at Traffic Control on Huld. The Geordians could do nothing.

Izza held out the tab to Taarh, and he obediently put his left hand on it. There was silence. Izza stared in disbelief. There was no response from the tab. She pulled it sharply back and

addressed it herself. The tab recognised her immediately as a driver in a host's body: Izza (Guerleq) Isqad. Good morning, Izza.

Father in me. There's nothing wrong with it. There's something wrong with the boy. Who is he?

And of course the tab she was holding accepted her question and put it through to Registry: Who is the boy?

There was a pause, while the teller flipped through an unexpectedly enormous volume of data. Not finding anyone of Taarh's apparent race and age it turned further afield. After a while it stopped, finding itself checking data from totally irrelevant corpora. The logical conclusion was that the boy was deceased, and the teller would have gone ahead and checked the deceased files had not one tiny parameter baulked: the subject was manifestly not deceased. The teller went into a rarely used escape-routine. No data, it reported.

Terei's full lips had turned grey. His body felt like a lead weight about Izza. The boy looked up at her, enquiring. Their eyes met; Izza saw the resemblance. It flashed like a beacon in the deep, engulfing eyes. Reagh. Taarh. The god of what? The sea? The demons are everywhere—

And something spoke out of Taarh's lips—it was Taarh, but it was more than Taarh: Izza heard Reagh also speaking, and others of the pantheon, a mighty host:

Izza Isqad, said Taarh's lips. Be careful where you walk: you

are treading paths where you will find no succour in your feeble world.

What are you? said Izza, stepping back from him.

It is not I whom you hear, Izza Isqad. This is your own mind speaking to you. These are the thoughts of your body and of your brain and of your mind; and if you listen to them you will hear the far echo of the rhythms of the One Mind.

Izza had sunk to her knees. Begone, she muttered in a hoarse voice: not Terei's voice, not hers: a voice, had anyone recognised it, which was very like the voice of His Holiness Seguad Sodt. Begone ye demons.

And Taarh's lips replied: Sanity is terrible, Izza Isqad.

And Terei's body fell with a thud onto the floor of the flight deck.



Taarh—Elluasse—stood shaking. Tuusa moved towards him and he turned to her and they held each other tightly.

What were you saying? she said.

I don't know, he whispered.

What language was it?

I don't know, he said. But Roinje answered: It was the language of Carhault you spoke, Taarh. What more do you have up your sleeve?

I don't know, he said.



What is the procedure if the driver collapses? The handbook is perhaps designedly obscure on the point. Who has collapsed? The driver or the host? Administer first aid, says the relevant appendix, and contact Traffic Control. The handbook says nothing about what to do you're a renegade passage with every desire to remain aloof from Traffic Control. Nor does it give any information on what to do when the patient lies huddled in a foetal position and whimpers to himself. Terei looked incongruous, and rather frightening. They lifted him up onto his couch. He had put his thumb in his mouth.

And what was Traffic Control going to make of the situation? Surely they could tell when something was going wrong with the driver. Didn't the body respond?



But of course as it happened no one in Traffic Control was aware of the problem. Izza's body lay huddled on Yrre's flight couch in the Lodge on Tanquish Laer, and Reagh watched aghast as it sobbed and whimpered. And sucked its thumb.

Yrre had coached Reagh well as a flight supervisor. She knew how important it was not to interfere with the body of a driver in flight. The flight couch was designed to allow free movement while not allowing it to wander: a large, shallow bowl of hysenni which supported but did not impede. Only in

emergencies was the supervisor to intervene.

Reagh judged that such an emergency had arisen. She hitched up her smock and climbed up onto the couch and took Izza in her arms, soothing her, calling her name.

And Izza responded with one shrill and tortured scream; and then her body went limp.



Yrre said: How do you know they're sick?

See the big female to the right? said Pileo. She's the Mother. See how she stands? Stooped. Legs too far apart. I think I know her. She's of Caisc-stock. Look at the ones lying over to the left under the cliffs. See? There's a dozen or so more of them. With youngsters. They look fit enough. But the group on the beach is sick.

What do we do? asked Yrre.

I'm not sure, said Pileo. We've only got ten phials of sap. These are all Caisc elves, big creatures, they'll need thirty-twos. Ten phials, that makes fifteen thirty-twos. Some will have to make do with twenty-fours. There might be enough.

Some of them look almost human, said Yrre. Look at that little one lying to the right of the Mother.

Pileo focussed her glasses. She looked for a long while, almost motionless. When she turned her head to Yrre he saw something close to fear in her eyes.

It does look like a human, she said.

And then: Put your glasses away, said Pileo, suddenly alarmed. Don't look at them. It makes them nervous.

Can they see at this distance? asked Yrre.

Every detail. And much more. What did you see?

I suppose I saw elves, said Yrre.

What about the small figure?

It's not the same colour, said Yrre. It's lighter. It's head is not like the elves. It has long black hair. It seems to be lying curled up. There's too much shimmer over the sands to be sure.

Pileo was silent. Then she rose and shouldered her pack; Yrre did the same.

We'll go forward quietly, she said. We'll have to inject as many as we can. They'll keep still for us if we're quiet enough. You mustn't say a word. Just take your lead from me.

What about the human? said Yrre.

She turned her face to him, and their eyes met. For the first time. He wanted to say Now I can see you, Pileo. And then he saw he didn't need to.

Pileo smiled a little crookedly, biting her lip. I'm sorry, Yrre, she said. I'm scared. Why aren't you?

Should I be? asked Yrre.

Nobody should be, said Pileo, but everybody is. They're so strange. And they hate us so much.

What about the human? asked Yrre again.

That's really frightening, said Pileo. Although perhaps not for you.

They were still looking into each other's faces. Pileo could see the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the ragged beard crawling up over his cheeks. Yrre saw the wind and the sky on her skin, and how she still bit her lip. There were grains of black sand on her forehead.

This is how we found Reagh, said Pileo.



The scream brought home to the Geordian crew how frayed their nerves really were. They looked aghast at Terei's body. It lay still, relaxed now, empty. She's gone, said Roinje. Thank heaven for that. I wonder where to? Terei! She jumped to the couch and took the limp body by the shoulders. Terei! You can come back now. Oh do come back, Terei—why can't he hear me?

Perhaps he could. Perhaps both he and Izza could. But unfortunately such considerations were not relevant vectors in the non-parity of the good ship Nostra. For what actually happened was that Terei's body opened its eyes and looked at Roinje and gave a happy smile. Well well, said Terei's voice. It's as easy as that. She'd never have guessed.

Taarh looked up, hopeful at last. Reagh? he said.

Reagh smiled at him. She knew we were here, she said.



Explanations were painfully incoherent. I am Yrre's lover, said Reagh, choosing her words carefully. Like Taarh here. No wait—I mean she's Taarh's sister—

Who is? asked Roinje.

I am, said Reagh. Taarh is his sister. Her brother, that is.

The implications were enormous.

What are you doing here? asked Ciertho.

Izza was screaming. She thought it best to comfort her. She must have slipped into her somehow. We tend to get into trouble with identities.

The Geordians looked at each other, and then at Taarh. Roinje felt annoyance. You're Yrre's lover? she said. And Elluasse's sister? She turned on Taarh. Why didn't you tell us about this, child? She turned back to Reagh. What in heaven are you playing at?

Reagh blinked, and looked at Taarh for support. His face was a sun of joy.

Are we playing at anything, Taarh? she said.

It was Donnai's turn. I thought you said you were Taarh's sister, he said.

Yes, she is. I am. At least that's a good way of putting it.

Donnai looked round at the others. I'm beginning to think that Traffic Control in Seli9 is a very remarkable institution, he

said.

Heavens, said Reagh. We're nothing to do with Traffic Control. Izza was using Yrre's old flight couch, that's all, while Yrre's away with the Gleaners. The couch isn't at Traffic Control, it's up at the Lodge.

You mean Yrre and Izza both work outside Traffic Control? said Ciertho in amazement.

I doubt it said Reagh. Yrre's left Traffic Control, of course. But Izza is working for Carhault. She likes making love to women, you know. She's awfully good at it.

So that's it thought Roinje. A Church-Paulian. No wonder she reacted so strongly to Elluasse's new name. And this is Reagh! God of peace and love, or something like that. Yrre's lover! Well at least we're not far off track. I wonder what she looks like in the flesh—

Where's Terei? she asked. Is he all right?

Your host? asked Reagh, looking down at herself and running her hands a little clumsily over Terei's body. He's in the Span somewhere. He's lovely, isn't he? So this is what it's like to be a driver—



Yrre thought: So this is what it's like to meet the elves.

They walked unhurriedly together, Pileo and Yrre, over the hard sea-sand towards the figures standing and waiting for

them under the cliff. Pileo had taken Yrre's hand, clasping it firmly, so that they walked like children, or like lovers, and after his initial surprise Yrre saw the wisdom of the manoeuvre. It had the simple effect of changing their purposeful march into a harmless stroll. It was an unequivocal signal to the awaiting elves: we come in peace.

As they drew nearer, Yrre found there was yet another reason for the handclasp. Pileo had warned him not to speak; with her hand she could control him. At about sixty paces from the group she drew him gently to a halt, turned him round towards her and motioned him to sit on the sand. They removed their packs and sat down cross-legged, face to face. Pileo put her finger to her lips.

Then she began to speak, low and soft and unbelievably slowly, humming rather than talking, so that it was a moment before Yrre realised she was speaking to him:

Don't-look-at-them, she hummed. Do-what-I-do.

Unhurriedly she opened her pack and drew out the needles. Yrre produced the phials of sap. She took them from him.

Did-you-see-the-human? she sang.

Yrre nodded.

We'll-inject-them-first, sang Pileo. Bring-the-phials. Move-slowly. Don't-look-at-the-Mother.

They stood slowly and faced the waiting group.



The Mother is not sure how many of the elves have noticed the figure that she has summoned, lying hunched now on the sand. She can see Taarh staring at it. She is a little anxious herself, for there seem to be several minds between her and the Span, calling to each other, some in distress, others in gladness. And my people, she thought, are too transfixed with loathing for the Little People to notice what is going on.

She herself feels calmer. Her children are a good distance away under the cliff, and she knows the Little People are not milking now, and will not trouble themselves with healthy elves. And somehow the arrival of the figure on the sand is a comfort. It is a manifestation of the movements she and Taarh have noticed in the Span. The Little People are trying to break out of their prison in time. This body is one of the casualties. And the Little People have needles which cure all sickness.

The two Little Ones move closer with their uncomfortable, nervous gait. She is proud of herself, the way she masters her fear. She can even watch them moving without too much discomfort.

And as she watches a suspicion dawns on her. The shorter figure is not Huld-born. He is one of the Little People, she can see that, but from elsewhere. And more important: he is not afraid. Excited, perhaps. But there is no fear in him.



And so the fear in us is less.



The stench was appalling; it was the odour of sickness. Yrre stopped and looked aghast at the huge, sweating bodies.

Come-on, sang Pileo. Don't-be-afraid.

But Yrre was not afraid. He was caught in the grip of a searing compassion.

They were covered in open sores where the geo-oos flies crawled and drank. Their eyes were closed, their great faces taut with fear, but Yrre could see that the trembling and twitching of their bodies was not of fear alone. They were torn with fever.

Pileo motioned towards a large male crouching on his haunches in the forefront hiding his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking.

Hold-his-arm-out-if-you-can, sang Pileo. Yrre could hear the nervous tension in her voice behind the humming. I-shall-inject-in-the-forearm.

The flies rose from the sores as he touched the massive arm. To his surprise the flesh was cool. He tried to move the hand away from the great head, but it was clenched there. He looked enquiringly at Pileo, feeling the strange cool flesh the while, moving his hands unconsciously along the forearm to feel the coolness. Suddenly he felt the arm go limp. The tension was gone. The hand came away from the face and Yrre was

supporting the massive weight of it.

He looked up at the bowed face. And saw the great eyes open, the great brown elven eyes wide and staring into his own: in wonder.



The Mother can see how Rou has opened his eyes and is staring at the alien. She can smell his wonder. She sees how the taller one slips the needle into the arm and Rou does not flinch. And Rou follows the alien with his eyes.

She sees them move about the group injecting the sap: Aru, Nueg, Ur, Goorh. She can smell the fear giving way to calm. The bright electric smell of the taller one is less pungent too. Perhaps that too was fear. It has stopped its nervous chattering and is now producing bursts of not unmusical squeaking. Much easier to listen to.



They're amazing, said Pileo. A wave of elation was taking hold of her. I've never seen them like this before. They're almost cooperating! Wait till Heleui hears about this. You're fantastic. Even Teod can't handle them like this.

Yrre was too preoccupied to be pleased. He felt the fear and disgust fade as they moved amongst the sick elves, but it was as

if a deeper emotion was coming to light in the huge brown eyes. An unutterable sadness, a grief beyond repair. It cried out to him much more forcibly than their pitiful physical condition. And the calmer, the less afraid the eyes became, the deeper became the grief and the loss that he saw in them.

How's the sap going? asked Pileo. We must leave enough for the Mother.



There was enough.

As they turned at last to the Mother they saw that she had moved a little away from the group. To Pileo's intense surprise the massive figure slowly held out its arm to them, ready for the needle.

I've never seen any of them do that before, said Pileo. She slipped the needle into the vein. Then she stood back, and looked at the huge stooping figure. Its eyes were on Yrre, and Yrre returned its gaze in silence.

She knows you, Yrre, said Pileo, that's what it is. She knows you because of Reagh —

The same thought struck them both. They turned to where the human body lay some twenty paces off, alone on the sand.

It had not moved.

And the Mother thinks: He knows the Wanderers. Now he

will go to the body and call them. We are a happy people. We shall see the Wanderers again before the End of the World.



The body lay naked on the sand, its knees up under its chin. Its pale skin was blue with cold. It had its thumb in its mouth.

Pileo hung back. Give me a hand, said Yrre. She's freezing. Go and fetch a sleeping bag. We've got to warm her.

The elves watched, unmoving. Yrre knelt by the body and tried to rub some life into it. Pileo returned with a sleeping bag. Still she hung back.

Is it a god? she managed to ask.

How would I know? Help me get her into the sleeping bag. She's all buckled up. Lift up her legs.

Yrre forced his hands under the rigid arms and lifted the body as Pileo shuffled the sleeping bag up around it. Suddenly it gave a kick and threw back its head. Pileo nearly screamed as she saw the face.

It's the Paulian! she cried.

## 9

We, I, gods, she must not be surprised: it is simply the fragmented identity of the self-creatures that is confusing us. A god attempts to become a driver and enters a Geordian host leaving her own body several million leagues away intertwined with another driver in an agony of fear on a flight-couch. Reagh's grasp of identity is always a labour; and now she finds she has entered Izza and come out as Terei. To complicate matters her own brother is standing before her looking like a smaller version of Yrre, whom we love.

And as might be expected when gods meet within the shells of human cognizance, Taarh and Reagh are having difficulties keeping themselves separate. The Geordian crew, too, are overwhelmingly beautiful; and somewhere at the back of Reagh's mind there is an incoherent Izza calling in anguish.

Roinje came to her, put her hands on hers. Reagh, she said. That's your name, isn't it? You've got to help us. We've lost Terei. Can you find him for us? And can you find Yrre for us?

This really struck through. Me? I said, meaning exactly that. I am the very last person who could ever find anyone for you. Wasn't Taarh going to help you? No wait a bit— For a brief moment she managed to hold the whole ponderous structure in

her head, its impossible convolutions, its thundering nuances. And then, as if by intention, to save it slipping raggedly from her grasp, she dismissed it. It collapsed like the preposterous fabrication that it was. Taarh and she gave a single sigh of relief, and looked at each other with love, their faces lit with the same elfish expression of happiness and expectation. What am I saying, we said brightly, gazing at Roinje with a new-found affection, noting the fine set of her lips and cheekbones, seeing the desire in her eyes—what are we saying? Of course we can get Yrre for you. Or you for him. And Terei too, and Izza. Just you wait and see, Geordians. Are we ready, Taarh?

Ready, you said.

And we linked hands, or was it heads, Taarh and Reagh, and retired from the Geordian passage with a certain flourish, leaving the lovely black sisters and brothers replete with wonder, fused into a singular amaze.



Children, says the Mother cautiously. Come nearer. I feel some good things happening.

Pileo recoiled at the sound of the long booming roar. It was not a voice she had heard at close quarters before: elves were silent in the presence of humans.

And Yrre looked up, briefly, as the irrational thought crossed his mind: She's calling Reagh, how sensible—

Pileo, he said, listen now. You've got to help. She's still alive, but only just. I've got to save her.

What's wrong with her? asked Pileo. How did she get here?

Heaven knows, said Yrre. She's flying, that's all I know. She seems to be out of control. Queer things can happen when a flyer cuts free, but it doesn't explain this. She needs help.

I don't understand, said Pileo in exasperation. How did she get here?

I tell you I don't know. She's terribly cold. She's got to get back to her flight-couch. Sometimes they decide not to come back. You'd understand if you'd ever flown.

Then what are you going to do?

I'm not sure. I'm going to try and fly with her, and see if I can bring her back. You'll have to help.

How can I help? asked Pileo, looking distinctly lonely.

Watch over us. I'll sort of go to sleep. You mustn't disturb us. And make sure nobody else does. Keep the elves away.

We understand what is happening, says the Mother.

Yes, said Yrre.

How long will you be? asked Pileo, wincing again at the thunder.

Not too long, I hope. Try to be patient. I'm going to get into the sleeping bag with her to keep her warm.

That's not a good idea, says the Mother. You'll be cramped. Wanderers need to have their limbs free.

I suppose you're right, said Yrre. But we've both got to be kept warm.

Pileo looked at him uncertainly. Who is right? she said.

I was just thinking, said Yrre. I wonder if the elves could help?

Are you crazy? said Pileo.

We know what to do, says the Mother. We know how to nurse the Wanderers. The Wanderers borrowed the black man's body, and then left it again too suddenly. I called the white woman here to stop her screaming. The Gods are looking for you, Yrre.

Yrre felt the thunder hitting at his chest. He saw at last where they were coming from, the words that were forming in his mind. He looked back at the terrifying noise, the huge figures standing or crouching, watching.

How will you help? he asked.

We know where you go, says the Mother. We will nurse you, and keep you warm. We will send you safely on your way. She turns to the figures under the cliff. Taarh! she calls. Come! Bring the children! We must help the Wanderers!

Taarh stirs himself into motion. The children are crouching silently together further up the beach where the black sand laps at the boulders.

Children! he calls. You hear what Reagh says. Come! We must help the Wanderers!



Pileo screamed and lashed out with fists and feet as strong hands lifted her. She saw the figures bending over Yrre and the body of the Paulian. Their thunder drowned out the sound of her terror. A great face was nuzzling against her ear. She was going to be eaten.

And then she was being rocked, gently, waddled like a baby in the massive arms. The cool warmth of the great body was all around her. The smell in her nostrils was one of safety and comfort. The huge animal was crooning as it rocked gently backwards and forwards. Hush my Pileo, hush my little one. Warmth and quiet. Softly, softly, tiny Pileo.

The teat was surprisingly small. The great hand was poking it into her mouth. Pileo closed her eyes, and began to suck.



Is that you, Yrre?

He was lost in the vacant fields of beauty. And someone was with him, as lost as he.

As always the feeling of embodiment persisted, and as long as he was aware of his own body he knew he could return. If he wanted to.

Is that you, Yrre? He knew the call. It was a host he had entered before. He felt the safe arms of the elves comforting, warming his cold flesh. He felt a slight puzzlement. Whose body was it they held?

Is that you, Yrre? came the call again. Roinje's been looking for you. We need you to drive us. We've joined the Fleet.

It was Terei; he was sure of it. He could feel the splendid poise of Terei's body. He thought of Roinje. Where is she, Terei? Is she close?

Can't you see the pasdaghe?

He could. It was himself asking. Like Terei, he thought of Roinje. He could see her. Her mouth open in amazement. Watching in amazement as he receded.

Watching whom?

Come on Taarh. It's easy.

How beautiful they are, the Geordians. And how beautiful we are, the Gods. Yrre felt the movement of many minds, his own mind turning in the dust and the sheen of the Span. He felt Reagh's human form reaching for his.

He put out his hand, Reagh's hand, to find himself: gently went his hand, wonderingly, and found instead the I that is You; and he knew himself to be Reagh. Reagh chuckled her chuckle. Yrre, she said, send Terei back before you forget.

And on the flight couch in the good ship Nostra, Terei opened his eyes and looked up at his anxious comrades, outlaws of the Fleet. He managed a smile. There's a lot of people out there, he said. But now I'm Terei again.

## 10

The cars rounded the headland on gentle cushions, keeping a quiet throttle. Heleui looked round at Maro p4lei. He jerked his head in negation.

Something's happened to them, said Maro neis. We should have got here sooner.

Sooner or later, would it have mattered? Pointless hours of peering through the rain on the high moors, counting and herding. What was it all for? Reagh was gone; that was all they knew. The rest was duty.

It cannot harm, said Heleui. They have vittles for a week.

The elves on the uplands had been widely scattered. Heleui had had to double many hours round to the north to cover the top of the spread. One of the cars had cushioned out on a scree slope and that had cost them the second morning. And it was as if they had known, all of them, long before Teod's voice had told them. They had known at the libation that she was gone. And the Paulian crazed. They had flown together, said Teod. Reagh had not come back.

It was the wrong passing.

And why the silence from Pileo and Yrre? Teod had not been able to contact them, either. Pileo knows, said Maro neis.

She feels it as we do. But the driver...

They settled the cars down on the black beach below Gaffel where they had left Pileo and Yrre. Their tracks were still clear in the sandy black shingle. The weather had been calm.

The Gleaners surveyed the far headland.

Shall we motor over? suggested Manhra.

Heleui made no reply. She trained her glasses on Qert.

I'm sure there'll be a group under Qert she said. Ested verified the copes offshore. And even if they were over-Qert, Pileo would have found them. They'll be around here somewhere. If we go in with cars they'll simply scatter.

But if it's only tab failure they'd be waiting here for us, said Maro p4lei. Something's happened.

Heleui was silent, thinking. At last she said: Neis and I will go over to Qert on foot. The cars stay here. Or rather p4lei can take a car round the Undertow—

Pileo won't be there if there are copes at Qert, said Maro p4lei.

All right, stay here, said Heleui. If we find nothing, we'll go over the top on foot. You can come and pick us up on the other side if we don't return—give us three days.



It was clear, dry weather, with a gentle breeze off the sea. They were hardly more than two hours across the sand before

they could make out the seals in the glasses, leaping and flashing in the sea under Qert. They're there all right said Maro neis. Copes don't dance so close to the shore unless there are elves about. Do you think it's all right to go in closer?

We have to, said Heleui. Pileo must be in there.

But elves and seals do not consort while humans are present. Maro neis looked wonderingly at Heleui. Her face was expressionless.

They moved on.

An hour later they came to the eastern estuary. The tide was beginning to turn.

Maro neis sat down in the sand. I can't understand it he said. They must know we're here by now. Can you still see the copes? There must be some other reason why they're so close inshore. A big shoal of fish perhaps.

They're jumping, not eating, said Heleui, sweeping the distant Qert with her glasses.

If there are any elves about they can hardly miss you, standing up and flashing your glasses at them like that said Maro neis dryly.

Heleui made no reply. She had caught the far figure of Pileo in her lenses, making her way over the black sand towards them. She sat down by Maro neis and handed him the glasses.

Look who's coming to meet us, she said. And she lay back and settled herself comfortably against a sandbank.

By the time Pileo had reached the opposite bank of the by now rising water Heleui and Maro neis had seen enough in the glasses to realise that a measure of explanation was due. Pileo was alone. She had no pack, and was clearly not attending to her pad, even if she had it with her. She was dishevelled, her hair matted. From her free, arm-swinging walk it was evident that there were no elves within range. And she was smiling.

She stood for a moment on the far side of the water, surveying the rising tide. At first it seemed she had seen them. But as she moved down towards the water she gave them a low short wave and Heleui understood: Pileo had dropped below the skyline before waving.

Hallo Mother, she said as she waded up out of the water towards them. Hallo neis.

Mara neis looked startled at them bath. When had she ever called Heleui Mother?

Where's Yrre? he said at last.

He's gone, said Pileo, with a little rueful smile.

She had the pungent smell of the elves upon her.

Gone? Where?

Gone, said Pileo. With Reagh.

You know about Reagh? asked Heleui.

She came to us. The elves called her. And her brother Taarh. Now they're all gone. I nearly went with them. But I decided to

stay. The elves told me you were coming. They sent me to meet you.

The elves sent you—?

They watch over the bodies. Of Reagh and Taarh, that is. Yrre and the Paulian are gone.

Taarh the god? said Maro neis.

The Paulian? said Heleui.

It was ridiculous. They understood nothing.

The Wanderers, said Pileo. And now I suppose Yrre is a Wanderer.

Maro neis was losing his patience.

What in heaven's name is a Wanderer? he said.

It's what the elves call the gods, said Pileo.



The bodies lay side by side on the sand, the goddess Reagh, almost as if sleeping, in her light blue robe, and a small dusty young man with his face streaked with dry tears.

The elves stood their distance, mastering their fear of the cars. Pileo stood amongst them with the children, most of whom were taller and bigger than she: they nuzzled against her, pushing against each other in play, falling against their elders. They had no fear of the cars, only distaste. Pileo was the centre of their attention.

The Gleaners covered the bodies and laid them together in

the back of Maro neis's car. With the supplies gone, there was room to spare. Then they closed the car and turned uncertainly to face Pileo and the elves.

Heleui raised her voice a little and addressed Pileo:

Can we leave them now? she said.

I think it's all right, said Pileo. The Mother knows we'll be back. She turned to the Mother. The great arms wrapped briefly around her.

The elven children moved a few steps with her, towards the cars, before letting her go. They held out their hands to her as she parted from them. The Gleaners climbed into the cars, Pileo bringing the heavy smell of the elves with her. She looked out at the huge figures, saw the Mother talking to them, calming them as the engines sounded.

Is that all? said Heleui. Pileo was a little slow to realise the question was addressed to her. She had taken Heleui's place in the group.

She leant over the back of the seat and put her arms over Heleui's shoulders and kissed her on the cheek, filling Heleui's nostrils with the smell of the elves.

Yes, Mother mine, she said. Straight home to Tanquish.



## 11

*From the record of Tuls tCesa concerning the events at Qert when the goddess Reagh departed from the Gleaners:*

After living with the Gleaners for several cycles, Reagh is said to have departed from them at the time of the so-called First Geordian episode when a number (probably not more than four) of Geordian passages working for the Bases broke ranks and went extra-par. I, Tuls, was then a crew member in one of these passages. Shortly after this I was given leave of absence in order to go alone down to Huld to gather data in Tanquish and later in Three Mountain.

Accounts of Reagh's departure are not fully consistent. According to the woman Pileo, leader of the Gleaners, who was on a reconnaissance to Qert accompanied by driver Yrre Hemming (whom I never met), the body of Driver Izza Isqad appeared in a comatose state on the beach at Qert; later Izza was alive and well in the Lodge at Tanquish, and appeared some twenty years later in Tanquish and elsewhere as a high official of Carhault, controlling the forces of the Code.

Other members of the Gleaner's reconnaissance team report that the bodies of the goddess Reagh and her brother the

god Taarh were transported from Qert back to Tanquish. The implication is that either the elves or some other energy at Qert were able to move the bodies of human drivers to and from Qert from far-away places. According to the Gleaners, the bodies of Reagh and Taarh were buried at the Lodge on Tanquish Laer. It is clear, however, that Yrre and the Paulian Izza were both severally operative some thirty years later in Tanquish and at Three Mountain, and playing significant roles in the struggle between Three Mountain and the Code. I had left Huld by that time.

The Goddess Reagh is said to have appeared to several Gleaners in the years that followed. Ot Taarh little is known.



The barrow had been raised on the hillside above the Temple. A crowd had gathered, a wide spectrum of devotion and curiosity. The Gleaners alone entered the barrow. The bodies of the Goddess and her brother lay together on the earthen pallet. After a long while the Gleaners left the barrow and return to their Lodge. The barrow was sealed.

The watchers craned to see them as they came down towards the Temple; and to see Pileo, the Gleaner whom the elves had suckled.

Pileo! they called. Bond-maker ! Beloved of Gods and Elves!

Pileo bowed her head onto Heleui's shoulder. Heleui put

her arm round her and led her down the hillside, surrounded by the Gleaners.



Pileo was standing at the window of Yrre's old room, gazing over the town, when Izza entered. She turned and held out her hands. I am glad to see you well, she said.

I have the Gleaners to thank for that, said Izza.

Pileo smiled. If we can mend the elves, we can mend people, she said.

They stood for a moment looking at each other: this is Pileo the leader of the Gleaners, Izza told herself.

Are you going to stay with us as our local driver? asked Pileo.

I have been recalled to Carhault, said Izza. His Holiness will decide.

Pileo searched her face. You will be welcome if you return, she said.

Thank you, said Izza. I shall inform his Holiness of your offer.

Will you have to do penance or something?

Izza did not reply at once. Finally she said: I cannot repent. I have given my love to Reagh.

Pileo took her hands.

So have we all, she said. But the God of Love and Peace has

left us. The times have changed.



We, the Wanderers, saw the ships like a skein of silver motes against the black: the mythical Fleet, the far vision of Roinje, of Rewi, of Ellyonne, of Tuls, of Pileo and Maro neis, of many others. They shone brightly, briefly, before they faded.

We have ridden the great tides, watched the skies forming and breaking, listened to the rumble of earthquakes on planets wilder than ever Izza Isqad dreamt of. We have watched their rivers lash and coil, their uplands sprouting with red fire. We have seen their civilizations scurrying amongst the thicker stars. Everywhere we have felt the great tides rising. In our hearts we know that they will turn, the great tides: but that time is not our time.

Now you must return, said Reagh. He felt that she was weeping. But perhaps that was her brother Taarh.

Yes, I must return, said Yrre. He moved away from them, no longer weeping, and became himself. Thank you, Reagh, he said simply. Will I ever see you again?

Of course, said Reagh. But now you must return to Roinje, for she needs your help; and you two have a long and difficult road in front of you. And you will become old before the end of your journey. How will the Goddess of Peace and Love appear to you then?

April 1984  
October 2019  
April 2021.

## **Part 2**

### **Three Mountain**

Twenty-five years later

Note on the names *Ios* and *Eus*

These two names often appear as *Ruis* and *Ruas*. It seems that the people of Wedge often sounded a type of *r* in front of names beginning with vowels. This does not always happen, and we can see no clear pattern. The additional *r* may have a connotation which escapes us.

## 8

The mountain came into being like a tiny pock on the horizon, straight in front of the moaning car. Ios saw it, and said so. Pileo, who was driving, opened her good eye and squinted ahead. That's it, she said. If the candle lasts.

And she closed her eye again.

Ios sat on the cylinders, the wind in her face, staring out over the sand, her head held high and her back straight, riding the limping car. She was not sleepy. Nor was the marquil in her lap. It sat and gazed gravely, like Ios, over the featureless black and grey.

The others slept. Rautte, his hair over his face, lay stretched out on the skins in the back of the car. Maro sat by the bulwark, his head lolling on his chest. Pileo and Ested lay in the driving seats, Ested with her mouth open and her feet up on the cowling.

The car nosed painfully onwards in a fairly straight line a little north of west over the gravel and black sand. Sometimes it changed course to avoid softer sand or an unfavourable gradient, seeking the fuel-saving route. It also did its best to avoid mesh, where it would leave a wake. But most of the time it headed for the mountain.

The horizon to the east and south-east had disappeared,



and the sun with it, caught in a blanket of blindness that was creeping up over the sands. The marquill glanced down at the dashboard and read 900 at the base of the candle; and then back at the cloudbank coming up from the left behind them. About fifteen minutes before the rain reached them, it reckoned.

And Ios rode the cylinders, her wide eyes staring over the desolation of sand and gravel at the tiny smudge on the distant horizon. The marquill pondered on what she was thinking.

Ios and the marquill scrambled down into the car as the rain hit, pulling the canopy shut after them. Pileo yawned and stretched. Damn, she said, as she saw the dials. Base is up to nine hundred. Time to look at the filters again.

Nine hundred's all right, said Rautte. She'll run cooler in the rain.

Not this candle, said Pileo. With four cycles on the clock I'm taking no chances. I don't want to have to walk to the mountain. Find a patch of hard and set her down, Ested. We'll take a break, and Rautte and I'll change the filters.

A break! thought the marquill. They sleep for three hours and then they take a break. It turned its eyes hopefully up to Ios.

The rain's cold, said Ios.

The marquill's gaze was unflinching.

A quick run, then, said Ios. She pulled off her overalls and her smell filled the marquill's nostrils. Rautte looked up at her from his place on the skins at the back of the car.

What? said Ios. I'm taking the marquil for a run, is that all right?

In this rain? said Rautte. You'll freeze.

Better than being cooped up in this car with a buck-rabbit like you, said Ios, Holy Father, can't even air my sweat without being ogled. She opened the canopy and the marquil scrambled up and was gone. Ios followed into the rain.

Not quite ready to tackle the filters, Rautte? said Pileo mischievously.

Rautte snorted. Not my fault she smells good, he said.



The marquil thought: Ios runs faster in the rain. This is because the sand is firmer.

The featureless grey desert was neither grey nor featureless to those who ran over it. Everywhere it bore the marks of wind and water, sun and frost, streaks and gullies of sand and gravel. The rain had kindled its range of colour, from pale blue and greenish grey to jet black, and scattered pockets of rust, even crimson. An enormous wash-plain, its surface the assorted rubble of mountains that sprouted many tens of leagues away out of sight to the north and east, ever rising beneath the ice.

The marquil found a larger stone and hopped up on it.

Ios threw herself panting on to the sand and lay for a moment face down, her body steaming. Then she rolled over

and spread her limbs, letting the rain wash and chill her.

Presently she sat up, shaking the moisture from her eyes. The sun was squirting in under the bank of clouds to the west. The rain was thinning.

The marquill hissed, swivelling its ears. Ios followed its gaze and saw a red blinking light low in the clouds to the east. She started to her feet. Low over the sand, the sun glinting on its metal body, a warplane came in from the south- east, rocketing through the rain, silent, leaving its naked roar behind it. Ios gave a cry and turned: seven hundred paces away the car stood alone on a patch of hard. Pileo! screamed Ios with all the strength in her body. Pileo! Ested!

The warplane lifted as it approached the car and presented its pale underbelly with the brutal black stripes of the Code. Ios saw the little puff of smoke as it released its missile. There was a frozen moment while the car stood tiny on the sand. And then it was split by flame, and gone, and in its place was the billowing pall of black and grey smoke that Ios was waiting for, shot with shoulders of red flame.

Ios crouched in the rain, putting her palms on the sand, her lungs heaving. Sensing the moment, the marquill came into the radius of her warmth. Ios moved in Time.

The sky was clearing. The evening sun was warm on Ios's skin. She started back to the waiting car, feeling at last hungry.

The marquill trotted ahead, its nostrils already sensing food.



Rautte jerked at the intake filter, and slid it up into the car. It's clean, she said, looking up at Pileo.

Almost, said Pileo. Only three days since we changed it. Pass me that clip. I'll take out the pulse filter.

It was clean too. Rautte and Pileo looked at each other.

They're both clean, said Rautte. What shall we do?

Who's for coffee? said Maro.

Ios clambered into the car, bringing the smell of the wet sand with her.

Pileo was thinking. No point in sparing filters, she said. But we're going to have to re-thread the candle before we go much further, and that'll take time. We'll need to tent down for the night. How's the coffee coming?

Coming, said Maro. You change them first.

Ios was cutting the delf bread in fine, thin slices, a little self-conscious with the food as always. The marquill's nostrils were twitching.

They were quiet as they munched the delf, waiting for Pileo to make up her mind. Ios was hungry, and was enjoying her food in spite of herself, keeping her back to the others and gazing out of the window over the wash plain.

We could stay here tonight, said Pileo at last. We can't be

far from the Old Time.

No, said Ios. There are warplanes about.

Did you see anything? said Pileo.

Could be, said Ios. The old sorrow gnawed at her, the old tears welling in her eyes.

But the others turned their eyes away from her.

Rautte, said Pileo, where's the nearest pan?

Rautte turned to the pad, his mouth full of delf. His reply was incoherent, and he sprayed delf crumbs over the pad.

That grey patch? asked Pileo, squinting at the screen.

Rautte nodded.

How far away is it? asked Pileo. She could never read maps.

Hee, said Rautte, holding up three fingers.

We'll risk it, said Pileo. We'll set down in the pan tonight and spin out the tent in case of air attack. We're close to Old Time, but perhaps not close enough—what do you think, Ios?

Ios shook her head, looking away.

If Maro helps me strip the candle this evening I can spend the night re-threading it, said Pileo. Then it should last for a while.

I'll help you re-thread, said Ios, still looking out of the side-window. I'm not tired.

Pileo gave her a smile. You can braid, she said. Then we can get a few hours of sleep before morning.



It had turned dark by the time the car wheezed onto the soft grey dust of the pan. They spun out their tent over around the car and settled in for the night. The Marquil was let out under a flap of the tent and it climbed up onto the lip of the pan to keep watch. The car was undetectable, tented into the soft dust, but the marquil liked the focus: the silence and the night. Ested, Rautte and Maro crawled in together under the skins. Rautte fell asleep almost at once, but Ested and Maro lay in the aura of each other's warmth for a while and listened to Pileo and Ios muttering together over the candle.

Pileo's fears were confirmed. The base of the candle was black with cinder, and they had to score deep into the resin to secure the new threads.

You've got to be real crazy to try to rethread a candle that far gone, said Pileo.

Or desperate, said Ios.

Or determined, said Pileo. I am not going to walk to the Mountain.

Ios watched Pileo as her fleet fingers worked over the resin. She saw the warplane's belly lift, the tiny puff of smoke. Pileo gone. And Ested and Maro.

Pileo. Never again her gentle warmth.

The endless, uncertain mission lay heavy on her. Life had

become an interminable series of missions, mountain, forest, coordinating missions, intelligence missions, always on the alert for enemy on land or in the sky, always heading somewhere or moving from something. This one was to have been different, a chance to escape the Time Change, however ephemerally. Perhaps for the last time.

I don't know how you can suffer him, she muttered savagely.

Pileo rethreaded without pausing, applying the paste with her leech's finger, feeling the lie of the thread against her nail instead of using the callipers. According to Maro, Pileo had once built up a shattered candle from nothing, using gum and pebbles as a core. It had lasted them five leagues through Noncerry territory in the Syriades. That was before Ios and Rautte had joined the crew, in the early days before Noncerry had joined the Code, and Manhra and Helui were still alive.

Pileo put down the thread and wiped her hands on an old sweatshirt of Ested's. She reached for the kettle, refilled her mug and leant back in her seat.

It'll get better when we reach the Mountain, she said. Grass and green fields. We can dig in real living-quarters and get off each others' backs.

No it's not just that, said Ios. There's nothing wrong with Rautte. It's me. I just can't take him any more.

That's not quite true, you know, said Pileo. A lot of it is Rautte's fault. He's been getting worse since we left Ariel. We all

find him tiring. But he's only trying to get your attention. He'd be much more tolerable if you were nice to him.

Ios sighed. You're lucky, she said. You tolerate everybody. But Rautte disgusts me. He only thinks of one thing.

Ios, said Pileo, Rautte is a nice guy, I promise you. But we're all under strain. It's getting to him.

Strain, muttered Ios. What does he know of strain?

Teod had told her, again and again: It will be heavy for you, Ios. Do not talk to them of it. Time is for them a moving point. It will disturb them if they begin to understand. Let it lie. Try not to show them Time before they are ready.



You got on well enough with Rautte before we reached Ariel.

He was different before Ariel, said Ios. Or I was.

Before the checkpoint? said Pileo

Ios looked at her nervously. Do you remember? she said.

I know something happened, said Pileo, but I don't know what. Rautte understood something. He turned to you, Ios, but you wouldn't help him. Maro saw it. Maro says it happened twice. He's said that about you before.

Ios and Pileo looked at each other, Pileo's eyes searching deep.

Then Ios said: There was a warplane this afternoon. I was too far away. I could rewrite it.



She had said it. She looked at Pileo, terrified. But Pileo's searching eyes wavered, and then withdrew. She turned back to her threading. The moment had passed. Ios was alone again with her pain.



By two o'clock in the morning they had built up the ground-threads, and Pileo was applying the resin so fast that Ios could hardly keep up with her. The pack was beginning to take shape.

Shall we stop and have a bite? said Pileo.

They refilled their mugs and cut themselves each a slice of delf bread. They took their mugs and went out to look at the stars, munching.

Far away to the east the sky was clear, but above them and to the northwest, over the Mountain, there was a dark cloud cover. In spite of the cloud the air had cooled, and Ios could smell the sea. The cool air was welcome, but the smell of the sea troubled her.

You're shivering, said Pileo.

I smell the sea, said Ios. The sea is fearful.

The sea is wonderful, said Pileo. The elves love the sea.

The marquill came running over the sand towards them. Ios bent down and put out her hand and the marquill gave a little leap for her wrist and then ran up her shoulder.

They climbed up towards the western ridge of the pan,

expecting to see the Mountain from the top. Do we know how far it is? asked Ios.

We're not into Old Time yet, said Pileo.

They said we'd get into Old Time as soon as we left the Highlands, said Ios. Why didn't we?

Pileo grunted. The Change is drifting west, she said.

I wonder what they're like? said Ios.

The mountain people? Fairly primitive, I expect. If there are any of them left, that is.

They came to the top of the ridge and stood for a while looking over the dark surface of the wash-plain. The drifting clouds revealed for a moment the bright spark of Tungel, and their dim shadows flickered on the dust of the pan. They stood silent for a while.

What do you mean, you rewrote? asked Pileo.

Did I say that?

What exactly happened this afternoon? said Pileo. You saw a warplane ? Why didn't you shout?

I did. You didn't hear. I was too far away..

So what did you do?

Ios hesitated. I screened us off, she lied.

But you didn't have your pad with you. You were running. You should have been on watch.

Ios flared in anger. Why me? she said. I was giving the

marquil a run, you saw me go. Why should I have been on watch?

There was a silence.

I know, said Pileo, You're right. I should have had someone on watch. We should have been screened..

There was another silence. Ios took Pileo's hand.

Let's go back and finish the candle, she said. Then we can get some sleep.

Pileo laughed. You're trying to change the subject. But don't forget I'm the mother of this godforsaken outfit. I want to know what happened.

They were looking for us, but the rain was too heavy, they missed us, said Ios.

It was a poor lie.

You won't tell me, will you? said Pileo.



The marquil read 500 at the base of the candle. It could smell the sweet pulse of the motor: it knew it was Pileo's motor. The car hummed its way along the unseen road. The Mountain still seemed as far away as when they first saw it; and now it began slowly to descend behind a far ridge of higher ground, until it sank out of sight.

Ios saw the figure first. Of the humans, that is; the marquil had been watching it impassively for the past quarter. Man on

the skyline at two span, she called down into the car.

Everybody woke up. Pileo flicked the stick to the right, but it took several seconds to respond, navigating a slight gradient.

The figure, a mere boy, stood against the skyline, a dejected, mournful silhouette. The car reneged, detecting a patch of mesh between it and the boy. Pileo put it down and cut off the motor.

Hallo, called Ios.

The boy stood motionless, as if waiting for them to approach.

We can't come any closer, called Ios. Can we give you a lift?

He was filthy. Ios could smell his stench already. She realised he was older than he looked. The marquil hopped down and hid behind the car.

Can we help you? called Ios, using the Evenspeech as slowly and clearly as she could. Do you want a lift? We are going to the Mountain.

He began to sidle reluctantly down the slop towards them with strange hobbling gait. He was clad in a heavy upper garment of spun wool, but his hose and threadbare shoes seemed to be of skin.

Ested looked out and repeated Ios's message in the Tanquish variety of Evenspeech. Rautte stifled a laugh.

The boy—the young man— stood a few paces from the car, gazing at them mournfully. His smell filled their nostrils: he was clearly a meat-eater. Ested tried in Haric, and then

incongruously in Geordian. Rautte barked a laugh.

Ios mimed dramatically: you come with us—we go to Mountain.

He turned his head slowly away, and then back again, as if refusing. He spoke a few words in a slow guttural, pointing to himself and then in the direction of the Mountain, invisible behind the slope. Then he pointed to the ground in front of the car and said something which Ios suddenly understood. He was trying to say, in Evenspeech, You follow me.

He doesn't understand a word, said Pileo.

Yes he does, he said Follow me, said Ios. Look, he's beckoning.

And it was clear that he was walking off in front of the car, inviting them to follow.

I'll let the car decide, said Pileo. She started the motor and the car rose, moving after the departing figure. He broke into a run. The car followed.

## 9

I had come of age that summer when Ruis and her people came. I was the first person to see her, I Ruas of the Domain. She was my namesake, even before we joined languages.

It was late summer, and we had ridden up into the Lower Drays to check on the flocks and gather the horses. My sister Telis and I had ridden away from the others up into the Upper Drays to head off the outrunners and keep the flock together for the first gathering. We saw the smoke from the Ridge of the Drays, far off over the high grasslands. It looked like someone was burning shell-oil, a great pall of black smoke, and through the glasses you could see glimmers of red fire at the base. We cursed them for the damage and disquiet to the grasslands.

They were not keeping to the road, but making their own way over the gullies in the upper grasslands. We took precautions, of course: they could have been horse-thieves. Telis rode swiftly back to the brothers and took off with the wild horses in a wide sweep under by the North Flete, taking them over the river by the Flats and keeping well out of sight in the Lower Drays. I rode gently along the ridge towards the path of the car, showing myself as best as I could, meaning to intercept them as they came over the ridge by the old road. Their car was moving slowly, but they kept tacking south so that I had to

follow them along the ridge. It was a long time before they seemed to see me.

I knew little of motors in those days. There were a few in the Domain, one or two archaic Terenz motors to drive generators, and the occasional fusion tractor on the farms. I had never seen anything as exotic as a Tanquish wagon. But it seemed to me obvious from the fumes and the noise that this motor was sick. The coachwork itself was in a poor state of repair, patched together with kerry and lenthorn, the screens of its canopy scratched and pitted. The wheels had long since dropped off, and when they finally saw me I winced as the driver put her down on a gentle slope and the undercarriage gouged into the turf.

She sat up on top, her back straight, and we stared at each other. Her matted hair hung over her forehead, and there were smudges of engine-oil on her arms and face. She was unlike any woman I had ever seen. The women of the men of the Domain are beautiful, say the people of Tanquish; but Ruis was very different. Her face was angular, with high cheekbones, and there was a strange slant to her eyes. She had light skin, like the men of Tanquish. Her body was meagre, and the wind pinned her thin dress to her.

They were a tatty crew. I tried to understand their chatter, but they spoke too fast and too much for my school-Evenspeech. I tried to point out the road to them, and advised them to stick

to it as the most economic route for their ailing wagon. But they didn't seem to understand, and in fact it was as if they didn't see the road at all. They stretched out their hands to me. I thought they were asking for bread. I hadn't any provisions with me. They were fairly decently dressed, but their clothes were worn and thin and inadequate. I told them they would be welcome in the Domain if they had goods to peddle, but they shouldn't stay long. It was at least clear they were not missionaries. I told them they should follow me if they wanted the best route for their wagon. I turned the horse and made off slowly along the road. They seemed to understand; at least they followed me in the wagon at hardly more than an amble. We made slow progress into the Domain, a strange cavalcade.



As he ran, it now seemed to Ios that he was riding a horse. A small horse, a pony, had suddenly flickered into sight, as if by a trick of seeing: she felt she could blink it away and he would be running again. She looked at Pileo. Are we into Old Time? she asked, wonderingly.

What makes you think that?

The boy is on a horse, she said.

No he isn't, said Pileo. Wait. He looks larger than he was. Did he have that red coat?

His hair is longer, said Ios.



Ested, are we into Old Time? asked Pileo.

Why not? said Ested.



The young man had slowed his pace, or as they now seemed to see clearly, slowed his horse, to the cruising speed of the car. Amazingly, the car followed his every move: either it was making the same decisions as the rider, as the marquill saw it, or it had decided inexplicably to follow him, which was how it looked to the humans. Ios sat up on the cylinders as usual, but the marquill remained in the car, not showing itself. They continued this way as the day wore on. By evening they had gained higher ground again, and the Mountain had reappeared, with a billowing cloud-cover obscuring its heights. Maro said that meant a northerly wind, but it was still calm here on the sands. However the Mountain looked a little larger; in the glasses Ios could see the great gullies leading up into streaks of white snow which blended into the cloud-cover.

As the afternoon turned into evening Pileo and Rautte began scanning the screen for a good pan to spin out the tent. Ested said they were definitely well into the Old Time, out of range of warplanes, but no one felt like taking chances. Eventually Rautte spotted a pan of soft sand on the screen, a few degrees left of their route, and Pileo flicked the stick to take control. After consideration the car began to pick its way

towards the left. The rider turned and looked at them in surprise. He shouted and gesticulated, but as they ignored him he rode round and followed them. Finally Pileo put the car down in the pan, and Ios and Maro neis began to spin out the tent. The rider had dismounted; he seemed to be agitated.

As the outlines of the can began to disappear under the tent he came towards them on foot, shouting loudly. Ios had finished the webbings on her side, and she straightened up and turned to meet the boy. His demeanour had changed: now he seemed angry. He strode towards the car, shouting and clenching his fists. As he came closer Ios saw little tears of rage in his eyes.

We've every right to bivouac here! she shouted in defiance. You leave us alone and go back to your Mountain. You can't order us about!

Pileo had raised the canopy and came scrambling out of the car towards them.

Ios, she called. Calm down! We have to find out what's wrong. We do things gently, that's what we're here for.

He's threatening, said Ios.

Sit down, said Pileo. Sit down in the sand.

Ios sat, cross-legged. The boy gave a cry. He said a few words and beckoned wildly towards the edge of the pan.

I think he's talking Evenspeech, said Pileo. I'm sorry, she said, slowly and carefully. What have we done wrong?

Seed-earth, said the boy. Come away, come away!

He is talking Evenspeech, said Ios. What a strange accent!

Come away from what? said Pileo. Get up Ios, for Reagh's sake. Do what he says.

They followed him to the edge of the pan, some forty paces from the car. Pileo sat down on a rise of rock, looked up at the stranger. Sit and talk to us, she said.

He knelt at the edge of the pan, passing his hand over the surface gently, as if stroking something. Seed-earth, he said, the tears still in his eyes. Big trees.

It's sand, said Ios. But as she watched his hands a soft green brightness seemed to flicker under them, and then spread out over the sand, as if by a trick of sight. Suddenly she saw there was a carpet of tiny fresh green grasses over the whole pan of sand. She looked startled at Pileo: she saw it too. Like when we first saw his horse, she said. It's the Old Time. The Change has gone.



We, the Intelligences, have our doubts.

The policy of Pacification, sometimes termed Upgrading, was of course operational long before the Geordian disturbances, even going back to Berenice. But the War Against Geordian Extraparity following the Eile incident and the rise of Geordian sympathy in the Seli9 System can be said to have

triggered our development of second-wave systems. Among these was the Regeneration Project initiated by Carhault, which we supported insofar as it was directed against the Geordian sympathisers on Huld, although we had our doubts at the time. The Paulian insistence on female dominance has always jarred with us, but while they agreed to confine Regeneration to Huld we were prepared to support the experiment. However the results have not been fully satisfactory.

Regeneration seemed at first to exceed all expectations: minor time-sequences could be reframed automatically and larger malsequences were amenable to various degrees of adjustment. But with increased coverage Carhault began to run into problems. Inexplicably, certain areas outside Har in Huld showed robust resistance, demanding dramatic increases of power resources. It was particularly in the areas directly North-West of Tanquish, over the great wash plains towards the Domain, which proved increasingly difficult to regenerate. Satellite imagery consistently refused to show New Time configurations. The Beacons on the single mountain of the Domain, inexplicably known as Three, could not be imaged, Again and again the security flights of the Code lost contact with their quarry.

The incident of the Marian cell which infiltrated the Domain brought these concerns to a head.



It was more than the Change. It was as if they were learning to see, to look at the wash-plain with eyes that knew its language.

Big trees, said the boy, motioning up to the sky. On the Mountain.

What trees?

Dalab, he said.

He's saying Delf, said Ios. I could understand him! Delf-nut trees.

They saw again the swathes of delicate green plants in the sand, trampled and ploughed in by the car as it settled.

Our bread, said Pileo. She stood up. This is terrible. Oh child I am so sorry. Please forgive us.

Not child, said the boy. Ruas of the Domain. Horseman of the High Lady.



For the next two days they car followed the rider dutifully over the sand. It seemed to them that it was following some sort of road: sometimes clearly so, with stone embankments, but often hardly visible, or not at all. The Mountain rose slowly over the sand and began to reveal deep green valleys leading into its

depths. The cloud-cover had come down lower, and there was no glimpse of snow. The next night they stopped where the rider indicated, and slept out under the stars, unafraid. The rider slept apart, and his horse stood grazing the short grasses. The marquill did not leave the car, as if unwilling to show itself.

The second night Ios went over and sat by him, offering him delf-bread, which he accepted.

What is your name again? she asked.

He looked up at her with bright eyes.

Ruas, he said. She heard: Eus.

My name is Ios, she said. He heard: Ruis.

They were smiling. We have the same name, they said to each other.



On the third day they began to feel the mountain's presence as it rose, much larger now, over the sand, watching them. The cloud had lifted considerably, and the streaks of snow had reappeared. The local landscape, too, had changed: there were great rolling lowlands of grasses and low bush, and the road was clearly marked as it wound through them. Ios felt no longer that this was a function of her sight: the vegetation was too green and lush not to have been there for their old eyes. As they progressed, the road became hemmed in by low embankments on either side.

Around midday Ios called down into car: Me ahead!

There were three horse riders following a large wagon drawn by two heavy horses. The boy Ruas spurred on to meet them, and was talking to them when the car caught up. There was not room between the embankments for the wagon to pass the car: Pileo preened the cushion and lifted the car out of the road above the embankment. Ruas and the newcomers spoke together shortly; then one of the rides turned his horse and made his way back towards the mountain at a brisk pace. After the wagon had passed the hovering car, Pileo returned to the road and raised the canopy as Ruas came alongside. They take the little trees, said Ruas. To the Mountain. Make big trees. One go back to tell. Then he rode on forward.



They slept the third night again under the stars. The cloud continued to lift on the mountain, and a range of peaks began to appear, dark against the light of the evening dying in the north-west. Early the next morning they were awoken by shouts. Ruas was standing up on the embankment, waving. Two horsemen were approaching from the Mountain, and Ruas ran along the embankment to meet them. Two large chestnut-coloured dogs were loping behind the horses. The riders dismounted and embraced the boy: a tall rugged man in a long russet cloak and a girl of Ruas's age and height in a light blue riding dress, her

hair covered by a russet headpiece. The dogs pranced around Ruas and jumped up at him to lick his face. They turned the horses loose to graze with Ruas's horse, and sat together talking together on the embankment. Pileo and the crew rolled up their sleeping-bags and stowed them in the car. Maro and Ested climbed into the car and began boiling water and cutting delf-bread for the morning meal. Ios, Pileo and Rautte lounged by the car and watched the mountain people's conversation. Every so often Ruas gesticulated at the car, and the man regarded the strangers intently. After a while the two men stood up and walked towards the car. The girl followed close behind. Pileo and Ios came forward to meet them.

Ruas spoke several sentences in his own language. From behind the girl's translation came instantly, in clear and rather old-fashioned Evenspeech, with a slight accent.

This is my father Sheug, Elder of the South Reach. We wish to ascertain the reason for your coming.

Greetings, Sheug. My name is Pileo of Tanquish, and I am spokesman for this group. We are members of the League against the Code. Our purpose is to discuss with you and your elders the present situation and learn how you intend to deal with the threat of encroachment against both our peoples. We pledge friendship and ask for your support in this struggle.

The girl interpreted.

A silence ensued. The man Sheug looked intently at Pileo,



then at Ios and Rautte, and then moved to the car and peered in through the canopy. Maro and Ested were busy over the stove.

May we offer you morning coffee and delf? asked Pileo.

There was no reply. Sheug turned from the car and said a few words to Ruas. Then he addressed Rautte, ignoring Pileo. The girl translated: You will come with us to the Domain. The Council will hear you and discuss matters. Sheug turned his back and walked off towards the horses, and Ruas followed him. Pileo looked at Ios. Not much of a welcome, she said. The girl stood silent beside them, watching the dogs, who were up on their hind legs, pawing at the car and whining. She gave a single call and they backed away. Ios turned to look at her.

You have benc in the car, she said in a low voice. Ios said: What is benc?

The little animal, said the girl. With the ears.

Ios nodded, startled.

Keep it hidden, said the girl. Otherwise it will be killed.



The three riders rode off down the road, the father and son side by side, the dogs at their heels and the girl following. They did not look back. Ested started the motor, waited for the lift, and followed.

As the morning wore on the weather turned fine, and the mountain shed the last of the cloud. It seemed to rise forever

into the sky above them, ranges of high moor and hanging cliffs. Ios reasoned that they were too close to see the highest peaks, now hidden behind the hanging shoulders of the cliffs that bore up the high moors, breached here and there by deep green valleys leading back into high passes. The lower slopes were thickly wooded, with rocky terrain patched with green pasture above them. The snows could not be seen behind the high shoulders.

The road was now running through flat sandy grasslands. Ios saw it yellow and green; yet she was aware of an earlier vision, of featureless barren sand. And she saw too that the two landscapes were one and the same. Both times lived in her sight.

The road was less clearly marked on these flatlands, with no embankment. The girl had moved apart to the right, and slowed, so that the car began to catch up with her. Presently she was riding beside the car. She was looking at Ios.

Ios raised the canopy. Jump in, she said. The girl swung herself nimbly off her grey horse and onto the running-board, and then scrambled in beside Ios. The grey moved away but kept pace with the car.

Welcome, said Pileo. Thank you, said the girl, smiling a little shyly.

Pileo introduced everyone by name. The girl smiled at them all.

There was an awkward silence.

You are the interpreter? said Pileo.

The girl thought a little. I am the daughter and the sister, she said.

What is your name? asked Ios.

My name is Telis, she said. Ios heard: Tuis. She said the name: Tuis. Telis smiled her smile. That's very good, she said. And I can say your name, as I have heard it. Ios. And I can say Rautte's name. But the other names are difficult.

She said nothing for a while, watching the two horsemen on the road before them. Then she said: May I see the benc?

There was a sudden scuffling noise at the back, under the bedding. The marquill put its head out.

Telis gave a gasp of delight. She called: Tùl benc!

The marquill came warily towards her. She held out her hand, as she had to the humans. The marquill seemed to make up its mind, and jumped lightly up into her lap. She gave a little squeal of delight as she stroked the creature. It's lovely. It's used to humans.

You have seen one before? asked Rautte.

Never so close, said Telis. There have always been on the Mountain. The Hillmen know them well, and respect them. My people hunt and kill them. They say they kill the lambs and drink the milk from the sheep. That is not true. My people use the word benc as a curse. My people have very fixed ideas. I have talked to Hillmen. Benc help the Hillmen to herd the deer

on the High Moors. My people do not trust the Hillmen.

And do your people know you have talked to the Hillmen?

It matters not. I am the daughter and the sister, said Telis.

The boy is coming! said Eted suddenly from the driving seat. Immediately, the marquil scrambled out of Telis's hands and disappeared under the bedding. The boy Ruas rode round and took the reins of Telis's grey. He came alongside, shouting angrily.

Thank you, I must go, said Telis. Ios lifted the canopy and Telis clambered out and flung herself astride her horse. Ruas continued shouting at her. They rode forward towards the man, who had not looked round. They could hear still Ruas's angry monologue over the noise of the car. The three riders rode abreast for a while, the man in the middle; then Telis rode ahead at a canter and was soon far down the road. The man and the boy continued, at exactly the right pace for the car, without looking back. Soon Telis was out of sight.

How can we hide the marquil? asked Ios.

Let it go to this hills as soon as you can, said Rautte.

I agree, said Pileo. Some time when the dogs are not close. The marquil will be able to look after itself.

Ios said nothing.

By mid-afternoon they became aware of habitations, low turfed farmhouses on the grasslands scattered at some distance

from the cliffs. They passed the mouth of one of the deep valleys and Ios saw higher, smaller farmsteads nestling on the slopes. As the day wore on toward evening the farmsteads on the grasslands grew larger and closer together. Finally they rounded an outcrop of high rocky land and suddenly they were close to a cluster of buildings on the outskirts of a small town surrounded by tree-clad hills. People were working in the fields, mostly women with headscarves like Telis's and tucked-up long skirts. The riders stopped.

The boy Ruas approached and motioned for the canopy to be opened.

You stop leave wagon here, he said. You get house for sleep.

People began to approach, now mostly men.

Let the marquil go now, before it's too late, hissed Rautte.

There were dogs barking.

Go, my friend, like the wind, said Ios, opening the back hatch. The marquil made a leap and began running at a great pace towards the trees. A cry went up: *Benc! Amas benc!* Ios saw to her horror that the dogs were running to cut the fugitive off before it reached the trees. She had leapt out of the car after the marquil, and now stood motionless on the short grass. Yelping with excitement the dogs fell upon the marquil, tearing at the little body and tossing it between them. Ios gave a great cry of despair. In the confusion she saw for a moment Telis on her grey horse, racing towards the dogs. Ios fell on her hands

and knees, her head down, her palms on the grass, into the silence.



The man Sheug and the boy Ruas led them into the town followed by a crowd of townsfolk. There was angry talk behind them, and Ios heard the word *benc* several times. They came to an open square with larger buildings on either side, and lower buildings between them. The men reined in their horses in front of a low building, with barred windows.

You sleep here, said Ruas. It is house for strange people. You take things from wagon, and you lock wagon for thieves. Elders talk tomorrow.

We cannot lock our wagon, said Pileo. The boy seemed not to understand.

No keys, said Pileo.

The boy spoke to his father. I watch the wagon tonight, he said.



We.

The Mind reads its own movements. It rises into life, into awareness.

Mankind, when one of them speaks, says I.

We benc, we marquill, we see well, hear well and smell better. This one benc lives for many years with men, travels for many weary leagues with them in their car. It learns to hear their speech, easy enough for benc, and watching and smelling the one man Ios. This one benc learns to read and write, easy enough for benc. Hard for the elves of Qert, our sweet friends, hard for the singing birds of Water Eye, our sweet friends, easy enough for benc.

So this one benc writes as the Mind directs, using Evenspeech, using k2or, using Geordian, using whatever language used by the one man Ios, whom we love.

Ios the Mender.

This one benc sees its own death by dogs, smells it well. But in the same while it smells Ios the Mender starving Time, stiffening the dogs, and in the same while it smells the horseman Telis riding through the dogs and through Time and lifting this one benc up alive and riding to the trees, where the Mind waits in thankfulness. We benc.

This one benc brings us news of the people, of the car, of the Change, of the Danger. We arrange our thoughts and store our memories and manage our Time. We look to the Centres.



The house with the barred windows was surprisingly spacious and comfortable inside: it was clean and sparse, and

although they were anxious about their car the crew were delighted with the luxury of a clean soft bed for each of them. There was water, and they washed. Two young women brought roasted meat, fruit and boiled delf-nuts, and a dark potent ale, and kept their eyes down, and left without speaking. The crew sat at a heavy roughly-hewn table and ate the fruit and the nuts, but only Ested and Maro touched the ale, and no one the meat. The others drank water, wishing for the stove in their car, and the burnt coffee.

Then Telis crept in through the door.

Ios ran to her. What happened? she asked.

Your marquil ran into the trees, said Telis. It will be safe, it can travel high in the trees.

The dogs seemed to go off on the wrong scent, said Rautte.

I thought they had caught it, said Ested.

Telis saved it, on her grey, said Maro. The dogs stopped. I saw it twice. It happened twice. His red face was wide open. Ested took his hand.

They had the blood of the marquil in their teeth, said Pileo. She looked at Ios, and Ios looked at her.

There was blood on the grass, but it has gone, said Telis. The marquil was unharmed.



Sheug had been shaking with anger. You rode with the benc



to the forest, her said. The people are angry. They are angry with me, an Elder, for my daughter.

The benc are not vermin, said Telis, in a quiet voice. They are beautiful creatures.

The benc ride the deer until they fall to the ground. Then they drink their milk.

Nonsense, muttered Telis. The benc herd the deer, and lead then to the cliffweed. You know this, you know the Hillmen. Why do you repeat these untruths?

Sheug and Ruas were silent.

Forgive me, Father, said Telis.



Where are we? said Ios. What is this place?

This is Wedge. It is the only town in the Southern Reach. You are now in the Strangers' House. There will be no meeting with you yet, said Telis. The Elders will discuss me and the benc. Perhaps they will listen to me: I am the daughter. I shall tell them, the benc are not vermin.

This is a bad beginning, said Pileo. We should be talking of more important things than the marquill.

No, said Telis. Your fears of the Code are groundless. The benc are our concern now. They know the Mountain, they go to the top, where the Centre is, and they commune with other Centres, and other worlds. The Code is nothing to the Mountain.

The Hillmen have told me. They herd the deer, and the benc are their helpers.



Later as Telis made to leave, Ios walked with her out into the gathering dusk of the quite evening. There was no one about, and very few lights in windows.

Is it true? she asked in a low voice. The marquils herd the deer?

Your marquil is safe, said Telis. It will be sitting on a stag's head now, holding the antlers, its tummy full of warm milk. They speak the One Language, deer and marquil. Didn't you know?

The One Language, said Ios. What a lovely thought.

One mind, one language, said Telis. You know this. I saw what you did.

No, it was not me, Telis.

One mind, said Telis.



Three days passed, and still there was no council. They were free to come and go, but never felt welcome outside the house. There were hundreds of the townsfolk out in the fields making hay, which seemed to be the main crop of the summer. They

were not allowed back to their car: four stout men with pitchforks waved them away. Telis did not return, and Ruas came once to inform them that the council had been delayed, the Elders were all busy haymaking in the good weather. They would be informed. Sheug did not appear.

The same meal appeared early in the morning and in the evening. The two young women who brought it would say nothing. On the second day they cleaned the house and changed the bedding. Pileo thanked them, but they gave no response, their features expressionless.

The inactivity chafed. Ios kept away from the others, taking her seat only beside Pileo at the table. Rautte spent a lot of time out of the house, apparently walking about the town, coming back to scribble in a loose-leafed book he kept in his pack, showing nobody. Maro and Ested played cards. Pileo stared stonily out of the window, reading occasionally in a book from her pack.

At the end of the third day Rautte came into the house banging the door behind him. Everyone looked up.

The car is gone, he said.

Pileo sprang up and made for the door. Her way was barred by three men who had followed Rautte home. They pushed Pileo back and came in, looking wordlessly around as if to check that the foreigners were all in the house. Satisfied, they nodded to each other and backed out into the street. Ios and the others

heard them bolt the door on the outside before making off, talking in low voices.

It's not much of a door, said Ios. We could break out.

We stay here, said Pileo. This is their call.



No women came with food that evening. There was delf left from the morning, and enough water. They sat silently at the table or lay on the beds, waiting.

Around the middle of the evening the three men returned, now each carrying a stout staff—like a staff of office, thought Ios. Two of them stood each side of the door and the third took a step forward and knocked his staff on the wooden floor. He spoke several sentences. Then he turned and strode out through the door. The other two followed, and they heard the bolts being thrown again.

What was all that about? said Maro.

They said the Council will begin tomorrow, said Rautte. They will come and fetch us.

They looked at Rautte in surprise. You understood them? asked Pileo.

I've been walking around, said Rautte apologetically. I've picked things up.

He caught Ios's eye, blank with surprise. She looked quickly away.



The Council met at Prime. Only I and the sister were called. No public were present.

The Seven were seated in their semicircle. Aristas, who was the Elder of the Northern Reach, presided as Eldest. He was already an old man at that time. Our father Sheug sat with the other Elders.

Aristas addressed me formally: Ruas, Horseman of the High Lady. You were the first to see the prisoners?

The first face to face, Aristas. But we had all seen the fire they made before on the Upper Drays.

What of the fire?

They were burning oil, or so it seemed. We saw a great plume of smoke the day before from the Ridge of the Drays, too far away to see clearly.

Telis, daughter and sister, you saw this?

I saw this as Ruas says, Aristas.

You did not follow Ruas to meet the prisoners?

We feared they were horse-thieves. I took the horses across the Flete with the brothers.

*You* took the horses? The sister?

Ruas told me so to do.

Good, said Aristas.—And you, Ruas, rode forward to meet them?

Yes, Aristas.

What of your meeting?

We could speak little together. I ascertained they were neither horse-thieves nor missionaries. I ordered them to follow me into the Domain.

You did not see the benc?

I saw no benc, and my horse was not aware.

So it could be there was no benc with them at that time?

I cannot tell, Aristas.

Aristas turned to Sheug. You rode out to meet them?

Diras met them on the road and sent word to us.

Then I spoke out of turn, regretting it instantly: Diras will confirm that the prisoners drove their car into a good pan of young delf, killing many hundreds of seedlings. It seems they had did so unintentionally, and they expressed regret.

Unintentional damage is not redeemed by regret alone.

As I told them, Aristas, but I fear they did not understand.

There was a silence.

There was no benc, you say. And later there was benc. Had they found benc on the road, so far from the Mountain?

I cannot tell, Aristas.

Aristas turned again to Sheug. You took the daughter with you when you rode out to meet them?

She speaks their tongue well, Aristas.

The old man looked closely at my sister.

How is this, girl?

Tuls taught me well, Aristas.

Tuls knew many things, said Aristas.

There was another short silence.

You saw the benc, girl?

Telis did not hesitate, and I was afraid for her.

I entered the car to talk to the newcomers, said Telis. It was my duty to ascertain their intentions. I saw the benc.

You did not tell your father and your brother?

Telis spoke the same words that she had spoken to me and Father. She spoke without fear or hesitation. The benc are not vermin, Aristas. They are beautiful creatures, worthy of our respect.

Be silent, girl! said Father, but softly, not angrily.

I will not be silent, said Telis. I am the daughter and the sister. The Council will hear my words.

There was a long silence, while the elders looked intently at her. Father's face was expressionless.

That is what the Hillmen say, said Aristas.

It is the truth, Aristas, said Telis.

After another pause, Aristas turned to Father.

I have said before, Sheug. Your acquaintance with the Hillmen is not to your credit. And now you have allowed them to pollute the daughter's mind.

Father replied in a low voice: The Hillmen mean us no ill,

Aristas.

The other Elders murmured in indignation.

And you say this? An Elder?

As an Elder I say it, said Father, his voice low, but firm.

Perhaps we should listen to the daughter.

Telis kept her eyes down. But Aristas spat at her: You rode with the benc to the woods! You warded off the dogs!

She is the daughter! said Father, loud and clear.

And I added in a small uncertain voice: She is the sister.

There was a long silence. Too long.

Then Aristas said: You shall not sit with us, Sheug, at the Council, when we question the men of Tanquish.



The three men—guards, as they now thought of them—returned late in the morning, and marched Pileo and her crew through the throng of people that had gathered outside the door of the large building on the other side of the square. They were led in to what appeared to be a large courtroom, with a raised dais supporting a long high table with seven empty chairs, heavy and ornate. Upon the table by each chair stood a carved wooden beaker. The hall was full of townsfolk sitting on benches facing the dais. The guards motioned the prisoners towards two empty benches arranged diagonally across the corner of the room to the right of the dais. To one side of the



benches, on a small stool, sat Telis, with her hands in her lap. She did not look up.

They took their places on the benches, facing the public. Sheug was sitting on the front row of the public benches, surrounded by self-important gentlemen wearing gold and silver chains of office. Men of all ages, some youngsters, occupied the public benches. Ios saw no women among them.

There was silence, broken by subdued coughing. The men of the town stared at the prisoners. Telis kept her head down.

Several minutes passed. Then a door opened behind the dais and an old woman appeared wearing a headscarf and an apron over long heavy skirts which concealed her feet. She carried a large jug in her hands. The men rose to their feet as the woman appeared, and Pileo and her crew did the same. Muttering to herself, the old woman placed the jug at the end of the high table and hobbled over to a low stool in the opposite corner to the prisoners, where she sat down with obvious difficulty. Everyone sat down again. A heavy silence settled over the men in the hall. Ios had the feeling that everyone was listening to the mutterings of the old woman.

Finally the door opened again and the old woman rose painfully to her feet. Everyone rose. Six Elders filed in and took their places at the dais, leaving one chair empty. The old woman hobbled round behind the Elders, filling the beakers one by one from the heavy jug, including the beaker by the

empty chair. Then she made her painful way back to her stool in the corner and sat again, and the people in the hall sat with her.

After a pause the Elder in the middle began to speak. Telis moved her stool closer to the crew and translated in low voice, and what she said seemed much shorter than the long sentences of the Elder.

The Eldest opens the case against the travellers from Tanquish, said Telis.

The Eldest spoke on. He was interrupted by a man in the hall who stood suddenly and asked a question in a loud voice. Sheug stood up and turned to the public benches and spoke a few words before sitting. There were murmurs in the hall. Telis translated:

He asks why Sheug is not in his seat. Sheug replies that he has decided to stay on the public benches. The public is not pleased.

The Eldest spoke, and Telis translated in a low voice. There are three charges against the prisoners. On the first, they caused grave damage to the grasslands by burning a great fire in the Upper Drays. On the second, they caused extensive damage by driving their wagon across a nursery of delf seedlings. On the third, they gave shelter to benc in their wagon.

One of the Elders spoke a few words to the Eldest, who raised his eyebrows, looked round at his colleagues, nodded, and made a further pronouncement. Telis translated: You have

since removed and hidden your wagon. This is also an offense. We await your defense.

The crew looked at each other. Without consultation, they knew who would speak for them. This was what Pileo had come for, and what she had been trained for. She stood up and cleared her throat.

She made no formal show of politeness or deference, but spoke in as neutral a tone as she could, knowing that her culture was so different from that of Mountain people that body language could be misunderstood. She spoke evenly and slowly, choosing her words carefully. She paused at the end of every sentence and Telis translated in a loud, clear voice. This time her sentences were at least as long as Pileo's.

We are thankful and honoured to be allowed to address this noble assembly. We come in friendship and peace, with important messages to you from our leaders in Tanquish. We are sincerely sorry for the damage we have caused by our great ignorance, and will redeem it to the best of our ability. But we saw nothing of any fire, and certainly would have no cause for burning anything. This is not our matter.

As for the benc: the animal has travelled with us in our car for many weeks, ever since we left Tanquish. It has been the companion of one of our crew (indicating Ios) for many years. Had we known that benc were unwelcome here in the Domain

we would have left it in Tanquish. We profoundly regret any discomfort this mistake has caused, and wish to settle these matters as best we can.

As to our car: we assumed that you had removed it. We wish for it to be found and returned to us immediately.

It is important that we put these charges behind us, for they are hindering the matters we must discuss with you, matters which concern the well-being and safety of both our peoples. Please tell us how we can make amends for these mistakes so that we can initiate a discussion on more important issues.

Pileo sat down slowly. Telis concluded her translation and took her seat again.

The Elders consulted each other in low voices. They had been sipping from their beakers and sharing glances with each other during Pileo's address, and now the old woman hobbled again to her feet and went around filling them from her jug. The Eldest raised his voice and directed a question to the prisoners. Telis translated:

Can one of the men corroborate the woman's story?

Maro and Rautte looked at each other. Maro rose uncertainly to his feet.

Pileo speaks for all of us, your worship, he said. Telis translated.

Why do you have a woman as your speaker?

Pileo speaks best, said Maro.

The Elders raised their eyebrows. There was laughter in the public benches, and some jeering. Maro sat down, perplexed. But Ios was on her feet, eyes blazing.

Why do you laugh, Men of the Mountain? How is it that there are no women amongst you in this room? Except for an ancient charlady to see to your thirst, and a young woman to translate because none of you can? Are there only males in your town? What iniquity is this?

Idiot! hissed Pileo to Ios, pulling her down onto the bench. The Elders looked at Telis. She sat still, her head down.

The Eldest spat an order at her.

Telis sat with her hands in her lap. She translated in a low voice. There was uproar in the hall.

The Eldest stood up, and spoke with emphasis. Telis translated mournfully:

The High Lady is no servant. You insult her, and her Council, and her Elders.

The old woman was sitting again in her corner, her face a mask of anxiety. Still standing, the Eldest raised his hands to the public, demanding silence, which fell immediately—and now a low moaning could be heard from the old woman. The Elder closest to her, a young man, reached out and took her roughly by the shoulder, hissing a few words. She fell silent.

The Eldest remained standing. After a significant pause he turned to Pileo and her crew and fixed them with his gaze. He

raised his voice and intoned two or three short sentences at them.

Telis was given no time to translate. The three guards approached the prisoners and motioned for them to rise. Maro and Rautte were frog-marched out of the hall, and the women followed, through the hissing crowd outside and across the square to their quarters. Maro and Rautte were thrust one after the other in through the door, and then the guards stood aside to allow the women to enter. The door was again bolted.

They stood dazed around the table, not looking at each other.

Halfwit! hissed Pileo. Damn! Damn!

Ios's face was rigid. She stared out of the window at the crowd in the square, unable to speak. Rautte said softly: The old woman was terrified.

They are beasts, said Ested. What on earth are we here for? They're no better than the Code. I say we break out, find the car and take off.

We have to find the car first, said Maro. If they haven't burnt out the candle.—And if they don't come and slit our throats first.

They're not all like that, said Rautte.

There was a silence.

What do you know of it, said Pileo, still angry.

I've talked to men in the town, said Rautte. Sheug is from this town, and the people like him. They say he is not to be blamed for the mistakes of his daughter.

And Eus, the Horseman of the High Lady? Ios spat out the words.

Ruas? They speak well of Ruas.

He orders his sister about like a servant.

They all do, said Rautte. It's their culture. But Telis doesn't let it bother her.

You're soft on Telis, said Ios.

You're soft on Pileo, said Rautte.

Ios flew at him. They fell to the floor, pummelling each other. The others stood and watched. After a while Pileo said: OK, that's enough.

Ios hauled herself off Rautte and stood up, brushing the dust of the floor off her overalls. She was laughing. So was Rautte.

You should do that more often, said Rautte.



I sat at the back of the Hall with the other fifteen Horsemen of the Lady, four from each farthing, wearing our capes and feathered caps. For us it is always a solemn occasion when the High Lady appears with the Amphora, and everyone stands; and the Elders file into the Hall and take their seats. It chafed

that my father was not among them, and in my heart I blessed the High Lady for overlooking his empty seat and filling his cup with the ceremonial ale. And thus it was that my heart skipped a beat when Tahras stood up and asked why my father was not on the dais. There was an angry murmur in the hall when my father gave reply—It is my decision, he said, that the South Reach will not be represented at this meeting.— For the people mistrusted Aristas and saw that they had been belittled; although everyone knew that it was proper that Sheug should not judge the action of the daughter in giving life to the benc. But the South Reach is the smallest, and the only reach to have only one Elder. And so annoyance had already crept into the hall, for most people in the public benches were from our town, and it rankled not to have our only Elder on the dais. Thus when Aristas named the charges against Ruis and her people, which were indeed grave charges, there was no great indignation from the public benches. The Southern Reach is alone among the Reaches of the Mountain to have deep valleys stretching up towards the High Moors, and we have sheep-farms high above the plains. Our men climb high into the foothills to gather the sheep every year, and it is no secret that we have had commerce with the Hillmen, even trading with them for roandeer. Of course we do not tolerate benc on our lands, for we know they kill lambs and drink the ewes' milk; but we also know that the Hillmen revere the benc and trust them



with the deer. For us, Telis's actions in turning the dogs from the benc is not the same abomination as it is for Aristas and the rest of the Domain: it is youthful folly only, and Telis is a daughter and a sister, my sister, and no common dairymaid.

And then Ruis stood and said her piece. Her passion moved me although I did not understand her words; but then I was already smitten by her alien beauty, and her fearlessness stirred my heart; it was not until Telis translated that I saw her unreason. And even so, not all the public were as shocked as the Elders on the dais. The High Lady is a Northerner, and they are the harshest with their women.

After the foreigners had been taken out and back to the Strangers' House, Tahras stood up again and addressed my father, and a hush fell on the public benches.

Sheug, said Tahras, is this to be tolerated? The foreigners say they have important matters concerning our safe-being. There have been rumours of fires up in the Drays. We know the men of Tanquish have fallen to the Code, and that terrible changes are occurring throughout the lands of Har. We have heard it said that airships of the Code have been seen over the Upper Plains below the Eastern Mountains: we do not want them here. The foreign woman seems to be no daughter and no sister and no wife, and yet in my judgement she spoke well. I should have wished for you to consult with these people, Sheug, even if the Westerners and the Northerners and the Easterners

and the High Lady Herself find it below their dignity to do so.

He sat down, and Sheug rose to answer. But Aristas's grating voice spoke over him:

Who is this self-appointed spokesman for the South Reach? he said in a withering tone. So you Southerners think, because you sport in the sun and look to the south that you are closer to Tanquish than the rest of us? Or that because you wear roanskin (Tahras was indeed clad in roanskin) and scramble up in the mountain after your bleating sheep that you know more of the Code than the rest of the Domain? Would you rather listen to the ramblings of a female refugee from Tanquish than the wisdom of the Elders? Perhaps you would be happy to receive more female refugees from the Haric lands? Are you not satisfied with your own women?

Several men were now on their feet. Of course Canokas began shouting: The women in the South are the finest wives and daughters in the Domain! How dare you speak disrespectfully of what is ours? Sheug, get back on the dais and show these countrymen how to mind their manners in our town!

There was uproar in the Hall. People were angrily waving their fists at each other and we Horsemen in the back row looked along the line to Teuk, our captain from the West Farthing. He gave us a nod and we moved up the left-hand side of the Hall to take our stand in front of the High Lady and her Elders, should it come to a scuffle. Thus it was that I came to

stand close to my father who was in the front row; he caught my eye and said Stay close to me Ruas. I could not see Telis; I assumed she had left with the prisoners. A column of Aristas's guards had entered at the main door, their pikes lowered. Our townsfolk moved back, but they were enraged that this should happen in our hall and the shouting increased. The Elders began pushing out of the door that led into the Vestuary behind the dais, and the High Lady stood aside for them to pass before following them with the Amphora. Fighting had already broken out among the benches, and crowds of out-towners were pushing in through the main doors at the back.

Come, said my father suddenly. Of course I obeyed, although I was deserting my post. We ran for the horses. I knew my father was going to ride for Wintergate.

We must find Telis! I shouted as we ran.

Telis will come at her own pace, said my father.



For the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening the square was thronged with manfolk. There was a good deal of shouting and some scuffling, but no one seemed to have much interest in the prisoners. The Hall now seemed to be occupied by guardsmen, and the crowd was focused at the main door, alternately chanting or listening noisily to various speakers. There were as usual no women visible. Pileo and her crew

watched through the barred windows. At one point the guards in the Hall sallied out with pikes levelled at the crowd, which initially dispersed but later returned to taunt and harangue. Eventually the crowd thinned, and towards evening the square was empty and the main doors of the Hall closed. As the dusk set in there were no lights in the square. No food arrived.



At around mid-evening there was talking outside the door. Then the bolts were drawn and a guard entered, ushering Telis in. He bowed his head briefly as she passed him and said a few words to her; they seemed to know and respect each other. Then he turned on his heel and went out, bolting the door behind him. They heard voices and footsteps receding outside. Ios stepped forward, took Telis's hands and drew her to the table.

Telis, tell us what's happening, said Pileo.

There has been fighting up behind the Bow Stone, said Telis. Aristas's men have killed two townsmen, Canokas and my kinsman Falan. Then the brothers charged them and drove them back. Now people are keeping indoors.

Why were they fighting? said Pileo.

There has been tension before between the Southern Reach and the Northerners. Aristas is not liked, and making my father stand down at the council was taken very badly.

And where is Sheug? asked Pileo.

He and Ruas have ridden, said Telis, —probably to Wintergate.

Wintergate?

My father's home village, at the mouth of the Winter Dales. It is second home to Ruas and me.

You came to tell us this?

I have been found guilty of keeping benc and of commerce with foreigners, said Telis. I am held under arrest with you.

What is this with the marquill? said Ios. Why do you people hate them so much?

Telis hesitated. It's not hate, she said. It's fear. Benc are part of our children's stories. They're used to scare children with: Be good, or benc will take you up the Mountain. That's what they say in the North and East. They say benc are evil. We in the South don't say this, and I don't think they do in the West either. But we believe benc are vermin that live with the Hillmen. We are wary of them. There are stories that they speak with other beings.

The marquill never spoke, said Ios.

Are you sure? said Telis.

Other beings where? said Pileo.

They speak with the elves of the Qert, and the singing birds of Water Eye.

You know of the elves? said Pileo.

You are Pileo, is that right? I know the stories, and of your name, and Yrre and Reagh. There was an alien man called Tuls who lived with us—he taught me much. And the Hillmen have many stories. Benc pass on their knowledge to the Hillmen.

You talk with these Hillmen? And yet you fear the marquil?

I do not fear your marquil. I was talking of the men of the Domain. But here in the South Reach we know the Mountain better than the rest of the Domain. We have farms up in the valleys, and when we gather the sheep in the autumn we go high into the hills, even up onto the Moor, and we speak with the Hillmen, who love benc and respect them. But many mistrust the Hillmen. They are not like us.

Shh! said Ested suddenly. There's someone at the door!

They sat quiet at the table, listening. Slowly and gently they heard the bolts being pulled. But the door remained shut.

They stood quietly and faced the door. Ios moved softly to the door. Rautte followed. Ios stood for a moment with her hand on the door handle and Rautte stood ready opposite her. Rautte nodded to her and Ios yanked the door open.

Three marquils stood on the step, looking up at the humans.



Telis gave a stifled shriek and took a step backwards. Ios put down her hand and the marquil in the middle ran up her arm and sat on her shoulder. The other two remained staring at

the humans.

Come in! said Ios joyfully. Come in! You are welcome, my friends.

But the marquils did not come in. Instead they motioned urgently to the humans to follow them, and turned away from the house.

The square was dark and silent. Rautte and Ios looked out uncertainly. What do they want? asked Rautte.

Follow them and see, said Pileo. Wait, I'll come with you.

The marquils scuttled down the side of the square and disappeared into a narrow side street. Then their faces reappeared, as if to say Follow us. Rautte and Pileo ran after them.



And then Rautte was racing back to the house. He stood in the doorway, wide-eyed. Pileo says take all our things and follow us, as quickly and quietly as you can as you can, he said.

Wordlessly, and wonderingly, they stuffed the few belongings they had taken with them into the packs and crept out after Rautte. They rounded the corner and stopped dead in their tracks. Their car stood there waiting, with Pileo already in the driving seat, and what looked like four or five marquil milling round her.

Get it, quick, she hissed. Telis, take the front seat with me.

Everyone aboard. Show me the quickest way to your father, Telis. The motor will wake everyone—we'll have to make a run for it. Everyone ready?

She flipped the ignition as they clambered aboard. Nothing seemed to happen. Damn, she said. It's dead.

No, wait, said Ested. There's light on the dials. Look Pileo, you're already running at two hundred!

There was hardly a murmur from the motor.

Reagh, said Pileo. She preened the cushion and the car rose effortlessly to waist-height and began to glide forward.

Someone's changed the candle for us, said Maro. Sounds like new!

Which way, Telis? said Pileo.

Straight across the Square and up right, said Telis. The car swept forward.



The night sky was clear and the bright spark of Tungal shone in the Span, but there were no lights in the dark streets and Pileo dared not use the headlights. Telis guided her through the upper parts of the silent town and soon they had left the houses behind, following a dark road up into the trees. You'll have to put the lights on, said Maro. You can't drive like this.

The five marquill were clambering all around Pileo, excited and hissing. Suddenly Ios saw what they wanted. Pileo, she said.



Let them drive!

Pileo stopped the car and looked at Ios in amazement.

Let them at least try, said Ios. They see well in the dark.

Pileo looked around at the others. I can't go on like this, she said. But I don't want to use the lights.

Try it, said Estd.

Telis moved to the back and Pileo moved over into the second driver's seat, ready to take control whenever needed. Two marquil stood on the driver's seat with their hands on the sticks, and two others sat underneath at the pedals. The car rose again and sped forward along the winding track between the trees. Telis let out a high squeak. Maro slapped his thigh. Ios had her hand over her mouth, but the marquil on her shoulder gazed fixedly ahead. The thought struck her that it was the marquil on her shoulder who was doing the driving, while the others were the operators. The car sped on through the dark trees.



My father had renovated the old farmhouse at Lye on the hillside above Wintergate, the house he had been born in. We reached it after seven hours' hard riding, and my father soon had a good fire burning in the hearth and the kettle singing, while I watered, fed and rubbed down the exhausted horses in the stable. I was still anxious about the sister, but my father was

dismissive. The daughter knows how to look after herself, he said. He rummaged about for skins and bedding and prepared to settle down in front of the fire.

Early the next morning the sister's grey clattered riderless into the yard. I went out to calm her and lead her to the other horses. She was jittery, but happy to see the others.

My father still said nothing.

Since our grandparents had died the old farmhouse had been empty, but we had always lived there part of the summer and the villagers from Wintergate looked after the house for us, in return for using the land for grazing and haymaking. For the sister and me, the old house at Lye was our real home, and we had grown up in the kitchens of our childhood friends in the village. Our horses were Wintergate horses, and the grey had done no more than make her way home. But her nervous state made me wonder how she had parted from the sister.

The sun had sank below the West Ridge and dusk was falling when I heard the battered old wagon of the travellers roaring and coughing up the valley and setting all the dogs barking in the village. The sister had clambered out even before the wagon set down in the yard. She ran to me and threw her arms around my neck.

We're all here, she cried. Ruas, the benc drove the car in the dark.

Father said nothing when Telis came in with the foreigners

and the benc. He stood by the fire as if stunned as the benc arranged themselves by his feet, facing the fire. At last he seemed to pull himself together. Telis, he said, see if there's any food for our guests in the pantry.

There was dried delf and a flagon of old wine left from the autumn before, which father and I had opened during the day. The foreigners sat round the table with the sister, eating hungrily.

I looked to my father. He seemed to have made up his mind.

Telis, he said. Tell the foreigners we will speak together with the villagers tomorrow.

He turned to look at me. Ruas and I will go down to the village and spend the night with Caral, he said. We will come up and fetch you when the villagers are ready.

I knew that he did not want to sleep in the house with benc. Neither did I.



The sky was a great cloud of small birds, dropping and wheeling over the hillside above Lye. Below, in the valley, the village of Winter Gate nestled in the darkling trees, also thick with chattering birds preparing to roost.

Autumn is coming, said Telis. The birds are preparing to fly back to the northern summer at Water Eye. They roost in the woods above Wedge Town during our summer, and feed out on

the tide sands. If you climb up above Lye you can see the sands on a fine day. And Telis shuddered.

What's wrong? asked Ios.

The sands are terrible to those who cannot fly. Come on up to the farm.

Pileo, Ested and Maro took their bedding from the car and Telis showed them up to Ruas's old room under the eaves. Then they sat round the table by the fire and thankfully munched the dried delf that Telis had found for them

Later, Ios, Rautte and Telis sat round the fire, waiting for the snoring to start upstairs.

The marquil drove, said Telis.

I think it was my marquil that drove, said Ios. It seemed to control the others.

No they don't work like that, said Telis. They have one mind. They all drove. Perhaps your marquil saw better from your shoulder, but it was not one marquil seeing. They always say We, never I.

Ios looked at her. They don't speak, she said.

Don't they? said Telis.

The marquil stretched up from Ios's lap and put five fingers on her shoulder, pressing its mouth against her ear. Ios heard, so softly that she was not even sure she was hearing, a tiny voice, as if from far away. It said: *benc*.

It said Benc, she said.

That's what they say, said Telis.

Is that all they say? said Ios, puzzled.

The marquill seemed agitated. It looked up at Ios and this time she saw its mouth moving, and clearly saying *Benc*, although she heard nothing.

It said it again, said Ios.

That must be why the townsmen call them benc, said Rautte, Ios turned a withering gaze on him. Brilliant, she said.

No, I mean, if they call them benc it must be because they knew that's what they said, said Rautte.

So?

So they've listened to them talking, said Rautte.

Ios said nothing. Telis said: The name is ancient. Our records have always talked of benc.

Perhaps there was a time when men and benc were on good terms, said Rautte.

The Hillmen have always been on good terms with benc, said Telis. They call them belinc.

Ios looked at the marquill. Talk to me again, she said. The marquill stood up and whispered again in Ios's ear: *benc*.

Or did it say *belinc*? The sound was so soft. It was hardly a sound. Was it perhaps not a sound?

Perhaps, when we speak, the marquill think we always say the same thing, said Rautte. Perhaps they have a different conception of hearing and talking.

No, the marquill understands everything we say, said Ios.  
Don't you?

The marquill blinked.

Perhaps *benc* is the carrier signal, said Rautte.

The what?

The channel, said Rautte. It's how they say *benc* that makes the meaning.

It always sounds the same, said Telis.

Maybe they modulate the signal in too subtle a way for us to hear the difference, said Rautte.

Or too fast, said Telis.

That's it! said Rautte. We'll record the marquill and play it back slowly.

How do we do that? said Ios.

We've got the pads.

Rautte! said Ios aghast. The pads are locked up and shielded!

Rautte raised his eyebrows. Aren't we in the Old Time? he said.

What is this with Old Time? asked Telis.

Ios was urgent: It's only their synchros that don't work in the Old Time, Rautte. They can't pinpoint us, but if we open the pads they'll know where we are. They're out there somewhere.

Who? said Telis.

The Code, said Ios. The Change is New Time, said Ios. They

can re-synchronise. Resequence.

Not only the Code, said Rautte. You do that too, Ios.

There was a long silence. Ios was motionless, stared rigidly into the fire. There were tears in her eyes. No one spoke.

At last Ios said: You don't know.

Rautte said: We all know, Ios. We know what happened at Ariel.

No you don't, said Ios before she could stop herself.

They were checking our old Carhault permit inside the checkpoint. Then they came out with guns levelled. Pileo took off faster than I've ever seen. They were firing at us.

Ios was shaking. You don't know, she repeated. You don't know. Teod told me you don't know. Teod said: Don't show them before they are ready. You are not ready.

How will you know when we are ready, asked Rautte gently.

Pileo had come downstairs. Let her alone, Rautte, she said. Ios will know when we are ready.

Telis had taken Ios's hand. You are safe on the Mountain, she said.

Come up and sleep, Rautte, said Pileo. Leave them alone.



The marquil were woven together again, sleeping in the farthest corner from the fire. Ios and Telis stared into the dying embers.

Tell me, said Telis. What happened?

Ios said nothing.

Tell me about your childhood, said Telis.

Terror, said Ios. And want. And later slavery.

How, slavery?

Sex slavery. Until I was rescued by Carhault, and I became a Paulian. And then Pileo rescued me from Carhault. And now I am a Marian. This is why we are here. To help you fight the Code.

We do not need to fight the Code, said Telis, smiling. They cannot reach us.

The Change is drifting closer, said Ios. We felt it when we came out into the Old Time, on the upper sands.

The upper grasslands? said Telis. Where we saw the fire?

There will be more fire, closer, said Ios. It was terrible how I messed things up in the town. Now Pileo must talk to the villagers. Perhaps they will listen.

Perhaps, said Telis.



Ios, said Telis. Do you like my brother Ruas?

I like nobody, said Ios.

I know. But if you did like anybody, would you like Ruas?

If I liked anybody, I would probably like everybody, said Ios.

He asked me to speak to you, said Telis.



Why does he not speak himself?

I am the sister. He talks to me.

I think he speaks through you because he guesses the answer, Said Ios. I like nobody.

Can I tell him you would like him if he you liked anybody? asked Telis, smiling.

Ios did not return the smile. Telis waited.

I might like him as a friend, said Ios after a long pause. I like you as a friend.

That answer means no, said Telis. Shall I tell him?

There was another pause.

Wait, said Ios. There are two things.

Two?

One is that I cannot talk to him through you. This is a strange relationship, this man and woman thing with you people of the Domain. You must know what I mean.

You are like the Hillmen, said Telis. Your women are not owned.

The women of the Domain are owned? said Ios, with an edge to her voice.

The women of the men of the Domain, said Telis. This is our identity.

I would not be happy with such an identity.

You do not seem to be happy with your identity, said Telis.

How can you be happy with yours? said Ios. Your father and

your brother treat you appallingly.

It might seem so to you, said Telis.

There was another silence.

You said two things? said Telis.

Ios took a long time to reply.

I do not want a relationship, said Ios. Not like that. I don't like sex.

You are afraid? You have had bad experiences?

Yes, but that is not the reason. I was like that before. My body doesn't want sex.

And your mind?

My mind leaves my body when things get bad, said Ios. The marquill on her shoulder turned to look at her. She saw its mouth form the word: benc.



Sheug and Ruas came up from the village at noon. They spoke to Telis, and she translated for the crew:

The villagers will speak with Rautte and Maro, she said. They have nothing to say to the women.

The crew stared at each other in disbelief. This is hopeless, said Pileo. Teod should have known. It was useless to send me.

Then Sheug spoke, in a rough, forced voice. Telis interpreted: We will go to the Hillmen. They will speak with you.



They stowed their packs in the car. The marquil took their places in the driving seat, with Maro as the second driver. Sheug and Ruas followed on the horses, leading the grey with them. Telis sat by Ios in the car.

My father said benc mended your car, said Telis.

I would believe anything, said Pileo.

I want to see that candle, said Maro. It drives like new.

Can the benc renew candles? said Ested.

They can drive, said Rautte.

But where would they get a new candle from? said Ested.

Ask them, said Pileo.

I know what they would say, said Rautte.



They were cruising gently off-road, cutting across the hillside above the farmhouse, moving out around the mountain. Gradually the grasslands came into view, stretching wide in every direction but rising in the west toward the far cliff wall of the High Moors. The view was magnificent.

They are taking us by their road, said Telis. I have been here once before, with the Hillmen. Usually we take the old sheep road up the floor of Wintergate Dale and round the Horn of Eris

up onto the Moor.

Rautte was looking out over the grasslands. How far is it to the sea? he asked.

A league at high tide, said Telis. Three at low. The tide comes in over the sands twice each Span.

The sea goes out two leagues? said Ios, aghast.

It comes in faster than a horse runs, said Telis.

How terrible, said Ios.

And Telis looked away.



And the marquill swivelled its ears, hissing softly.

## 10

You must be patient, old friend, said the Paulian Izza  
(Guerlec) Isqad.

I am patient, said Teod. I am a Gleaner.

We will allow you to visit your Elves, all in good time.

It's not good enough, said Teod, banging his stick on the  
ground beside his chair. This is Tanquish in Har, not Carhault.  
What's wrong with you Comptroller people?

Things will be normal again, I promise.

Normal? The Elves need us, Izza. We have not tended them  
since this absurd embargo or whatever you call it. Where is  
Pileo?

I assure you, said Izza (Guerlec), I wish I knew.

You should speak to those Bases of yours, Comptroller Izza  
Isquad. Tell them what's going on here in Tanquish.

They don't listen to me, you know that, said Izza.

*Izza (Guerlec) Isqad to his Holiness Naguad sef Sodt:*

*My darling.*

This is my report of my latest meeting with High Priest  
Teod.

The heathen Gleaners are restless, and although they are

by no means aware of the Regeneration Program, they show increasing ill feeling against the travel restrictions. The High Priest is uncooperative, claiming no knowledge of the renegade hovercar team in the North West. We have on the other hand confirmation that at least three members of the team were connected to the Marian driver Yrre who was active in the First Geordian Episode in the time of your late lamented father Seguad. My information is that other members of the team include an apostate Paulian woman working for Teod and a young Tanquish man said to have immigrated from the East.

My failure in this matter is unfortunate. However as long as my true association with Carhault is unknown to the High Priest, I must cultivate his friendship. His standing in Tanquish provides me with a valueable channel to the Council. I must therefore tread softly. If I learn anything, my darling, you will be the first to know.



By mid-afternoon the car was crawling high on the slope, edging closer to the cliffs above which rose up into cloud. The valley of Wintergate had disappeared behind the shoulder of the hill. The slope was becoming steeper, and the marquis were canting the cushion far to the right to keep the car more or less level. The crew were getting anxious.

We can't put down on a slope this steep, said Maro. We'd

never get up again. I hope these animals know what they're doing.

But the slope did not last. As they came up to the cliffs they found a narrow ledge of level ground running along their base, allowing the car to right itself. The three marquil set the car down on the short grass at the base of the cliff and turned off the motor. They scrambled out of the car and bounded off along the cliff, soon disappearing around the shoulder of the mountain, leaving Ios's marquil on her shoulder. Ios looked at it. It seemed to mouth the word *benc* to her. Or was it *belinc*?

Coffee? said Maro.



The two horsemen came up. They had dismounted and were leading the horses up the final slope to the base of the cliff. The humans drank coffee and sat at the foot of the cliff, gazing over the far grasslands, facing now a little east of south.

There was more fire, said Ruas.

Where? said Pileo. Show me.

Ruas spoke to his sister, and she translated: Just above the ridge where we met you. The same fire and smoke that we saw before you came, but now closer.

Ruas pointed. Not see now, he said.

Pileo trained her glasses to where he pointed. When was this? she said.

Mid-morning, said Telis.

That was what the marquill saw, said Rautte.

No, said Ios, The marquill moved its head as it watched. It saw movement.



The three marquills came scampering back, and it seemed to Ios that they were chattering happily amongst themselves, although they made no sound and their lips were not moving. It was as if they were communicating with their eyes.

The marquills climbed aboard the car and took up their driving positions, as if waiting for the humans. Ios's marquill remained on her shoulder.

Better do as we're told, said Rautte. They climbed aboard, and Sheug and Ruas mounted their horses to follow. The car set off at a gentle pace. It had to navigate one or two rocky patches, but on the whole it was as if there was a fairly level road of grass running along the base of the cliff, always ascending but never steeply. The mountainside curved away continually to the left, until they found they were heading almost due north. Finally the road seemed to widen out and a large cleft appeared in the cliff wall. They headed for a large but shallow recess in the cliff wall at the other side of the cleft, almost a cave. The marquill drove the car gently into the recess and set it down on the gravel floor. Then they piled out of the car and motioned for the



humans to follow.

Sheug, Ruas and Telis seemed to know where they were. They left the horses by the car and set out immediately up a narrow path which led into the cleft. The marquill motioned for the crew to follow them.

Do we go the rest of the way on foot? called Pileo.

Come on, said Telis. Leave all your stuff in the car.

Where are we going? called Pileo.

Come on, said Telis impatiently.

They trudged in single file up the path. Ios's marquill was still on her shoulder, but the other marquills remained behind, watching them as they climbed out of sight.



The path hugged the side of the cleft, weaving back and forth and climbing steeply. No one was particularly scared of heights, and the path was broad enough for them to march fairly steadily upwards without handholds, but they were careful not to look down. Presently they were into a thick mist which clung to the sides of the cleft and brought a cold drizzle with it. Maro and Ested were beginning to tire when the path widened out to allow everyone to sit and draw breath.

We should have brought our packs, said Pileo.

No no, said Telis simply.

After a brief pause they set out again, Sheug leading, and marched for a good time until they came to another resting place. And again they set out, and two more resting places followed. Finally the path began to level out and the mist cleared. The final climb was in warm sunshine, up a grassy slope. In spite of the sun the air was cooler. Below them the mist rolled out into the void.

As they cleared the last slope they saw two figures standing beside horses, apparently waiting for them. They climbed up to meet them, a wide vista of rolling moorland coming into view under clear skies, while far above the high mountain rose into the distance, its sides streaked with snow.

As they came up towards the figures Pileo suddenly gasped. Look, she said, pointing out to the rim of the cliffs. Settled on a small patch of level gravel was the car, with the three Wintergate horses standing beside it. The humans stood wide-eyed.

How on earth did that happen? said Pileo.

Sheug and his son and daughter were shaking with laughter and so were the two waiting figures. They were tall, heavy people, man and woman, clad alike in heavy skin tunics and breeches, with large furry caps on their heads. The woman spoke in Evenspeech, with a thick rolling accent.

Welcome to the hills, Sheug Ruas and Telis, and welcome to your friends. How do you like our little joke?

How did you do that? said Pileo.

We have no idea, said the man. He put his hands together on his breast and bowed his head slightly. My name is Lankar, man to Hersili.

My name is Hersili, woman to Lankar, said the woman, doing the same. We speak for the Moor and its People, and wish you a good sojourn with us. Please take your wagon and follow us to our tents.

But how did the car get up here? said Rautte, still in amazement. And the horses?

It is a good joke, is it not? said Hersili. Ask the belinc. I have no idea how they do it, either.



But the marquill were nowhere to be seen. Only Ios's marquill remained; and now it hopped down from Ios's shoulder and clambered up Lankar's skins and sat up on his fur cap, gazing intently out over the moor. Sheug whistled, and the three Wintergate horses trotted over towards them. Pileo and her crew made their way over the hummocky grassland to their car, but this time Telis stayed with her father and brother. They mounted all five, and made off at a swift pace into the rolling moorland. The marquill leapt from Lankar's fur cap at the last moment, and bounded lightly over the uneven ground in the wake of Ios. Pileo started the car and preened the cushion to

breast height in order to drive comfortably over the tufts and hummocks of green-brown vegetation with deep wind-blown runnels of bare soil between them. The five horsemen threaded the hummocks with amazing speed, riding in one tight knot and laughing together as they rode.

These are good people, said Ested. We can talk with them.

We shall see, said Pileo.



The day was waning as they set off across the moors, and after some time the light began to fade and Pileo throttled back as she saw less and less. We need the marquils to drive, joked Rautte. Where are they?

And what are they? said Ested. They drive cars, mend cars, and carry cars up cliff walls—and we never guessed, Ios, all this time you crewed with us with your marquil on your shoulder. Do you know?

No, said Ios. I knew it understood everything I said, and more than that. But no more than that.

I had never seen a marquil until you brought it, said Ested. Where did you get it?

It found me out, said Ios. Remember when I first came to the Lodge?

I remember how you looked when Pileo first brought you in, said Ested. You were a sight to behold.

It was that autumn, said Ios. I was down by the harbour in Tanquish watching the fishing boats come in. Suddenly it was standing beside me. I supposed it must have come on one of the freighters. It climbed up on my shoulder and has stayed there more or less ever since. She looked at the marquil who looked back at her and blinked. But its ears were swivelled to Ested.

I think it was the marquil who cured you, said Ested. It slept on your pillow.

I think so too, said Ios.

Suddenly they were driving through a huge herd of roandeer. The riders had slowed down and the two Hillmen were calling out in high whooping voices, so that the deer parted to let them through. As they came out of the throng Ios saw that the herd was rimmed by stags with huge antlers, and in the poor light it seemed to her that some of the stags had small animals riding on their antlers. Look, she said. Marquil. Telis was right!

Telis always seems to be right, said Pileo. Isn't that so, Rautte?

Why ask me? said Rautte. Ested chuckled.



As the dusk thickened they came at last over a ridge to see a large encampment of circular tents laid out below them, all

looking rather like large versions of the cap on Lankar's head, with oil lamps burning in the spaces between them. There were many people moving round between the tents, and children playing. A cry went up as Lankar and the horsemen appeared on the ridge, and as the car appeared the children started running up the ridge towards them. Lankar yelled at them and waved his fist, but it didn't seem to deter them. Pileo edged the car gently down the slope with a crowd of children milling round them and trying to climb onto the running-boards. Soon she gave up and settled the car down on the grass, with the crew leaning out of the canopy to shepherd the children clear.

Lankar came riding back to them, still shouting ineffectually at the children. He leant down from his horse and addressed them over the top of the canopy:

Perhaps you should leave your wagon here outside the camp, he shouted. There's not a lot of room among the tents. Bring what you need for the night, we'll find room for you somewhere.

We can't leave the car unattended, said Pileo.

Try the lock, said Ested. Perhaps the marquils have mended that. too.

The lock was operative. The clicks sounded throughout the car.

That's not worked since Ariel, said Maro.

Where did he learn Evenspeech like that? said Rautte as

they made their way by foot after the hulky figure of Lankar on his horse. He's as good as Telis.



Hersili and Lankar's tent was a little larger than the tents around it, but there was little room inside—it seemed the whole encampment wanted to look at the strangers. Lankar was trying to say something above the general hubbub but no one was listening—until Hersili stood up and began speaking. Eventually all the talking stopped. Hersili spoke for some time in a rolling, sonorous language before switching suddenly to Evenspeech:

... impolite of me to speak so long in Three, she said. Many of us understand Evenspeech, thanks to Tuls. I was saying that you are welcome from the Outside, we see so few strangers here. Sheug has told us you have many tidings to tell us and we look forward to hearing them, but not tonight, for now we will eat and drink together before we find places for you to bed. Our tents are well filled with families, but we can find room for you here and there, especially if you will share. Are you well paired?

The crew looked at each other, wondering what Hersili meant.

Which of you sleep together? said Hersili.

Ested put her arm round Maro's shoulder. We do, she said.

Ios shot a glance at Pileo. Pileo smiled and nodded. Ios and

I can be together, said. Pileo.

That leaves the boy, said Hersili. Telis?

Rautte can share with me, said Telis.

And Sheug and his son will stay with Lankar and me. Good.  
We can find places here and there. But now we eat, tomorrow  
we talk.

There was a fire in a circle of stones in the centre of the tent,  
with a decorated iron funnel hanging over it and a pipe leading  
up out through the top of the tent. On the fire sat a huge boiling  
cauldron, and people began fishing out hunks of meat with  
large knives, cutting them up and passing them round. Ios was  
feeling sick.

Lankar was quick to notice. The strangers eat little meat, he  
called. I should have known that. We have berries and  
bloodroots—

I can fetch delf from the car, said Ios, stepping over  
children towards the flap of the tent, and reaching blindly for  
the night air.

Rautte, called Pileo. See she's OK.

I go, said Ruas, scrambling for the door.



There was a far red, blinking light moving rapidly over the  
horizon to the north. Ruis stood still at the edge of the  
encampment, watching it. The benc stood upright beside her.



I called: Ruis!

She said: Quiet. Still.

What is it? I asked.

The blinking light dropped below the horizon. She turned to look at me.

What are you doing here? she said.

I came to help, I said.

Ruas, I need no help. You saw the light?

What was it?

It was a hardwing (I think she said) of the Code. They are coming closer to the Mountain. Tomorrow you must tell the Hillmen that you saw it with me.

Ruis ...

Go in. I am all right, she said.



The warplanes are about, said Ios. Ruas and I saw them.

Are you sure? said Pileo. Then we must spin out the tent. If they are close enough to spot the car the Hillmen will be in danger. Come.

They walked fast up the incline to the car

Thank you for sharing with me tonight, said Ios.

We are good companions, said Pileo.

Will Telis be OK with Rautte?

You misunderstand Rautte, said Pileo. And Telis can look

after herself.



The newcomers all reassembled in Hersili's tent around mid-morning the next day. Lankar stood outside keeping children and villagers away. Hersili will tell everything this afternoon, he told them.

Inside the tent were Hersili and six other men and women, two young adults and the others middle-aged, sitting on mats. We are the Speakers of the camp, said Hersili. We will talk together and afterwards I shall report to the others. You slept well?

Lankar came in and laced shut the flap of the tent. One of the men handed out mugs and they were filled with hot water with grey-brown weed floating in it. It was bitter, but refreshing.

We slept well, said Pileo. Thank you for your hospitality.

Now we wish to hear from you about the Outside, said Hersili. Our news from the Outside all comes to us from belinc. It is refreshing to hear from humans. Belinc do not see things as we do.

You speak with the benc—with the belinc? said Rautte. They only say *benc*.

They say *blinc*, said one of the women. But the speech does not come from one at a time. Each *blinc* is spoken by many. We do not understand their speech.

But you say you receive news from them? said Pileo.

When there are enough of them, they can talk to us silently, said the woman. I am a Reader. My name is Ceneri. Several of us can read much of from the eyes of many belinc together.

And how do they gather news from the Outside? said Pileo.

The speak with the birds of Water Eye, who travel far and see many things, and with the elves of Qert, who speak with the seals and know what goes on in the seas. This is why we know of you, Pileo of the Elves. They miss you.

I miss them so much, said Pileo. The others looked at her. Pileo whom the elves had suckled.

They say too that they sent one belinc to you, Ios. I see it is still with you.

It cured me in Tanquish, said Ios, when my mind was sick.

When your body and your brain were sick, said Hersili. Your mind cannot be sick. There is only one Mind.

So Telis says, said Ios.

But how do they speak with the elves and the birds? asked Rautte.

You have much to learn, said Hersili smiling, and there will be time for this. But now you should be giving us information. We have learnt a little from Sheug, who gave us a report of the Council in Wedge Town. I am surprised they allowed you into the Council, Pileo, let alone allowed you to speak. They are afraid of women. That is why they are afraid of us up here on

Three. Our language does not make this distinction.

What do you mean? asked Ios.

She means there are no different gender-words, said Rautte. They do not say *he* and *she*. They hve one word for both.

Rautte is perceptive, said Hersili.

You ask and ask, said Ceneri. Now you should tell.

Forgive us, said Pileo. She paused to collect her thoughts. This was very different from speaking with the men of the Domain.

We come from Tanquish, she said. Tanquish is under the control of the Code, who are initiating terrible changes throughout Har.

This is what the Code calls Regeneration? said Ceneri. You know about this?

We have heard from belinc, but we do not understand.

The Code has achieved some control over short time-sequences, said Pileo, which means that they have had some success in reworking events which they consider undesirable. This involves some amount of control over men's minds. They were very successful in Tanquish, but have not had the same success up here in the North West.

Belinc have different ideas about this, said Ceneri. They do not live in the same time as us. But they have told us that the Gleaners of Tanquish have stopped visiting the elves.

The Code bans all movement from Tanquish, said Pileo.

Some of us escaped. We have been in flight from the Code for almost a cycle, all over Har, and now we have come to you in the North-West, where we find the Code has not yet penetrated. But their program of Regeneration, which we call the Change, is clearly drifting closer. We fear the warplanes of the Code are appearing in your skies. Ios tells us she saw lights from a warplane in the distance last night.

I saw too, said Ruas. And the one benc.

We have seen these skyriders, said Hersili. They are searching for something. They fly as if blind, and keep clear of the Mountain.

They are searching for us, said Pileo. They can only navigate safely within the Change, because their synchros give false readings in the Old Time. But to be safe we have spun out our tent over the car, so they cannot find us us.

Spun out a tent?

We camouflage the car, said Pileo. It cannot be detected.

With a tent?

We call it a tent, said Pileo, but it is not like your tents.

Which reminds me, said Hersili. We are putting up a small tent for you to be together. There was some confusion last night.

Maro woke everybody every time he went out to pee, said Ested.

So does Lankar, said Hersili. But enough of this. You come here to warn us of danger?

We have also come to ally ourselves with you, and ask for your support. And for the support of the men of the Domain. And to understand why the Change cannot penetrate to the Mountain.

The men of the Domain will not act until they experience the danger at first hand, said Hersili. You can forget them until the worst happens. We hope it will not happen. As for the Mountain, we cannot say what this Change is, nor why the Mountain resists it.

We will speak with belinc, said Ceneri. They are wiser than we, although it is difficult to understand them. They will know much of these things through your belinc, who has been with you in Tanquish.

How can we speak with the belinc? asked Pileo.

It is an art, said Ceneri. Some of us can speak with belinc. But perhaps they will talk of these things. Or that we will understand if they do.

So, are we getting anywhere? said Ested.

Yes, said Hersili, I think you are. You must be patient.



Hersili sat with them that evening in the tent that had been raised for them. Telis stayed with them, but Sheug and Ruas had found friends to stay with in the camp. It had grown colder, and there was an iron stove burning in the centre of the tent

with a pipe to take the smoke up through the roof.

You must tell me more of this Change, she said.

The Gleaners of Tanquish say the Change brings with it a virus which affects the minds of men, began Pileo.

Brains of men, said Hersili. Bodies of men, where the Mind works.

As you wish, said Pileo.

Rautte said: Teod has told me that just as language propagates among people's minds, so it can carry viruses. It is a metaphor from the old digital computer technologies, and I am not sure it is a good metaphor. Teod speculated that because k2or, the Gleaners' language, is a phase-language, it is particularly prone to the virus. I cannot see that this is right. He assumes language is an organised entity that can be polluted.

And why do you find that wrong? asked Ceneri.

Teod teaches that language resides in the brain, said Rautte. I do not know whether he thinks of the brain as being polluted, or language being polluted as a separate entity from the brain.

Many teach that the brain and the mind are one, said Hersili.

Aren't they? said Rautte and Telis, almost together.

No, said Hersili. Not only are they different, but they move in different worlds. The mind creates, the brain enables. Your Teod's mistake may have been that he saw the brain as a digital machine, and language as a digital code. People used to

visualise language as a code, that can be affected by viruses.

We think with our brains, said Rautte.

You don't, said Ios. You think with your testicles.

Very funny said Rautte.

Not funny said Telis.

The mind makes good use of the brain, said Ceneri. But the brain only mediates. It cannot perceive the mind.

The mind is one, said Rautte.

Ios looked at him in astonishment. Who told you that? she said.

You did, said Rautte. Don't you remember?

As if we ever talked, said Ios.

Come come, said Hersili. At any rate we need not worry about viruses. Three is not a phase language, and belinc do not have language.



The tent was warm. The five benc lay woven together by the door flap, one hand out in the snow.

Rautte was speaking. It's what Hellem calls the lottery of collective action. That's the sceptical view, the kunical. There are two constructive views. The first sees it as trending towards cooperation; the other assumes competition. Both assumptions are speculative and quite unscientific, although the competitive assumption usually pretends to be scientific, and the



cooperative does too, sometimes.

For me, the competitive assumption is essentially nihilistic, even worse than Hellem says. It leads to instability and strife. It is the bottom-up assumption, the old reductive fallacy. The cooperative assumption is top-down, and tends towards institution and complexity, and to religion. I am an optimist.

I like you, Rautte, said Ested.

I lean towards Reagh, said Pileo.

There you go, said Rautte.

Ios said nothing. She snuggled against Pileo. Telis put her hand into Rautte's.

Coffee? said Maro.



Later that evening Rautte and Telis walked together up to the car and crept in under the tent. We need to record the marquil, said Rautte. I want to see the wave-form of its *benc*.

Do you have a recorder? asked Telis.

I would use a pad, said Rautte. They are kept in a screened box in the back of the car. Pileo is afraid that if we activate a pad the Code will be able to pinpoint us.

What are these pads?

Communication devices and general calculators. You can record and take photos with them.

We would have to persuade the marquil to speak to the pad,

said Telis. That might be difficult. Ios would have to help.

Ios does what Pileo says, said Rautte.

Ruas is soft on Ios, said Telis.

That's his problem, said Rautte.

Rautte's mind was still on the marquils. I bet they live inside the mountain, he said.

Benc? That's what the Hillmen say, said Telis. But no one has ever seen them come out, or go in.

Perhaps if they let us into the Mountain, said Rautte, we could run a pad and record them, and the Code would not hear.

Come up into the car with me, said Telis.



We benc: time and place.

We benc.

We are now, and we are here; but the human mind puzzles itself as to the when and where of benc.

For the when, the human mind has local time. Benc have a richer time, which the human mind does not perceive. Thus they see us come and go.

The human mind experiences its time as true time. But we do not experience our time as true. We know there is a greater time, which we do not perceive.

For the where, the Hillmen say we live within Three Mountain. This is not utterly incorrect, and it is realistic to

envisage the Centre as within the Mountain, but it would be closer to the truth to say that we benc live in the Centre, and that when we leave the Centre we stand on the surface of Three Mountain.

Perhaps in the languages of men the Centre could be called the Inner Place.

But not only the surface of Three Mountain. When we leave the Inner Place we may also be on other surfaces. Both Qert and Water Eye are also portals between the Inner Place and the Outer Places.

Not that we benc need portals to move between.



The next day was windy and cold, and Maro and Ested stayed in the tent. Sheug and Ruas did not appear, and Telis had disappeared. Ios and Pileo and Rautte walked around the encampment, and were everywhere well taken by the people. Rautte tried to speak their language with them, and they were delighted with his attempts. And he tried to engage in a children's game with sticks and a ball, and the children laughed at him until they could not stand. Ios left them, and found her way out of the camp, crossing a small stream that ran into a gulley below the camp. The marquil trotted beside her, and kept looking up into her face, blinking. So you want to run? said Ios. And she thought as she said it: How did I know that? Am I

reading the marquill?

She took off at a trot. The marquill kept pace with her, still looking up and running, and she understood again. She stopped and slipped off her shoes, but did not take off her overalls: Not here, she told the marquill, not so close to the people. They ran up onto an expanse of gently inclining grassland where the stream wound and chattered. They ran for a long time.

Later they returned to where the stream ran close to the camp, and sat perspiring and warm in the cold air on the bank of the stream. People came to draw water, and smiled to her and tried out a few words of Evenspeech. Some of them came up and addressed the marquill in their own language, and Ios thought she heard the same formula, a low and reverential sentence, almost a prayer, ending on the repeated words *belinc*, *belinc*. The marquill blinked at them.

They sat for some time. Ios began to feel the cold wind, and there were few people about. Suddenly the marquill hissed. Looking up, she saw Sheug standing on the other side of the stream, staring at them. She met his gaze, and as she did so his face twisted in hatred and disgust. And Ios saw the mindless flame in his eyes, and she knew it from the days of her captivity. He turned abruptly and strode back towards the tents.

She was trembling. She looked at the marquill, who was still hissing softly. It ran up to her shoulder and put its mouth to her ear, and Ios heard: *benc*.



They made their way back to their tent, the marquil on her shoulder, and the few people still outside smiled at her and bowed to the marquil.

The others had arrived back at the tent, and Maro was brewing coffee. Ruas was with them. Ios laced up the tent door against the cold and Rautte began stoking the stove with firewood.

As they sat and talked, there was a movement at the door. It was being unlaced from the outside. A tent door cannot be knocked at.

A young face looked in through the flap. Good, you have a fire, it said. May I come in?

Come in and be welcome, said Pileo.

You will have coffee? said Maro.

Yes thank you, said the face, unlacing the rest of the door and coming in. My name is Dokei. My grandmother Hersili sent me to see if I could be of assistance. She said I could show you our places.

Ested held out both her hands from the stool where she was sitting. Welcome Dokei, she said. And thank you. My name is Ested. Sit and drink coffee with us. But tell me, are you a boy or a girl? For I am uncertain.

It is no mystery, said Dokei with a wide grin. I am neither.

Only in your Evenspeech are you uncertain, for you have to say either he or she. This is also in the language of Wedge. Your languages demand gender, and this chains your thoughts. In my language there is no He and no She.

Then welcome again, She-he, said Ested. You will have to teach us your language.

That is a very good idea, said Dokei. Our Ruas here, who writes down everything that happens, he is stuck in the language of Wedge. What do you write of me, Ruas?

I write He, said Ruas defensively. In my language He has no gender. Only She has gender.

That is a strange misbalance, said Dokei.

Ruas's brows were knitted. There is no lack of strangeness here up on the Moors, he said. We have no people like you in Wedge Town.

Oh yes you do, said Dokei softly.



They sat on the skins by the fire and introduced themselves to Dokei, who pronounced their names carefully and correctly.

Your coffee is good, said Dokei. And you are burning logs. This is a rare treat. The Moors are treeless. We burn turf. And in the winter we dress well, under the snow.

Lankar brought us logs to burn, said Pileo.

Belinc bring us logs for our guests, and for festivities, said

Dokei. I think they gather them in the forests of Water Eye.

Water Eye is many thousands of leagues away, said Pileo.

Belinc can travel, said Dokei. You must speak with them.

I thought it was only Ceneri and her colleagues who can speak with them, said Telis.

Speak or not speak, said Dokei. They talk to us all if only we would listen.

They only say *benc*, said Rautte.

They say *blinc*, said Dokei, with a twinkle in her eye.

And can you understand their meaning? asked Rautte eagerly.

You have first to learn that when one belinc speaks, all belinc are speaking. They have one voice. No, I cannot understand their meaning. But when the north wind blows, and Tungal rides the clouds, and the roandeer stand close around us on the high moor to keep us warm, then we can feel much of their meaning.

Will you take us out on the moor to see the roan? said Maro.

Ios looked at him in surprise. He was usually silent in company.

Of course we can: tomorrow, if you wish.

Maybe then we can speak with the benc, said Rautte.

You will have to learn to be a Hillman first, said Dokei.

I should like that, said Rautte. And learn your language, so I can say things about you.



The next morning Ested and Pileo chose to rest in their tent. Thus only Telis on her grey, and Maro, Rautte and Ios on borrowed horses, followed Dokei in the mid-morning sun up the incline out of the camp. The three crew members were not experienced horsemen, and Dokei kept a slow pace for their benefit. Ios reminded herself that it was Maro who had suggested the expedition, but still she was surprised to see him taking part. Even more surprisingly, her marquil had chosen to ride with him, sitting in front of him on the mane of his horse, and Maro clearly took this as a mark of favour.

For the first hour they made their way diagonally up one gentle slope after another, until at last they came over the top of a ridge and beheld the great stretch of high moorland before them, dropping gently towards the foothills of the far mountain. The view that met them took their breath away: enormous herds of roandeer, thousands upon thousands, were grazing the grasses and mosses as far as the eye could see. They seemed to be gathered in separate herds of two to three hundred animals each. The females stood at chest-height to a man, but the antlered stags, most of who seemed to be patrolling on the outskirts of the herds, stood higher. They could see no marquil among them, but Ios's marquil had stood up on the horse's neck in front of Maro and was surveying the herds intently.



Dokei led the party gently down to the nearest group of animals. They are not shy of us, she said. Your belinc must be talking to them.

And as the horses moved into the herd the marquill suddenly leapt onto the back of one of the stags and ran nimbly up onto its head to sit between the antlers. The stag nosed its way into the throng of animals, and Dokei and the other horses followed.

There are calves, said Ios excitedly. They are so beautiful!

The roan are beautiful animals, said Dokei. Come and speak with them.

Dokei dismounted among the does, patting them, but they were uneasy and backed away. Until the marquill came running across their backs and up onto the head of one of the larger does, holding on to her ears. Dokei took her head in her hands and pressed her face against the animal's muzzle.

Maro had also dismounted, and stood as if dazed. The marquill, who was jumping between the animals, steered a doe towards him: she gave a quick snort, as if with fear, but then seemed to calm herself and laid her head on his shoulder. Maro laid his arms over her neck and his cheek against hers. The man and the roan stood together in communion. Ios saw that Maro's eyes were streaming with tears.

You have spoken with roan before, I see, said Dokei.

No, said Maro. But I am a Gleaner. These animals remind

me of the elves: fear, curiosity, and finally acceptance. They speak to me of the elves of Qert. It is three years since I was at Qert. I wish I were at Qert now.

They stood for a long time together. The other animals began pressing around, nuzzling the humans, seeking contact. They made low rumbling sounds in their throats. The horses stood quiet amongst the animals. There was warmth and peace in the press.

Suddenly the marquill stood upright on a deer's head, hissing, its eyes searching. There was an uneasy movement among the animals, their heads tossing, nostrils flared.

Down everybody! shouted Ios suddenly. Hide!

She had seen the black dot of a warplane racing along the skyline. It banked, and came in towards them, silently, leaving its roar and whine behind it. It shot over them at a low altitude, and its hideous noise followed. There was panic amongst the animals, and the humans struggled to keep their feet in the press. Then the herd split and stampeded away on both sides as if cloven in two by the warplane. The humans were left battling with the reins of their rearing horses. The marquill was gone. And Maro was lying on the ground, his jacket torn and his body twisted, and his face battered and bleeding. He did not move.



They tended him as best they could, warming him with

their cloaks but fearing to move him. He was breathing laboriously and moaning. Rautte had ridden off almost immediately to fetch help from the camp, but Dokei stood silently watching Maro with narrowed eyes.

Telis, said Ios, ride like the wind after Rautte. You'll be much quicker.

No need, said Dokei. They know already. They will be on their way.

Rautt was not a third of the way to the camp before he met Lankar and a party of Hillmen, men and women, riding hard towards him.

Belinc sent us word, shouted Lankar. Rautte turned and rode in their wake back towards injured man.

The Hillmen had two long poles with a stretcher laced between them, which they attached to the saddle straps of two horses, fore and aft. Maro moaned as four Hillmen lifted him with infinite care onto the stretcher. One of the women produced a flask and made him drink. He was wrapped carefully in thick, woven cloth, and the party set off at a steady pace towards the encampment. Ios walked beside the stretcher, talking to him, telling him what was happening, and that he would soon be in safe hands, but he did not respond. Now and then his lips moved, but no sound came.

It was a skyship, said Dokei to Lankar.

Belinc told us, and we saw it, said Lankar. It came high over

the camp. But it did not know where it was. It headed out west towards the sea. If it does not find its bearings it will perish there.

Ios thought: How did he know it was lost?

There will come more, said Lankar.



Maro suddenly stretched out his hand to Ios. They had been moving for over an hour.

Pileo, said Maro.

It's Ios, said Ios, taking his hand.

Ios is a good girl. She will go with you. The elves are calling you. I heard then. They need us, Pileo. Take Ios with you to Qert.

Then a little later he said: If we die, Pileo, it will be the second time.

And then he said: Ested.



Mother! Light returns.

Creep closer, children.

Reagh's Span is a long thread of colour falling low over the north-western horizon. The sun rolls below the mountains in the east.

But otherwise the east is empty. The mother's body smells the open skies: there are no little people coming. This will be the third spring that our Pileo has not come to us.

Once it was that we feared the little people. And then the Wanderers came, and Pileo lost her fear of the elves, and we lost our fear of Pileo; and for many years it was our greatest joy in the spring when the copes come with their fish, and the little people came with their precious medicine; and we gave our milk gladly to copes and gleaners, and our Pileo walked with our children, and slept with us under the stars, before the war came among the little people, before Pileo went north to fight for her freedom, and our greatest joy was gone. But the birds of Water Eye have told us that benc have sent one who watches Pileo for us. Perhaps they will bring her back to us some day

And this day we heard Pileo's companion, the old man, calling us in pain. So we fear for him, as we fear for Pileo, for when there is war among the little people then they die even faster than we, the elves.

Now the spring is upon us, and the birds have flown, and we await the copes with their fish. But our sickness grows.

## 11

Westward from the camp, over the ridge beyond the stream, was the stone-walled garden of flowers and low shrubs, where the Hillmen laid their summer-dead. There were hundreds of barrows in the garden, large and small, which children could climb over and hide behind, and pick flowers and make adventures: with stones they made roads and houses and corrals for their wooden roandeer and bone horses, and there were few mounds not so decorated. The Hillmen had taken a shallow grave for Maro, ready for the mound to be built upon him, and the children helped to find stones to arrange carefully around him. The Hillmen had straightened his twisted body, washed him and clad him in a white robe, and mended his face so that he looked peaceful. They built up the stones around him and over him to give his mind space and freedom to roam, and to seek the One Mind. They sang softly, and spoke words to him; then they began to arrange the mound of sods over him, while the children helped and hindered.

Ested and Hersili sat together on a small mound and watched, their arms around each other. Ested said little, but Ios heard her talk to Hersili: This is a good place for Maro to rest.

The Hillmen took the best part of the morning arranging the sods of turf in wedge-like formations over the mound. Pileo,

Ios, Rautte and Telis stood together, all but Ios weeping openly. Ios's grief was not in her head, not in her eyes. The marquil sat on her shoulder, blinking. Ruas stood apart, watching mournfully.

Later they gathered in Hersili and Lankar's tent to tell stories of Maro. Pileo recounted the old expedition to the Qert, when she and Heleui, Ested, Manhra and the two Maros had introduced Yrre to the elves, and Reagh had left them, and the elves had suckled Pileo. Maro loved Reagh fervently, she said. He and Yrre were on bad terms for a time.

How do you mean, said Telis: Reagh left you?

Reagh is a name that fares widely, said Pileo. The elves call their Mother Reagh. Our Reagh is the god of peace and love. She lived with us for many cycles in Reagh's Lodge on Tanquish Laer. She left us while we were on that trip, and went back to the skies. She took Yrre with her.

Yrre who joined Roinje the Geordian? asked Telis.

Yes, said Pileo. That is my friend Yrre.

He was on the trip with you? And he left with Reagh the god?

It's a long story, said Pileo. I'm not sure how it all happened.

In Wedge Town they say that Yrre and his woman Roinje will come back to us, said Telis.

His woman Roinje? said Pileo smiling. Yes, maybe they will.

And there were two Maros?

My Maro neis, said Ested, and the other Maro, whom the

Code destroyed; and now the Code has destroyed them both.



Where is Sheug? asked Pileo suddenly.

Two men rode up from Wintergate, said Lankar. There is strange news from the valleys. They are talking in my tent.



Caras and Obès had ridden up from Wintergate while the accident occurred and my father was busy with them during Maro's burial. When I returned to Lankar's tent they were making ready to ride down into the valleys. The Code, they said, was approaching Wedge Town, and the Horsemen were gathering in defence.

My father ordered me to stay with the Hillmen, and to watch the outsiders. He had formed the idea that Ruis was a spy of the Code. I, Ruas, knew of course that this was not so. I knew from the beginning that Ruis would become one of us, that I should become Eldest after my father, and that she would become High Lady of the Domain. In many ways I was right, although these things came about so differently from my hopes.

I begged my father to let me ride with him: I was a Horseman of the High Lady, I said. I would not shirk my duty.

That is true, he said at last. You will come with us. But you



must be ready to supervise the women and children if the enemy approaches Wedge Town: they will flee to Wintergate, and from there if necessary to the High Moors: you will be their ambassador with the Hillmen.

We rode hard home to Lye by the old sheep-road round the Horn of Eris. From there we took a party of stout Wintergate men down to Wedge Town. Aristas had fled, and my father was acclaimed as Eldest. The West and East Reaches supported him, and we knew that in time the North would also.

The skyships of the Code could still not approach the Mountain, but the Change, as Ruis had said, was creeping closer. In Wedge Town, the Old Time was still in force, and it was as if the pilots of the skyships were blind as they came in over the town. But we could see the forces of the Code arranged out on the grasslands, biding their time. They had taken the grassland farms and burnt them. We could see the fires, but no survivors came to the town.

Wedge Town was swollen with reinforcements from the East and West, and soon we heard the North was also rallying. We were confident. We did not have the war technology of the Code, but we knew the soldiers of the Code were mostly Paulians, and terrified of us men of the Domain. While the Old Time held sway we reasoned their technology could not touch us, and that we could defeat them.

The women and children of Wedge were sent up into the

valleys, and I was to organise their flight up to the High Moors if necessary. My father was also anxious that I return and keep my eyes on the Outsiders, and especially Ruis. As I had eyes for no one but Ruis, I was torn between following his orders and remaining at my post as Horseman of the High Lady. He was too occupied to notice my decision to remain.



Ested, said Hersili. You will stay with us.

I should like that, said Ested.

Come, said Hersili. I must talk with your friends.

And so Hersili sat again in the tent with Pileo and the others, warming themselves by the fire.

Summer is leaving us, my friends, said Hersili In a few days we shall be moving the encampment. We travel to our winter grounds.

You move further down the Mountain when winter comes? asked Rautte.

No, further up, into the snows. If we stay here too long we will have to endure long weeks of rain upon snow, frost and thaw—wretched weather. But soon winter will be upon the High Moors, under the tops of Three Mountain. The Hillmen flee the wet and the wind and move their tents up into the winter to be together under the snow. Those are our winter grounds. The great winter storms rage over our heads, while we lay in our

tents under the snow with the roan and tell stories, and there are long weeks of still weather and deep frost when we can walk on the high snow and watch the stars. We love our summer grounds; this is our summer village. There are many such villages. But we are all together during the winter. Will you come with us, and talk with other Hillmen?

You show us great hospitality, said Pileo.

The Hillmen welcome guests, said Hersili. Guests have new stories and new blood.



The next day Ceneri came to find Ios. Come to the talking tent, she said. Come with the one belinc that follows you. We will teach you to listen to them.

And if I cannot learn? said Ios.

We see that your time is richer than most people's, said Ceneri. That is why the one belinc stays with you. You understand more of what it says than you know.

Of what it says? said Ios. And she quoted Hersili: When one belinc speaks, they all speak.

Exactly, said Ceneri. You are almost there.



Inside the Talking Tent were a older man and woman who

greeted Ios and said their names. Ceneri says you need to hear the belinc.

I think she is right, said Ios.

They sat round a small peat fire in a circle of stones in the centre of the tent under its iron funnel and pipe leading up out through the top of the tent. The marquil sat on Ios's shoulder, its wide eyes looking at the fire.

It would be easier to be out on the moor among the roan, said Ceneri. But the skyship scattered them, and belinc are gathering them elsewhere. They do not say why, and this is strange. This tent is where we come to hear of the roan, and learn where they are grazing. Without belinc, we would not be able to tend the roan.

Tend? said Ios. You slaughter them—that is not tending.

You do not eat meat, said the old man. We respect people such as you. Belinc do not eat meat, although they drink roan milk. But we Hillmen on the Moors, we have no delf like the Men of the Domain. We eat moorgrass and cliffweed for our health, but the meat and the fat of the roan is necessary for our strength and our warmth. We could not live our lives on the moors without the roan.

Roan-meat limits your thoughts, said Ios.

Some of us also say this, said Ceneri. You must learn to ride, Ios; you need to understand horses. They are also our connection with the Mountain.

Telis has been teaching me, said Ios. And Dokei.

We have discussed the problem of meat with belinc, said Ceneri, but they say things we do not understand. Perhaps that is our limitation. Perhaps you will understand them better.

Do you speak with the belinc here in this tent? asked Ios.

Often. It is better to speak to them out on the Moors, with the roan. But this is the Talking Tent, where we can talk freely as if on the Moors. We come here to speak with belinc.

There is no belinc here but my marquil, said Ios.

There is only one voice, said the marquil.

With her ears, Ios heard: *benc*.

There is only one voice, said Ios softly to herself.



Long ago, said Ceneri, men talked, and made meaning for each other, and joined in response, but did not know they were talking. Just as we see, and we know what is seen, but we do not perceive the seeing, so they spoke but heard no language. They heard the One Voice and so knew the thoughts of the One Mind. But then they became aware, and felt their own lips moving, and attended to their own throats speaking and tongues rolling, and understood that they were making the sounds they were hearing. And they became self-aware, and learnt that within the One Voice, there were many distinct voices talking, and distinct lips and minds. And they began listening to the stories that had

been told from before they were aware, and they spoke them anew.

But we Hillmen try not to forget the time before awareness, and we often speak aloud with ourselves, with the One Voice. So do the old women of Wedge. They call it Talking to Oneself; but what is speech but a fragment of the All? Out on the moors among the roan we talk to ourselves and to the roan, and belinc hear us, and talk with us. The poets of Wedge call this soliloquy. We call it the One Voice. Here in the Talking Tent we come to talk in this way. That is how we hear belinc.



Ios looked the marquill in the eye. How long have you been talking to me? she asked.

The Voice has been talking to you since the beginning, when we found you in Tanquish, said the marquill.

Rautte said that the word *benc* was a channel-signal, modulated for meaning, said Ios.

That sounds interesting, said the marquill, but it is a side-issue. It is study for leisure times, and there is no leisure now on Huld for men and benc.



Then speak to me, said Ios. For I am afraid of what is still to

happen.

You are afraid of Sheug, said the marquil. He watches you. He fears you.

What does he fear?

You are putting knots in time, said the marquil. The Code knows you, and is following you. Sheug sees some of this.

Rautte also said I was like the Code! said Ios. But he is wrong!

Rautte who is dead? said the marquil.

He lives! He is with us!

He is with your comrades in the car. He is with this one benc. Do we still live, now Maro is gone?

Don't turn against me, marquil! You have seen these things. I do not do what the Code does: I save my friends. How can I do otherwise?

Perhaps there are those in the Code who also believe they are saving people, said the marquil.

Ios drew her breath in sharply. You are saying this? she said. You talk to me, marquil. You one marquil talk to me. Is this the voice of all benc?

The marquil looked at Ios. For the first time, Ios saw doubt in its eyes.



We benc, we talked with the one man Ios.

We said: Ios must unravel her time-thread before she can hear us clearly. She has many knots to undo. She travels with comrades already lost. One has now been lost a second time.

Ios ever turns her back to the Mountain and looks to the approach of the enemy. Ios must turn instead to the Mountain.

We benc ever say the same to the one man Ios: Climb the Mountain.



Ios caught Telis, and led her away from the camp. I need to talk, she said.

Then I shall listen, said Telis, taking her hand.

I have been speaking with benc, said Ios.

That is good. Will you teach me?

Telis, listen. The benc say it is me who is bringing the Change to the Mountain.

Telis released her hand, and they sat in the dry grass of the incline up from the encampment.

It is not—

Wait, said Telis. Be quiet.

Ios watched Telis's face. Finally Telis said: This is what is worrying Rautte. He says you are doing things we don't know about.

Ios saw again Rautte's blood on the windscreen.

When I saved the marquill from the dogs, said Telis, I did it



twice. Maro said so, and I feel it. The first time I failed.

Yes, said Ios.

And Rautte also? said Telis.

Yes, said Ios. And Pileo and Maro and Ested.

No me? said Telis.

Not yet.



*Pileo put the car down at the top of the pass, where they could see village of Ariel below them. A cluster of houses on the side of the mountain, and the red-painted checkpoint on the road that wound around the mountain. Below the road, the people working in the orchards.*

*We can't get through the checkpoint, said Maro neis.*

*We have Teod's papers, said Pileo. He said it was worth trying.*

*We should avoid them, said Rautte.*

*If we go off-road, said Pileo, they will pick us off immediately. We must go through the checkpoint. We must take our chance.*



*Pileo handed the papers out of the window to the guards. Gleaners, she said. On a trip to the West.*

*One of the guards took the papers into the blockhouse.*

*There was a group of women waiting the other side of the barrier. A woman began shouting. Three hours! she shouted. How long do we have to wait? We must get back to our children!*

*When we've cleared your papers, shouted the guard back. You know who we are, you bastards! You let us through this morning. We've got to get back!*

*Who are they? Rautte asked the guard.*

*Not your business, said the guard.*

*We've been working since morning in the orchards, shouted another woman. The children are coming home from school. You have no right to keep us!*

*Rautte put his head through the window. Why don't you let the women through? he said.*

*The guard fingered his gun. You want to go over and wait with them? he said. Ariel women, just your sort.*

*Pileo pulled Rautte in. Not our business, officer, she smiled.*

*The other guard was returning from the building, with two soldiers and an officer with him: an imposing female figure in the long cloak of the Code, her hair carefully braided up under her headpiece. Clearly a high-ranking Paulian. Pileo's heart sank.*

*A gleaning trip to the elves in the West? she said.*

*That's right, said Pileo. Routine surveillance.*

*So you hoped I was an ignorant soldier of the Code? said the officer with an malicious smile. There are no elves in the northern hemisphere, and none in the north-west. Want to go north-west, do you? Then I think we should first search your car. Everyone out.*

*Pileo hit the throttle and the car leapt forward at the barrier as the motor howled. There was no chance it would lift clear of the barrier, but Pileo rammed it at full throttle and the car tore through it.*

*Down everybody! she screamed. There was a rattle of artillery behind them. The car blasted its way over the heads of the screaming women, bucking as it found the road again and then tore down the grassway, its cushion crackling.*

*Hold tight, everyone, said Pileo. We'll make it.*

*The car careened through the village towards a curve at the far end, where they would be safe from the flying bullets.*

*And then there was blood everywhere, and Rautte fell across Ios's lap. The top of his head had gone. And time stood still.*

## 12

This is my account of what happened in Wedge Town.

The Northerners arrived, now under the elderhood of a man called Tegui of whom we had not heard before. They accepted my father as Eldest. The Easterners wanted to sally immediately out on the grasslands and engage with the Code, but my father said Wait.

And then the Change was upon them. A skyship came in low, and seemed in control; it rose and circled over the town, before returning to the south-east. My father gave immediate orders for evacuation: the townsfolk fled with whatever they could carry up the forest road towards Wintergate, leaving a hundred men to guard the town. The horsemen of all four Reaches drew up in formation outside the town, facing the Code. At mid-afternoon three skyships came in from the south east in close formation lifting their bellies and spitting fire as they roared passed over the town with a noise like thunder. The buildings round the market-place, the Council Chamber and the Hospital, were enveloped in flame. My father gave the signal and the horsemen sallied forth to meet the approaching army of the Code.



We, benc and roan.

For the first time we steer the roan down to the grasslands; never before. Sting Gulley allows four roan to pass abreast; for three days we steer the roan. They are shy of the sweet grass, and crowd close together in their hundreds of thousands, uneasy of the high, close horizon of the flatlands. Mountain-dwellers feel suffocation in lowlands. But now the roan can smell the sea, and look out towards it. They smell the salt, and the sea-grass.

Easy for benc. The wagons of the Code are simple contraptions, newer than Ios's wagon but limited by the timesway of the Code and simple to control. We sit among the antlers of the foremost stags and run at a gentle pace round the southern foot of the Mountain, coming in behind the army of the Code. We see the fire in Wedge Town but know it will die out. We see the horsemen of the Domain sally out to meet the Code. And so we let the great herd run, and the roan surge forward to the salt sea.



My father raised his hand at the forefront of the press: it took some time to slow and halt the thundering horses. There

was consternation among the Horsemen: why was Sheug halting?

Sheug was looking to the eastern horizon: it was smoking, and moving. Most of the men of the Domain had never seen roan. My father turned his horse and addressed the Horsemen, and his words were passed back to those out of hearing: Men of the Domain! See now the power of benc, and see how they rally to our need!

The wagons of the Code had turned westward, towards the sea, and the foot-soldiers were running. The roan came hard upon them, hundreds of thousands of pounding animals, surrounding them and carrying them with them out to the sands. The dust blotted everything from view, but the Horsemen saw the whole mass flowing towards the sea. The great expanse of roan seemed to go on for ever: it was not until the late afternoon that the rumble of their pounding hooves faded in the west.

The Horsemen reconvened in the ruined market-place. The Council Hall, the Hospital and the Stranger's House were smoking ruins, but the town guard had prevented further damage.

My father addressed the men of the West: How is it now with the tides?

The tide comes in tonight, he was told.

The benc will turn the roan in time, said my father. The

army of the Code will be taken by the sea. Tegui, are you there?

I am here, said the Elder of the North.

Tegui, take my place as Eldest. I have work to do among the Hillmen. And my father turned his horse and spurred it up to the road back to Wintergate.

I was at a loss. My father thought I had gone on ahead, back to the Hillmen. I remained for the rest of the day with the Horsemen, clearing debris from the burnt buildings. It was filthy, disheartening work. As evening fell I set off, tired and dejected, up the forest road in the wake of my father. I did not hurry, for fear of catching up with him.



I met the evacuees coming down the Forest Road as I rode up. They said my father had turned them back, the danger was past. I hoped my father was right. We had seen the skyships flying at great heights over us, so small that we could hardly make them out; but they seemed no longer interested in Wedge. My father had perhaps reasoned that there was no less danger up in the Valleys than in the town.

It was well over midnight when I came up into Wintergate. The village was dark and silent, but there was a light burning up in Lye. My father was awake. I feared the worst.

He looked up, bleary-eyed as I came in. Where have you been? he asked. There was the old smell of spirits on him—the

White Water of Wintergate.

I had already decided to lie. I came down from the encampment, I said. The evacuees were moving back to Wedge.

We will go up to the benc-people, he said. I have business with the benc-girl.

Let us drink together first, I said. You have another bottle? For I could see that soon he would be asleep.

Then we will deal with the benc-girl, said my father.



In the encampment, preparations for the move to winter quarters were under way. Pileo had offered Lankar the use of the car to ferry people or baggage, and after consideration Lankar accepted. You can hardly leave the wagon here, he conceded. We will see how well it travels on the High Moor. Does it run on snow?

Very well, said Pileo.

I look forward to seeing that, said Lankar.

It seemed that the roan were to be the main beasts of burden. Slowly the tents came down, and the poles, skins and chords were hung in bundles over the backs of the roan. There was a meticulous order about the proceedings which everyone including the children seemed to know how to follow. Attempting to help, the car crew soon realised they were a mere hindrance. Only Rautte and Telis seemed to be allowed to lend



a hand, and in fact most of Rautte's time was taken up by watching, and Telis's by watching Rautte. Every now and then he darted into the throng and helped lift a pole or hoist a bundle of skins. The Hillmen laughed at him, and he laughed with them, trying out his knowledge of their language; and they laughed more, and pounded him on the back.

As the tents came down after a day of packing, the Hillmen crowded together into the communal tents, including the Talking Tent and Lankar and Hersili's large tent. Nobody slept well, such was the press, and people were singing and telling stories far into the night. Everyone was up at first light the next morning and the packing continued. Separate caravans of horses and roan set off one after the other during the day, winding up the incline out of the encampment and heading for the High Moor. The car was filled to capacity with bundles of tenting and provisions and at least a dozen bouncing and over-excited children. Pileo drove, with Dokei sitting beside her to navigate. The marquil sat on Io's shoulder and gazed intently after the departing car, its ears trained on the hum of the engine. Into Ios's mind came the words: Please benc drive.

Ios whispered to him: Was that the One Voice, my marquil?

The marquil turned to look at her, its eyes wide, its ears towards her, waiting for more. Then it blinked.



It soon became clear that the caravan would continue without stopping into the night. The children in the car had all fallen asleep, and the other children were hoisted into slings hanging on both sides of the road. Men and women rode two together on the horses, or trudged by the sides of the road with heavy packs on their backs; every so often the riders and marchers stopped and changed places.

And then the stars were missing from the night sky. A gentle snow began to fall.



My father roused me before dawn the next morning. He was sober, and brittle. We drank strong coffee and I ate delf; he ate nothing. The weather was calm and the sky clear, with the Span setting in the south-west. To the northeast rose the black Moor, cutting into the stars with the Horn of Eris standing guard.

We took the old sheep road up the valley and headed for the Horn. As we rounded it the road levelled out onto the Moor the first grey of day began to glimmer in the east, and we sensed that the sun was moving below the horizon. But a cloud cover was also rising in the east, and by the time the sky was light

enough to receive the sun the clouds were shot with red and gold, and the light lurked behind them. Soon there was no colour, and the world was dimming, and the snow began to fall.



The spirits of the Hillmen seemed to lift as they trudged on into the snow. A wind had sprung up, light at first, but soon the snow was driving into their faces.

Some time past midnight a dark wall of cliff loomed out through the snow. The caravan kept the cliff to their left for at least an hour before turning in towards it. Soon they were into a pattern of low stone walls that seemed to be the remnants of old buildings, until they entered a shallow amphitheatre in the rock face that fell back into the dark outlines of three large caves. The first arrivals were hauling sledges and other equipment out of the caves and packing their tenting on the sledges along with the sleeping children. The children sleeping in the car were taken out and packed into skins with the other sleeping children. The younger children were taken half-sleeping aside to piss into the snow, and then bedded in with the others.

The caravan set off again at a much faster pace, with a team of two to six roan harnessed to each sledge. Telis continued with the other horse-riders on her grey, and Ested rode beside Hersili and Lankar. Pileo, Rautte and Ios followed in the car. It

had stopped snowing and skies were clearing; Tungal shone bright in the east.

The marquill sat on its old seat on the cylinders, one eye on the dials and the other to the road ahead. They had not gone far before it suddenly tensed, and its ears swivelled; then it made a single leap to Ios's shoulder. Peep, it said.

What do you mean? said Ios.

Listen, said the marquill.

Ios listened. Peep-peep, she heard. It came from the pile of skins where the children had been. Looking back into the car she saw the gleam of a small blue light, blinking. Pileo! she called in alarm. One of the pads is open!

Pileo slammed on the brakes and the car settled into the snow. She climbed over her seat, made a dive for the blinking light and closed the pad. She looked up, horrified, at the others.

The children have opened the locker and been playing with the pads, she said. What idiots we have been!

For a second nobody moved. Then Pileo shouted: Everyone out! Now! Get away from the car!

Ios felt the old fear grip her. They piled out into the snow. Away! shouted Pileo.

No wait, said Rautte. You closed the pad. They may not have noticed.

I'm taking no chances, said Pileo. Run! follow the caravan!

They had put some distance between them and the car before they fell together, panting, into the soft snow. The snow partially covered the black carapace of the car sitting on the slope below them. We should have spun out the tent, said Rautte.

I blew it again, said Pileo. I closed the tab. They can't track us any more. We should have taken off in the car.

Let's go back and do that, said Rautte.

The marquill swivelled its ears, hissing. Look, said Ios.

The warplane came in from the south: they could see it against the snow below them, hurtling up the mountain towards them. As it approached it banked suddenly upwards and to the left, and they saw the tiny missile drop from its underbelly.

The two blasts came in quick succession: first the car exploded in a billowing orange cloud, and then, far up above them, the mountain was lit by fire as the warplane hit the cliff wall, hung there in flame for a moment before tumbling down into the snowfield below it. They watched in horror as a tiny ripple spread through the great mass of snow below the cliffs high above them; and then the whole side of the mountain was moving.

Run, said Pileo again. They floundered wildly away across the slope, trying to gain height and distance. The thunder of the avalanche filled their ears. Ios looked up and saw that a wing of the running snow was fanning out to cut them off. She

screamed as Pileo disappeared in the breaking white sea. Then Rautte threw himself upon her and they tumbled together into the darkness.

An observer would have seen the marquil dancing on the crests of the thundering snow.



There was a great stillness. Rautte was still holding onto Ios.

Ios, he said. Keep me here.

Ios could hardly speak, so great was her weariness.

I can't keep you, Rautte.

Did I die at Ariel? said Rautte.

Yes, said Ios.

Keep Pileo. She must go back to the elves, said Rautte.

Oh Rautte. I can't hold her.

Try, Ios, my lovely Ios.

But Rautte was gone.

## 13

Ios's mind was rising slowly out of the silence.

They worship a number, which they call 10, equal to our 12.

They write 10 where we write 12.

They have a duodecimal system? said Rautte.

Yes, but they call it decimal.

Then how do they count ? asked Pileo.

They have two more words between 9 and 10, two-left and one-left.

So they worship 12, and call it 10?

They worship the One, said Telis, as we do; but they say that in the One there are twelve.

Twelve gods?

Twelve roan, said Telis.



Telis's face, pallid and drawn, but still smiling, formed itself out of the light.

Was I talking? said Ios.

You were talking of the twelve reoan, said Telis.

Where is Rautte? asked Ios.

We haven't found him. Pileo is lost, too. Benc showed us

where you were.

And Ios slept again.



When she woke, Ested was sitting beside her. Ios looked long into her face.

You are still with us, said Ios at last.

Hush my love. Don't worry. I shall not go.

I cannot keep you, Ested.

Hersili is keeping me, said Ested. I shall live for many years yet with the Hillmen.

You died up on the sands, whispered Ios. I rewrote you.

I know. And Maro knew. But you were not keeping us. Something else was: perhaps it was the elves. The elves took Maro when the roan trampled him. They will take me when my time comes. It is not your doing.

And Pileo?

They have taken Pileo, said Ested. The marquil told Hersili, and she told me.

And Rautte?

You were keeping Rautte, said Hersili. That was drawing the Code closer. But now you have released him, and the Code is gone from the Mountain.

There was a great battle down on the Wedge grasslands, said Telis. Ios turned. Had she slept? Telis was holding her



hand.

The men of Wedge drove them out onto the sands, said Telis. The sea took them.

Telis, I lost Rautte. He was yours.

Telis's eyes were staring into the distance.

Rautte was wonderful, said Telis. But he was not mine. He was yours.

I could not keep him, said Ios.

Then she said: I was keeping him for you.

Telis was still holding Ios's hand. Thank you, she said.



Izza (Guerlec) Isqad stood up from her desk as the tall Georgian woman was ushered into her office. Hallo Izza, said the woman, holding out her hand. It's been a long time.

Izza recognised her immediately: older, less angry, warmer, but the same movements, and perhaps the same face. She searched in her mind for the name.

Roinje, she said as she took her hand. Isn't that right? What in heavenr are you doing here?

Roinje smiled, and clasped both hands over hers.

I've come to see you about the Code, she said.

Izza drew her to a couple of comfortable chairs by the window overlooking the old Tanquish square on which the Traffic Control building stood. I know nothing about the Code,

said Izza easily as they sat. I am the Comptroller for the Bases and also the resident Driver—we're not as well manned as we were in the old days. But how did you come to Huld without our knowing? You have an extra-par driver I assume.

Of course, said Roinje. The Fleet has no use for Traffic. And we well know that you are more than Comptroller here. You are a member of the Council. You are the commander who lost your army in the sea off Three Mountain.

Izza smiled blandly, but said nothing.

We are hear to help you, said Roinje.

What help can the Geordian Fleet of Liberation bring? My information is that you are totally unarmed.

We are not a military force, said Roinje. We are a social force. We would in any case not help you by going to war.

I could have you arrested, said Izza.

If you could find me, said Roinje; but you cannot. We do not even need to hide. We are everywhere. And we see you are in need of allies. The Lords of the Bases are not happy with your escapade with the Code.

And how could you help?

We are on our way to meet with the Hillmen on Three Mountain, said Roinje. It occurred to us to talk to you on the way. Perhaps we could bring about a dialogue.

Izza had stiffened. But Roinje was looking out of the window, and seemed not to have noticed.

I could have you arrested here and now, repeated Izza.

No, Izza. *I* could have *you* arrested, said Roinje. She made a gesture out over the square. The low spring sun had lit the yellow and ochre tones of the ancient buildings. On the other side of the square Izza saw the small café where she sometimes sat on summer evenings. Five people were sitting round a table, three women and two men. Three were clearly Georgians; there was a Huld woman sitting with them and a small grey-haired man. One of the Georgian women raised her hand and waved at Roinje and Izza at the window.

Izza looked long at the grey-haired man. Then she turned and looked at Roinje.

Yes, said Roinje. That's Yrre.

Izza turned and looked again. Such a long time, she murmured. Where is Reagh now?

Reagh the god? She has not come again. Yrre came back alone to our ship, and since then we have been with the Fleet. Yes, it has been a long time.

Izza was silent, watching Yrre out of the window. Then she seemed to rouse herself:

Wait, she said. You are going to Three Mountain?

We mean to find whoever is left of the Tanquish team you were hunting there, said Roinje.

To find Ios and learn resequencing from her?

We have no need for resequencing. It is violence, Izza. We

prefer to navigate these movements without controlling them.  
That is the only Way, and that is why the Fleet is unarmed.

Ios will find her own way back to Tanquish, said Izza.

Perhaps, said Roinje. But Ios is not our only concern. There has been great loss of life in this sorry escapade of yours. But there are survivors, and we have grave concerns about them. We hope you share these concerns: they are Paulians, they are your people, and they are the remains of your miserable army. So what are you going to do about them?

I take my orders from Carhault, said Izza

And Carhault is as silent as the grave, said Roinje. The Bases are highly delighted at the failure of your famous Regeneration Program. I think it is time that Carhault and the Geordian Fleet started talking together.

After a short silence Izza said: That seems to be what is happening in this Office, Roinje in Nostra.

So Izza knew the Fleet's name for her ship.



When Ios awoke again, it was Dokei sitting by her bed. She—or he—leant over and stroked Ios's hair from her face.

Where are we, Dokei? said Ios.

We are in Winter City. Our healers say you need rest and food. You are badly bruised, but there is nothing broken.

What are these birds? said Ios.

Have there been birds? asked Dokei.

Perhaps I was dreaming, said Ios. They were singing.

You were not dreaming. The birds sometimes come to the Healer's tent. They are from Water Eye. They come and go in Winter City with the belinc.

Are there belinc here? said Ios eagerly. Where is my marquill?

Belinc come and go, like the birds.

Where do they go?

Winter City is high on the Mountain. We are deep under snow. But the air here is soft and fresh—can you feel it? Belinc do this for us, but we do not fully know how. Some say belinc open their Centre to Winter City, and from their Centre there are portals far and wide on Huld. Perhaps we are breathing the southern air from Qert.

Pileo was going to take me to Qert, said Ios, very softly.

You will take her with you in your heart, when this is over, and you can go in peace to Qert, said Dokei.

Ios spoke in a whisper, so that Dokei had to lean over to hear her: She is already there. I have released her. I was holding them all.

You did not hold Maro, said Dokei.

I could not. The roan were so many. They have a momentum of their own.

And Rautte?

Ios was floating in an ocean of grief. There were no shores. She hardly noticed as Dokei took her hand.

I released Rautte, said her mind; but her voice was silent.

Do you have others to release? said Dokei.

What has happened to my marquil? whispered Ios. Telis saved it from the dogs. I rewrote that.

The dogs were acting out the fears of the men, said Dokei. You could not rewrite a momentum of that magnitude. There was something else at work.

How will I know when I have released everyone? whispered Ios.

We all know you have, said Dokei. The Code has gone. The Change has gone. The time is our own.

Ios was drifting again. Are we all in Old Time? she asked  
Of course.

The sand turned to grass, said Ios. Pileo and Rautte saw it too.

If you see it, said Dokei, it has been given to you. It is yours to make anew.

And Ios slept again.



Ios woke suddenly and sat up in the bed. The lamp had been doused, and there was a faint light in through the tent-flap from the ice tunnel outside.

Who are these other people? she asked in a high voice.

A healer approached from the flap at the other end of the tent.

You have been dreaming, he said.

No, said Ios. These other people. She pointed to the other beds in the tent.

Shh, don't wake them, said the healer. They need to rest.

Who are they?

That's the Eldest of Wedge and his son, said the healer. Belinc found them in the snow down by Lankar's summer encampment.

Ios had her feet on the floor. I cannot stay here, she said. Where can I go?

The healer put a blanket over her shoulders. I shall take you to Dokei, he said.



The so-called tents in the Winter City were in fact interconnected ice caves, often hung with tent-material and with skins hanging over doors of the living-quarters for privacy. The four summer encampments came together in the Winter City, but the inner structure of the city did not represent the summer division: the ice tunnels connected a maze of private quarters, larger common areas, eating-halls and kitchens, and in the centre a complex of high domes large enough to hold all

the Hillmen of the encampments.

The city itself stood on the highlands under the eastern wall of Three Mountain. Part of it was dug into great caves in the mountain, some of them tapering to narrow tunnels, too small for humans, leading far back into the rock—into the Centre, said the Hillmen. Below the City to the east and south stretched the great plains of the high plateau where the roan had their winter quarters. The roan stood together in close groups when the bitter easterly wind blew, but spread over the landscape in the long calms between, eating the sparse mosses and grasses they smelled under the snow and dug up with their hooves.

There were three gates to the city, north-east, east and south; tunnels under the ice which led out through heavy skin doors onto the plateau.

Three figures made their way in bright, low sunshine over the packed snow: Dokei, Telis, and Ios. They made for a small wind-blown mound where stones rose out of the snow; a group of roan, pawing at the moorgrass and cliffweed that lay by the stones under the snow. They lifted their noses and turned their ears towards the three humans, but Dokei called in a low, singing voice, and the roan stood their ground as the three came up to them. They snorted and rumbled but continued chewing as the three women stood amongst them, savouring their warmth.

I miss my marquil, said Ios.



There are belinc everywhere in the City, said Dokei. They all speak with the same voice. Your belinc is one of many.

No, said Ios. They have their differences.

I have heard of a belinc mission in Tanquish, said Dokei. Perhaps yours is there.

I should like to see Tanquish, said Telis.

They stood still among the roan. Ios thought: Ceneri says one must speak aloud to the roan. I should be alone.

And then she felt a far, weak sound. It was that of a marquill hissing. She looked back towards the Southern Gate. Two horsemen where approaching. She caught Dokei's and Telis's hands and drew them close to her.

It was Sheug and Ruas.



My father and I had lost our horses; we lay for three days dug into the snow-drift on the hillside above the deserted Hillman encampment. We spoke many things together. At first we were not anxious: we had good equipment, and lay together head to foot, as the Hillmen do in the snow, keeping each other's feet warm. There was little frost, but the blizzard continued in full fury. We took turns to sleep. On the third day I dared not sleep; my father was drifting away, and I had to keep waking him. Soon I found it difficult to keep myself awake. I remember thinking that we should break out of the snow and

make an attempt to regain Lye, but that was my last conscious thought.

We woke in the Hillman infirmary in their High City. We were very cold, but hardly frostbitten. We lay and slept for many days.

And then Lankar brought us the news from Wedge. It must have been benc who told him.



Sheug spoke in the tongue of Wedge. His eyes were on Ios, and Ios saw the same dull flame in them. Telis roused herself, and translated in a low voice.

A crisis has occurred in Wedge. My son will return forthwith. Before he leaves, I have a proposal to make to the Lady Ruis.

Ios gripped her comrades' hands in hers; they felt her trembling.

I am stepping down, said Sheug. My son will be the Eldest of the Domain.

He waited, expecting a response. There was none. Ios was motionless, her grip tightening.

Aristas of the North Reach has passed to his fathers. The High Lady is unable to perform her duties.

My son wishes to make the Lady Ruis his wife, and take the title of High Lady of the Domain.

Still there was silence. Ios was motionless, her eyes unfocused. She saw the old woman at the council in Wedge, pouring from her heavy jug into the Elders' cups. She saw the terror in the old woman's eyes, felt the eyes of the men of Wedge following her every movement. She saw the mindless flame everywhere.

Sheug resumed: I need no immediate reply. These things need to be pondered. My son takes his leave; he is travelling south today with a party of Hillmen. I shall stay in Winter City for a time, since my health is not good, and await the Lady Ruis's pleasure.

The two men saluted, wheeled their horses and cantered back to the city.



For many days, Ios did not speak, did not respond to her friends. Dokei and Telis found her a tent close to Lankar and Hersili, and they moved in with her, and they all slept together on the wide bed of roanskins. Hersili came in to talk to her, and she watched Hersili with soft eyes, and took her hands; but still she did not speak.

Then Dokei was called away. Guests had arrived from Tanquish, and she was needed to guide and translate. Telis went with her, but returned twice during the day, and Ios slept.

Ios, said Telis at the end of the day. The Geordians want to

see you.

Ios shook her head.

They want to take us back to Tanquish, both of us. Will you come with me?

And then Ios spoke, in a whisper: Not this time.

They will leave tomorrow, said Telis. Please come.

It is too late, said Ios.



And when Telis came back the next evening, Ios sat up in her bed. Why did you not go to Tanquish? she asked.

I have no reason to go without you, said Telis.

You have no reason to stay here, said Ios.

I am a woman of the Men of the Domain, said Telis.

You must run from them, said Ios. You must leave them.

Yes, said Telis at last.

Then she said, as if to herself: I am still unmarried. They both lay on the bed together, both exhausted.

I shall go to Water Eye, said Telis. Benc will take me.



Ios woke to the marquil hissing in her mind. A figure stood in the doorway. It said: Filthy benc woman. Filthy Paulian.

And Sheug was on top of her, pinning her down on the bed.

A part of Ios was thinking: I was once a Paulian, and now I am a benc-woman, and soon I am to be the High Lady.

Sheug tore at her clothing. And the old response came automatically. Ios's body ceased to work.

And she had left the city, and was climbing with the marquill on her shoulder towards the ice-cap, leaving her body behind under Sheug on the skins of the Hillman bed.

And she left her father behind her, standing with the key in his hand; and all the blank staring faces from Carhault were left behind. And the blood was left behind, and the billowing flame. And the acrid smell of the Men of the Domain.

PK November 2018



## **Part 3**

### **The Birds of Water Eye**

Five years later

The families who lived on the banks of Water Eye spoke a language which had no name for the horizon. At sunrise and sunset they talked of the sun running above or below the forest. When Tungal kindled above the far trees it also kindled as a dancing spark on the Water; and in the calms of mid summer all the stars of the Span could be counted both in the Water and in the Sky. They had no name for hills or valleys. They had plenty of names for trees, and for fish. Their name for Water Eye was simply The Water; the rest of the world was The Greenwood.

It was the birds of Water Eye that saw the Water as an Eye; they also knew the curve of the horizon, and the high hills on the edge of sight; and they knew they lived on a globe of colour under the great Span. But they did not talk. They sang.

When the snows began at the end of summer, and the Water lost its clear vision and its boundless movement, the birds were no longer around to see their Eye cracked and sightless, for they had flown many thousand leagues, some to the Elves, some to the Benc, to learn new stories which they brought back in the spring to sing to the Eye. In latter times the stories had been more and more of Men, of their slow movements and the wars of their diseased minds. Their songs



became sadder, and deeper. It was as if the blue waters of the Eye had also become sadder, and deeper.

But the men and women of Water Eye took to the hard ice when it came, and hauled their cabins out far from shore, cut holes in their floors and drew the winter fish out of the dark water under the ice. The redfish they hung outside under the rafters and allowed their oil to drip into earthenware bowls, to light and heat their cabins and braise their fish. They wrapped themselves in bear hides, beaver and otter skin, and led warm and easy lives out on the ice in the winter storms, and sang the songs of men that the birds had taught them, and made plans for journeys in the Greenwood when the summer came again. Their plans had not changed for many centuries.

Until the birds returned one spring and began to sing of the Change.



There was an old man, by the name of Pubriassem, who kept himself apart from the others in the village. His wife and children had died many years before of the fever.

He stayed most of the time out on the water in his boat, only coming ashore for short periods. He spoke very little, to few people, regularly bringing fish for the villagers, who saw to his few needs in return.

He slept rarely in his hut in the village, and people said he

slept on the water. It is said that he went fearlessly ashore on the far side of the Water, and it was there that he came upon the girl with the sharp name sleeping in the snow; and she would have died there, but he brought her back to the village and called the Healer who cured her of her snow-sickness, and healed her frostbitten feet. And nobody could say her cold, sharp name, so they wove the alien sounds into a good village name, with a respectable beginning and a proper ending, and the sharp name safe inside: Entelisse.

And Entelisse became Pubriasse's new daughter, and Pubriasse took his old humour, and lived again in his old hut in the village, and began to sing his old songs. Slowly Entelisse learnt the villagers' language, and their ways of eating and dancing; and she seemed happy. And when Runasashi asked her to marry him, for he feared she would never ask him, she said Yes, and they built a new hut beside Pubriasse's and soon there were two children running in and out of the huts.

It is not recorded what the children's names were; but the younger was a boy. And when he was four he came home one day with a little wide-eyed animal on his shoulder. When his mother Entelisse saw the animal she gave a great cry, and the animal ran to her and she put down her hand, and the animal ran up onto her shoulder and whispered a single word in her ear. And Entelisse wept, and when she looked again at her

children and her husband Runasashi it was as if she was seeing them for the first time. And she left the hut and walked to the water, and stood gazing for a long time out towards the far shore. And then she came into the hut again, and kissed her husband Runasashi and hugged her children, and they made a fine meal of fish and roots, and old Pubriassem came and they told stories and laughed far into the night, and in the morning she was gone.



As I weave myself through the air, and split and rejoin myself, and climb and curve and dive over Water Eye, I feel the roll of the planet and the dance of its winds and fall of its seasons. In the late summer evenings my wings chatter in the trees. And when the autumn begins to settle on Water Eye I fly ever higher, and one morning I rise in my greatest span and fly south where a new spring is starting, and I split, part of me flying to the spring of the elves, and part to the spring of the benc, and none of me stays at home with the families of Water Eye, who wait patiently for the Ice, and after the Ice for my return.

And in the Year of the Change I left a little early, for I had business with the elves and the benc that we three had never had before.

One morning the High Lady of the Domain woke to the chattering, explosive song of the birds of Water Eye, and knew that one more winter would soon be over. She had lost count of her summers and winters in Wedge Town, her endless dream-walks in her garden, her misty days. But this spring the songs of the birds of Water Eye seemed to speak to her, perhaps with the voice of the roan, perhaps of benc, perhaps even with her own voice. For the first time in many seasons the High Lady of the Domain formed her own name, silently in her mouth: Ios.



Ruas, Elder of the Southern Reach, Eldest of the Domain, took his cup from the hands of a Paulian slave-girl and strode to the main doors with his cup raised to toast his guests, the slave-girl following at a respectful distance. The Speaker of the Hillmen, resplendent in skins and eagle-feathers, sat her horse—or perhaps his horse—at the head of a troop of companions in the middle of the Square. A shout went up from the men of Wedge as Ruas appeared and walked alone down the steps towards the waiting Hillmen. He fell on one knee before the Speaker, and the assembled crowd knelt as a man. But the

slaves stood apart at a distance at the entrance to their quarter, and neither knelt nor bowed their heads.

Welcome my friend Dokei, said Ruas, offering the cup. Dokei had dismounted. She took the cup and drank, and returned it to Ruas, who dropped it on the cobbles for the slave to pick up. I am happy to see you, Eus, she said. She turned and dismissed her companions, who were shown to the Strangers' House. Dokei and Ruas walked side by side towards the steps of the Great Hall.

Is there news of my father? asked Ruas as they mounted the steps.

He does not leave Lye, said Dokei. He sees nobody. He would not see me. He is drinking himself to death.

As they entered the Great Hall the tall, slender figure of the High Lady rose to her feet and stood by her chair. She felt the name in her mouth; Dokei. Her heart was racing, her head lifted, her eyes seeing again.

Ruas and Dokei knelt. The slave girl approached her, now with two cups, and Ios took the Amphora from the table beside her, and filled the proffered cups. The girl carried them to Ruas, who again offered one to Dokei; they both raised their cups to the Lady.

Long life to the High Lady, said Ruas.

Greetings to the Lady of the Domain, said Dokei. They

stood, and the slave took their cups and retired, leaving Ruas and Dokei alone with the lone figure at the side of the dais. Dokei and the Lady gazed long at each other.

That will be all, Ruas, said Dokei.

Ruas, the Eldest of the Domain, bowed and retired.



They fell into each other's arms and clung to each other for a long time without speaking, Ios laying her head on Dokei's shoulder and sobbing, and Dokei stroking Ios's long hair.

How is it? said Dokei at last.

They sat together on the steps of the dais. Ios was smiling through her tears.

I have not— she said.

Dokei took her hand and smoothed her hair.

I have not spoken since I saw you last, said Ios.

Not with the slaves?

What have I to say with them?

Thank you, said Dokei. You may go home to your families for the rest of the day.

I have not dared. I too am a slave, said Ios.

You are all slaves in Wedge, said Dokei.

Why are you here? Sheep and roan? said Ios, shuddering involuntarily at the shadows behind the thought.

Yes, smiled Dokei. Both. And belinc.

Ios said nothing.

And Tanquish, added Dokei.

What's happening?

Izza is sending an embassy, said Dokei.

To us?

No. To us Hillmen.

When will she speak with us?

When you free the slaves, said Dokei, smiling her smile.

Ruas will never do that. We grow richer with their labour each year.

Five years, said Dokei.

Then she said: I have a meeting now with your husband. He will ask me to eat with him. Afterwards I shall come to you. I have many things to tell you tonight.



The alien woman whom we call Ruis, whom my father gave me when he retired to Lye after the Crisis was a mere shadow of her former self. I loved her to distraction from the beginning, but she took little pleasure in my company and shrank from my bed. With my father's retirement I had become Eldest, by popular acclaim, and Ruis became the new Lady. I soon left the Chambers to her and her servants, and lived alone for a time in our family house before building the new Mansion behind the Council Hall. I travelled a good deal in the Domain, and had

good relationships with the various Elders. The people thought highly of me.

We solved the problem of the Survivors, mostly the women of the Code, by lodging them in the Old Town which had largely been abandoned and was due to be rebuilt. They were thankful to us, and willing to work for their food and keep.

The presence of the Hillmen became apparent in Wedge Town. With the influx of the Survivors we were short of provisions, and they provided us with roan-meat and hides. But it was not simply their economic support that empowered them. The crisis had changed them: they traded with us but despised us. Dokei became their Speaker and his attitude to the Men of the Domain seemed to vitalise the Hillmen. I have never understood how it happened, but it was clear from the beginning that I was his subordinate.

Things came to a head in the early spring of the sixth year after the Crisis. During the winter it seemed to me that Ruis was growing restless: she had more energy and her eyes began to flash at me and others in the way I remembered when I first saw her on the grasslands.

I associate the events of the early spring with Dokei's annual spring meeting with me. At first it progressed as usual: we renewed the contract for access to the sea for one-third of her herds, and agreed to a change of route for the roan-path outside the dykes at Hearth, since the rivers were running



under the cliffs again. We agreed to a ten-day period for the roan to graze on the sea-grass, between tides after Tungel's last winter kindling. This was to be the sixth spring of their sea-grazing, which had first followed in the wake of the rout of the Code, and it was clear that the roan were hungry for sea-grass, which gave early forage before the snows had left the High Moors. The Hillmen repaid us with meat and hides.

Dokei informed me that they were expecting a delegation from Tanquish. Carhault would be involved, and Dokei expected renewed pressure from Izza concerning the Paulian workers in the Domain. Dokei had also had word from the Geordians, who also oppose our using bonded workers, although they have little patience with Carhault.

Dokei stayed as usual in Ruis's chambers. He always ordered it so, and I could not refuse. I still thought of Dokei as a man, but Ruis called her She. I was uneasy. I feared that Dokei fanned Ruis's discontent. I was right.



Eus, said Ios.

She stood suddenly at the door of his office. The Captain of the Horsemen leapt from his chair opposite Ruas and stood aghast, not knowing what to do.

We will continue tomorrow, Captain, said Ruas smoothly. The man saluted, and Ios stood aside to allow him to leave. He

dared not look at her.

Ruas was livid. How dare you? he said between clenched teeth. You may not be here. If this gets out to the Horsemen—

Eus, said Ios evenly. That was the Captain. It has already got out.

Are you mad? said Ruas. How dare you talk to me in that tone—

Ios moved her hand in a gesture which so clearly meant: Be silent. Ruas stared in silent amazement.

I have spoken to Dokei, said Ios. I want a carriage up to the encampment to visit the Hillmen.

You'll do nothing of the sort, benc-woman! Ruas kept his voice down with difficulty, his voice thick with fury.

And if Dokei sends for me? said Ios.

Ruas stood frozen, his mouth open. It took him some time to understand what Ios had said.

At last he spoke: Then I shall go with you. We will take a troop of Horsemen. A delegation to the Hillmen.

You have nothing more to say to the Hillmen, said Ios. Dokei will send a party to escort me, within the week.

Ruas's fury was becoming tinged with anguish. The Horsemen will not suffer this—

I have already sent word to the Horsemen, said Ios. My slave—

Your servant! shouted Ruas.

—took an order from me to the Captain this morning. He will have read it by now.

Ruas sat down heavily.

You are a fool, woman. I shall revert this.

I am the High Lady, said Ios. The Horsemen will do as I order.

Ruas hissed: The Lady expresses her wishes through me, the Eldest, your husband.

I shall keep you informed, said Ios.



My lady, said the slave.

Ios looked up and smiled at her. The girl took a step backward. The Lady had never smiled before.

Forgive me, my lady! she said, her voice cracking with fear. It was a mistake!

Gernubai—that is your name, is it not?

The girl made the sign of the Father. My Lady, she muttered in terror.

Gernubai, said Ios gently. Come to me. She held out her hands. But the girl stood rooted to the spot, her eyes everywhere but on Ios.

Have we never spoken before? asked Ios. She realised she was talking in the Evenspeech.

The girl shook her head.

But now I wish to talk, said Ios. There was a catch in her voice, and the girl looked, and saw the tears in Ios's eyes. She wavered.

You know how they treat me, said Ios. I too am a slave.

Still the girl said nothing.

Gernubai, please come to me. I need to talk to you.

The girl looked at her, her eyes wide.

Gernubai, I have had news from Tanquish. I need a kind face to talk to. You have always had a kind face. Please come to me.

The girl wavered, still terrified.

There is no danger, said Ios. No one can hurt you.

They might come in! said the girl, with terror in her voice.

And Ios understood the word *they*. And the girl saw she had understood. Her guard was down; she moved towards Ios and took her outstretched hands, and suddenly Ios was holding her close, and they were both weeping.



There is talk in the kitchen, said Gernubai. They say you were once a Paulian.

I was, said Ios. I was in Carhault. But then I went to Tanquish, and lost my faith—

You can regain it! cried the girl.

I do not wish to. I have been with Geordians, Gernubai. I

was a sympathiser, a militant. Until the Eldest took me for his Lady.

The girl said nothing.

You must help me, Gernubai. I must talk with your people.. I know the Paulian ways. I know them better than the Men of the Domain.

Our ways are not what they were, said Gernubai. We lost too much when the sea took the vanguard of the army.

Ios shuddered. You were a soldier of the Code? she asked.

My mother served in the support, medics and kitchen, said the girl. We were left behind in the rout. The roan spared us, ran through our ranks without trampling. My mother says the marquils were steering them, and sparing us. But the sea took my father and my brothers. It was mostly the women in the rearguard who survived.

Ios's eyes were unseeing. The sea is terrible, she said in a low voice.

Yes, said Gernubai.

Do you think I might speak with your mother? she said. Would you show me your home?

## 16

The High Lady stood in the Market Place in the early spring sun, her slave beside her. The men of Wedge stopped and watched in wonder. And the word fled back up the side streets: The Lady is walking in the Market!

Ios and Gerbubai made their way together towards the Old Gate, the entrance to the Slave Quarter. A group of Paulian slave-women, entering and leaving the quarter in service, stopped and watched as they approached.

There was the sound of hooves from the Upper Gate: a troop of Horsemen led by the Captain clattered into the Market and took up a position in front of the women. Ios stood before them, her head raised, and looked the Captain in the eye. She thought: It is happening. Gernubai stood behind her, her wide eyes searching everywhere.

You know who you are, said Ios, in a high clear voice, so that many heard.

We are the Horsemen of the High Lady, said the Captain.

And you know who I am, said Ios.

You are the High Lady, said the Captain, sneering. We have seen you pouring from the jug.

Several of the Horsemen roared with laughter. The crowd murmured.

From the Amphora, said Ios evenly.

My Lady.

You are my Horsemen, said Ios. What is your business here?

We are here to protect you, my Lady, said the Captain, a little less certain of himself.

You are here to do my bidding! said Ios with all the force she could muster. Captain, dismount when you talk to me!

There was dead silence. Ios's heart seemed to stand still. And then the Captain dismounted.

Ios said: You will go to my husband the Eldest, who is in his office, and tell him I have dismissed you. Gernubai, hold the horse for me.

Time in the Market place stood still. The girl seemed to have taken strength from Ios: she took the reins from the bewildered Captain's hand and stood by the horse's head as Ios mounted.

Come up, said Ios, and helped the girl up in front of her. She turned the horse and faced the troop. Fall in behind me, she ordered. And she rode forward into the Slave Quarter.



Following Gernubai's directions, Ios threaded the streets of the Old Town. We are here, said the girl at last. Ios dismounted, and helped the girl down.

The presence of a troop of Horsemen in the Slave Quarter

had drawn a crowd. They were beginning to press around the Horsemen. Yet Ios felt that they were giving her and Gernubai passage: she did not feel the press. The horses snorted.

Ios addressed the Horsemen: Who is the second in command?

I am, my Lady, said a young man.

You will return to the Market Place, and continue your duties until the Eldest calls you, she said.

But my Lady, our duty is to protect you.

Your duty is to follow my orders, said Ios, feeling the rising power in herself. You will leave me the Captain's horse. She is a fine mare; perhaps I will keep her.

Gernubai had entered the house, and returned with an older woman and another girl. A young man stood behind them in the doorway, two young children clinging to his legs. The adults all made the sign of the Father.

Who will hold my horse for me? said Ios. Two young women stepped forward from the crowd.

Some of the Horsemen had turned, and were moving away at a walk, the crowd making way for them. Four remained, their faces grim.

Do I need to repeat myself? said Ios. The horsemen looked at each other, their lips tight, their eyes narrowed. Then they nodded together, turned their horses and followed their comrades.



May we come in? said Ios to the three at the door.



With the Horsemen gone, Ios found her power spent; she stood shaking inside the doorway, unable to frame her thoughts, not knowing where she was going. For five years she had lived a life of nightmare: now suddenly she was awake, and terrified. The three women led her in to the single room that was their living space, sat her down and put a cup of warm sweet liquid in her shaking hands. But she had not given up, she was not weeping, as so often during the last five years. She put out her hand to Gernubai's and grasped it.

Gernubai, she said. What will they do? I am terrified.

You must speak to them as you have spoken, said the girl. If you do, they cannot touch you.

They, said Ios. We speak of the same?

The Men of Wedge, said the girl.

But not the women, said the mother.

Not the women of the men of the Domain? said Ios, remembering Telis's formulation.

Wait, said the mother. I have sent word. Drink your *panate*.

This is panate? asked Ios. We used to drink panate in Carhault, in the cloisters. It was not like this.

Ah, said the mother. Here in Wedge there is no true panate. We use the herbs we find. One day, we will drink real panate

again, when the war is over, when we return home.

What is your name? asked Ios.

Haornaithj, my Lady.

Haornaithj, said Ios, savouring the sound. The language of Carhault. I have not heard a name like that for many years. It brings bad memories, she said.

You were in the cloisters in Carhault? asked the woman. Ios nodded.

Then we understand.



Ios felt peace coming over her: perhaps it was the drink. They sat in easy silence, until Ios said:

Are we waiting for someone?

They are coming, said the mother. She stood up. I have soon to work, she said. I am on the night shift.

What is your work? asked Ios

We are rebuilding the road to Wintergate.

You are building the road? said Ios. At night?

I did not choose, said Haornaithj. But it is easier than day-work. The guards are sleepy, and leave us in peace.

I must speak of this with my husband, said Ios.

No, said Haornaithj. You have seen and heard nothing. I must go now. The women are here.

She went to the door and ushered in two women clad as

slaves, but thei fcs were not Paulian, ans they worse the headscarves of the women of Wedge. She kissed them both before letting herself out. The two women came in and dropped to their knees as they saw Ios, their heads down.

Ios sat as if frozen. The kneeling women were part of her nightmare, five years of kneeling women, five years of silence. At last she managed to speak, in the language of Wedge: Please stand, do not kneel.

The women stood and raised their eyes to her. Then one said:

You are indeed the Lady. We did not believe it. And you are here with us!

They spoke as if this small room in the Slave Quarter were their home.

You live here? asked Ios.

In this street, here, in many places in the Slave Quarter, said the woman.

You live in the Slave Quarter?

Where else would we be safe, my Lady? The Paulian women hide us from the men of the Domain.

Hide you? You have run away?

Where does a woman go, who leaves her husband, in Wedge?

Ios head the words, rolled them round in her mind, and finally repeated: A woman who leaves her husband?

Yes, my Lady. And now you are here.

Ios stared, and at last the tears of relief began to well in her eyes.

I am here, she said. Am I a woman who leaves her husband?

I dare not say. my Lady.



What is your name? asked Ios.

I am the wife of Kesmen, said the woman. Kesmen is my name.

Ios took a moment to understand. Then she asked: How many of you are there?

The woman replied: Now we are fifteen. Two weeks ago we were nine. We know of more who will come.

Do the men not know you are here? asked Ios.

Perhaps, said the woman. But the Paulians say there is shame among the men whose women have fled. They say nothing as yet.

Ios's old Geordian spirit was aroused. You must speak out, she said. You must confront the men of Wedge.

You know what happens to wives who disobey their men, said the woman.

What happens?

There is much you do not know of the Domain, you who come from Tanquish, said the woman.

I come from Carhault, like the slaves, said Ios.

You are a Paulian?

No longer. I fought the Code.

The Code is dead, said the woman.

Izza still sits in Tanquish, said Ios. But you have not said what happens to women who leave the men who own them.

Ios waited.

The sea that took the army of the Code, said the woman, will take a woman who is left on the sands on tide-day without a horse.

Again Ios shuddered, but now her mind was clearer. Many things began to fall into place.

Has this always been so? she asked.

It cannot *always* have been, said the woman Kesmen. It is unnatural. But it has been for as long as we know.

Telis, Telis, thought Ios. She lived with this.

Did I rely too much on Captain Teuk? He was a Westerner, and always spoke with a strong western accent. He had been Captain of the Horsemen of the Lady in the Southern Reach since as long as anyone could remember, I had known him since I was a young boy, beginning to learn how to bear myself as a Horseman. He had been a close friend of my father, and he was always on hand to help and advise.

It was he who first alerted me to Ruis's changed behaviour that winter. He wanted me to take her with me on my overrides, to meet and talk with the people, but I knew what her reaction would be. He mistrusted Dokei's close friendship with Ruis—now I see he was right.

He came into my Office two days after Dokei's departure, about mid-morning.

Eldest, he said. The Lady has dismissed me.

I cannot say how I reacted.

She has ridden with the Horsemen into the Servants' Quarter, he said. I think I know where they will go.

I waited.

To meet the Fallen Women, he said.

I could say nothing; my throat ached.

It is time we cleaned up this sedition, he said.

What shall we do? I asked, like a child.

We will take the women into custody, said Teuk The Lady will return this evening. I shall have her confined to her chambers. You must speak to her tomorrow.

Speak what?

You shall inform her what must be done. The people will support you. And you will take a new Lady—that will do you good.



Ios put Gernubai on the horse, and led it out through the narrow streets. The few slaves about stood aside to give them passage. The sun was low, and the light was fading in the Old Town, but in the Market there was still sunlight among the long shadows, and the birds of Water Eye wheeled above the rooftops. The Market was empty except for a line of mounted Horsemen ranged on either side of the steps to Council Hall, as if waiting. The Captain and two Horsemen stood on the steps.

You will leave my horse here, said the Captain when they reached the steps.

Take her, said Ios. Stand aside and allow me to walk to my chambers.

We shall escort you, my Lady, said the Captain.

Ios took Gernubai's hand and they climbed the steps together, walked across the Great Hall and took the door

behind the dais up to the Lady's Chambers. The Captain and the two Horsemen walked behind them.

The door of the Lady's Chambers was open. Ios led Gernubai through, and as they trod the rush matting of the vestibule they heard the guards shutting and bolting the doors behind them.

Now you will stay with me tonight, Gernubai, said Ios.



Ruas stood by the window, waiting for Ios to dress, his eyes fixed on the door she would come through. When at last she did, they both stood still, fixing each other's gaze. Ruas's eyes were red; he had been weeping, and did not attempt to hide it.

I knew from the beginning that you would be mine, said Ruas. I did not foresee that this would make you High Lady. And I did not foresee that it would end this way.

I have never been yours, Eus, said Ios; and if it is ended I am content. Maybe then we can find again the friendship we felt when we first met.

That can never be, said Ruas. You have visited the women who left their husbands. You know what this means.

Ios thought: He cannot do this.

Did you think to flee with them to the Hillmen? said Ruas.

Ios said nothing.

Ruas's eyes wandered to Gernubai, who appeared briefly by



the door, managing Ios's clothes.

Ios saw him move as in a dream towards the door.

Tomorrow we shall ride down to the sea, he said, his eyes staring vacantly ahead of him.

As he left the chambers, he said: You will bring the girl with you.

In the Market Place, outside the Great Hall, the cry went up: *Benc! Amas benc!* There was a great barking of dogs.

Dokei sat astride her horse in the middle of Wedge Market, resplendent in roanskins, a marquil on her shoulder. On her right rode a tall black woman, in full ground uniform of the Geordian Fleet, and on her left a small grey-haired pallid gentleman with a thick roanskin cape thrown over his flight uniform. Behind rode a tight mixed group of Hillmen and Geordians. The dogs were whining and straining at their leashes, but the crowd was silent. Above the roofs of the town a great flock of the birds of Water Eye passed on the way from the forest above the town out to their feeding-grounds on the sands.

Captain Teuk appeared on the steps of the Council Hall. He came down them and approached the newcomers. Welcome Speaker Dokei, he said.

Captain, said Dokei. Remove the dogs.

Teuk waved his hand and the dogs were dragged away.

I was not informed of your visit, said Teuk, otherwise we would have drawn up the Horsemen to honour you. They are out patrolling the sands; the tide will come in today.

I am surprised, said Dokei. My Lady knew I was coming; I thought you would be advised. We have friends with us from

the Geordian Fleet over Huld; I planned to show the roan returning from the sands, and the incoming sea. It is a stirring sight. Where is my Lady?

She is out riding, said Teuk.

Where? said Dokei.

The Eldest and the Lady are riding out together, said Teuk.

There was a silence. Dokei fixed him with her eye. She said again: Where are they riding? Teuk did not reply.

They are on the Sands, she said. It is Tide-Day. You miserable people!

Then things happened very fast. The marquill bounded down from Dokei's shoulder, shot over the cobblestones towards Teuk and leapt for his face, wrapping its arms round Teuk's head. Almost at the same instant the horsemen behind Dokei turned as one, leaning over their horses' necks and taking them at full gallop down the road they had come, out onto the grasslands. Teuk staggered, and fell on one knee. The marquill leapt away, and was gone.



The small caravan of horse riders was like a tiny insect on the endless expanse of sand. They had set off at dawn, fifteen women, with their hands tied to the saddle-bows, each with two Horsemen riding close on either side. They took the road to the west, and at mid day they reached Stern Head, the south-

westerly outreach of the roots of Three Mountain. There they turned off the road and headed out onto the sands. Ruas and his Lady rode side by side at the front of the train, with Gernubai riding alone behind. The spring sun was warm, and the sands were dry. High above, great flocks of the birds of Water Eye wheeled and folded.

They rode in silence for two hours out towards the horizon.

At mid-afternoon Ruas spurred his horse on before them, riding fast and disappearing towards the sea. He rode until he saw the line of white surf in the far distance. Then he wheeled, and came galloping back towards the riders.

Set them down, he called in a mighty voice as he approached. Turn, and ride like the wind!

And he reined in his horse and dismounted. The women had begun running back over the sand after the horses, their hands still tied, stumbling and wailing. Ruas and Ios stood together on the sand. Gernubai stood alone, apart.

Ruas spoke into his horse's ear: Go home, Tetu. He slapped her rump and she took off after the departing horsemen.

They stood in silence. Gernubai turned away from them, her arms folded as if displeased, and studied the long line of approaching surf.

I do not ask for forgiveness, said Ruas.

Dokei tells me that your sister Telis has left Water Eye, said Ios. Will she forgive you?

What should the Sister forgive? said Ruas.

Perhaps, said Ios evenly, she would not wish for you to stand out on the sands on Tide-Day.

But Ruas seemed not to hear. He had narrowed his eyes, gazing intently after the fast receding horsemen and the wildly running women. Ios followed his gaze and saw a far brown motion in the haze over the sands. It seemed to merge for a time with the disappearing horsemen, then grew as it sped towards them. It was a small tight herd of roan.

It grew, and Ios saw the antlers of many stags. There were marquils steering them. They came thundering towards them, and as they drew near they swerved and ran grunting and snorting in a wide circle around Ruas, Ios, Gernubai and the fleeing women, penning them together.

A marquill leapt from the head of the leading stag and ran to Ios. She put down her arm and it ran up and stood on her shoulder. They looked into each others' eyes.

I have not seen you in five years, said Ios.

There is sun on the sand, and it warms the cold sea, said the marquill. We roan love the water, and we are good swimmers, not least with women on our backs.

The woman Entelisse stood alone in the small dusty silent square. Dominating it was a building of grey stone which she took to be the town hall. Its main doors were framed by two massive stone pillars far too large for the size of the building. Above the pillars, across the whole façade of the building, was a long ornate inscription in yellow on a blue background, in letters which she could not read. Over the building fluttered a small flock of birds.

Wearily she took a seat by a table outside an empty café opposite the hall, tucking her threadbare shoes under the chair and letting her small bundle of belongings slide to the ground beside her. An elderly waiter appeared by her side, looking up at the birds, saying something in a dialect she could not understand.

I have no money, said Entelisse in the Evenspeech. Could I have a glass of water?

I was saying they are early this year, the birds, said the old man. Would you take a bowl of lentil soup?

You are very kind, said Entelisse.

The soup was delicious, and the good slice of delf bread was more than she had eaten for several days.

It came to Entelisse that she had encountered such

kindness again and again on her long journey from Water Eye.  
And always she had heard: The birds are early this year.

You are on a journey? asked the old man.

I am going to Tanquish, said Entelisse.

Yes, they come through here, said the old man. Where will you stay tonight?

Where does a traveller without money stay? asked Entelisse.

Where they all stay. Up the hill. The Acropolis. But finish your soup.



Three pillars still stood on the brow of the rocky hill, two of them bearing the remains of an arch. The long floor was cracked and broken, overgrown with weeds. Here and there were patches of the old mosaic, an apple, a hand, a bird's tail feathers. The broken pillars lay scattered over the floor and on the hillside round the ruins. In the far corner, sitting on blocks of broken masonry, were three young men roasting food on sticks by a fire of brushwood. Entelisse made her way across the ruins towards them.

Come and eat, one of them called. We caught a hare.

He spoke with a rippling, lilting accent that Entelisse had not heard before on her long journey.

Thank you, said Entelisse as she came closer. I've already

eaten. But I will share your fire with you if I may. It will be cold when the sun drops.

You have food?

No. The old man at the café gave me lentil soup.

They looked at each other. What's your technique? they asked.

What do you mean?

He spat at us, told us to get out of town before he called the Watch.

Perhaps his mood had changed, said Entelisse.

They were clad in long dusty robes and had wisps of beard around their mouths, their black hair in long braids hanging down over their ochre faces. They had friendly eyes, glinting under heavy eyebrows. They were hardly more than boys.

You are from the East? said Entelisse. They nodded, smiling. Kirfa, said one of them, speaking the name as if it were holy.

A flock of birds came wheeling down to perch chattering together on the standing arch.

Perhaps they're refugees too, said one of the boys.

They made room for her by the fire, and each one gave her his hand and said their names. Entelisse laughed, her first laugh for many days, and said: I shall never remember such long and beautiful names!

What is yours? they asked. And she replied: Telis. And they



all laughed again.

That is a short and beautiful name, one of them said. Are you going to Tanquish?

Yes. And you?

Could be. They tell us that people are not friendly in Tanquish. They speak with two voices.

Two voices, she thought, was a good description of what she had heard of k2or.

Maybe their mood will change, said Entelisse, if I come with you.



The next day Entelisse and the three boys sat on the bank of a great river in the evening sun. They had raised the white flag on the tall pole to call the boatman from the far side, but they could see no movement. Perhaps the distance was too great.

How do we pay for the crossing? Entelisse had asked.

We pay. We are rich.

Their names were so long-drawn and elaborate, so poetic and graceful, that Entelisse could make no attempt at repeating them. Instead she picked out the syllables at their ends, and called them Kef, Rek and Aku. They laughed mightily, three brothers. You are very clever to hear the sequence, said Aku. First son, second son, third son. That is what we call the

Three-Beyond-Tungel.

Why are you going to Tanquish? asked Entelisse

Our people are dying, said Kef.

How? Why?

There is no water, said Rek. The Anamen have taken it all.

The river Ozu that ran through the Holy City is dry, said Kef.

The Holy City?

Kirfa, said Aku. Kirfa is a dead city.

The Anamen have diverted the river? asked Entelisse.

No no. They have drunk all the water. They are dying too.

Our parents used to swim in the river. But the Anamen are so many. They drink it all. With their cattle. It has happened so fast. We call it the Change.

Can you not come to an arrangement with these Anamen?

Once, long ago, we killed them. Those were the early times. Then the Ozu flowed deep and strong. And now they decide to kill us by drinking all the water. But the seasons changed. There was not enough water for them either. So they left Gosste and moved up-river.

Gosste? said Entelisse.

They call it Gosste, the Holy City, when they lived there, said Aku.

We drove them out, said Kef. Before. It was our city, before, in the time of the rains. That is what Kirfa means. The wet place. We took it from them again. We were a poor people, and now

we are poorer.

You said you were rich, said Entelisse.

We three. Because we came away. To see the rest of the world, before the Change reaches you too. Where do you come from?

Water Eye, said Entelisse

The boatman was now visible, in mid-river.

Here! shouted Rek.

Water Eye, said Aku. That is why the birds follow you. They have come to us, sometimes, in Kirfa. Is the Water wide? There is enough?

There is sometimes too much, said Entelisse. We build our houses on poles, so that the floods do not reach us. Our weather is changing too. There have been great storms.

You forests are sucking up our water, said Kef.

The boatman was within hailing distance.

You pay? he shouted. Rek lifted the brace of hares for him to see.

The children die first, said Aku. Then there is silence. Then the women die, one by one.



Why do you wish to cross? asked the boatman.

We are travelling west, said Rek.

It is worse in the West, said the boatman. You should go

back east.

We want to see the world before the Change comes, said Rek. So we cross now, while there is still water.

If there were no water, you could walk, said the boatman.

Then it would be too late, said Kef.

There was, as usual, a deep and palpable silence on the crowded benches, but instead of the usual suspense and anticipation there was a heavy sense of foreboding. Four people sat on the dais: Ruas in the seat of the Eldest, his hands clasped together on the table, his head bowed, his robe flung over damp garments in disarray; to his right sat Dokei in the full attire of a Hillman Speaker; and to his left, sitting at the very end of the table, the tall black woman of the Fleet and her small grey-haired white companion.

The most glaring discrepancy was that the Lady was not in her seat, and there was no Amphora.

At last Ruas raised his head, and spoke in a low, almost exhausted voice, but one that carried in the piercing silence:

We are here to listen to the delegates from the Geordian Fleet, he said. The Speaker will introduce them.

A man spoke in a loud clear voice from the benches: Where is the Lady?

Dokei intervened immediately: The Lady will not attend this meeting. She has better things to do.

And the man's voice came without pause or hesitation: She is with our women?

She has departed from Wedge, said Dokei. There are

several Women of Wedge who are accompanying her.

Women of Wedge! An unheard-of formulation. There was muttering on the benches.

Man-woman! shouted a voice.

There was sudden silence. Dokei rose slowly to her feet until she stood her full height, her eyes roving over the audience. Her presence was magnificent. She smiled, and her smile shone with a strong and subtle light.

Not so, she said. I am neither man nor woman. I am Speaker of the People of the High Moors.

The silence now was alive, and waiting. Still standing, Dokei resumed:

We have with us delegates and friends from the Geordian Fleet. They will introduce themselves. She sat, and at the end of the table the tall black woman stood. There were lines of age in her face, and her eyes shone with a powerful light.

My name is Roinje, she said. I wish to thank you for allowing me to address this honourable assembly. I bring you word from Tanquish.

There was movement in the centre of the hall. We need no women to tell us their stories, said a voice.

Ruas lurched suddenly to his feet. His voice was terrible to hear, at the same time broken, yet knife-sharp: There will be silence in this hall, he said. You will listen to the Delegate.

Again there was silence.

Roinje waited until Ruas had sat down. Then she spoke in an even voice.

Men of Wedge, men of the Domain, she said; and then she paused until the silence became in itself a statement. She continued:

It is my custom to address my audiences with the words: My lovely brothers and sisters. Once before, on a planet far away from here, I could not say this. There I had to ask my audience why there were no men present? The answer I received was that they were all out working in the field or looking after the children; and that they would not in any case understand what I was saying.

There was a short pause, and then some low laughter.

I see you take my point, said Roinje. But this is not what we came here to speak of. After this meeting, I shall talk to your women, and I shall say the same things. I believe the women of Wedge and of the Domain will well understand the things I have to say.

The audience waited, electrified.

Five years ago, said Roinje, the people of Wedge won a great victory over the army of the Code. For that victory, we stand in your debt. The Code is disbanded, and the people of Tanquish breath freely again. And Carhault stands in your debt, for you have offered food and shelter to the Paulian women who survived the rout of the Code. From Tanquish I bring you

greetings and thanks for these deeds, and from Carhault I bring you contrition and thanks for your clemency.

However there is a new threat on the horizon. For some time now our greatest enemy has not been Carhault, but the Lords of the Bases, which as some of you know is powerful association of rich worlds far away from us. They control inter-par communication and have always maintained an important way-station in Tanquish in Har, just across the mountains from you. Some of you have been to Tanquish and know these things. My companion Yrre here once worked as a Driver in Tanquish under the command of the Bases. I too worked for the Bases, together with my Geordian crew. Yrre was our pilot in Tanquish when we defected and joined the Geordian Fleet of Liberation.

There are Marians among us, said a voice.

And are they heard?

They are few, said another voice. They speak against Carhault.

No longer, said the first voice. They speak against slavery.

Roinje lifted her hand and spoke over the burst of talking that followed: The question of the Paulians is one of the matters we wish to raise with you. But there are others. The Paulians of Carhault have long been tolerated by the Lords of the Bases, but since the failure of the Code, relations have cooled between Carhault and the Lords. The tide is turning, and Carhault is looking to us Geordians for support against the Bases. Inter-par



communication is again becoming precarious, and the Bases are developing new technologies based on the time-sequencing programs used by the Code in their war with you five years ago.

You mean they will send a new Change? said a voice from the benches.

That is what we fear, said Roinje. And now the technology is more powerful and the threat greater. They will control communications between planets far better than they have ever been able to. This is a threat no less to the Paulians of Carhault than to us. It is therefore imperative that the whole of Huld, including the Men of the Domain, show their goodwill towards Carhault.

The silent audience knew what was coming. But it came with an unexpected twist.

We ask that you allow your servants to return to Carhault, those who wish to. And that you accept those who wish to stay as citizens of the Domain. And then she added, with hardly a pause, her eyes blazing: And that you grant the same citizenship to your own women.

There was a stunned silence. You idiot, said Roinje to herself.

One man stood up and said in a high, forceful voice: This will never be!

And one by one the whole assembly stood and chanted with one voice: This will never be!



I blew it, said Roinje.

Yes, said Yrre. You were doing fine. Up to the last sentence.

Dokei was laughing. You Marians will never learn, she said.

All or nothing.

I know, I know. But it takes so long.

And now you have made it take longer.

So what do you suggest, young Dokei? asked Roinje.

Only by showing respect can you hope for change.

You sound like Teod, said Roinje.

I should like to meet your Teod one of these days, said Dokei.

Slow down, said Yrre. We still have to talk to the women.

No, said Roinje. Dokei and I will handle this. You are not wanted here, Driver. Go fetch yourself a horse and ride back to Lankar's encampment. Ios needs you.



The Market was filled with women and children. Roinje stood on the steps with Dokei and raised her voice to them.

Women of Wedge!

And the Women of the Men of Wedge gave a great shout of delight at the enormity of the formula: We are the Women of

Wedge!

They linked arms and chanted: Women of Wedge! Women of Wedge!

At the gate of the Old Town a crowd of Paulian slave-women was gathering. Some of the women in the square turned and beckoned to them: Women of the Old Town! Come and join the Women of Wedge!

Here and there in the square women began to unwind their headscarves and let down their hair. Some had cut their hair short. There were screams of delight, and more and more followed suit, hooting with laughter at the scale of their own defiance. And the chant rose ever higher: Women of Wedge! Women of Wedge!

And then the chant broke into cries of derision as a column of Horsemen issued from the Upper Gate and took up positions in front of the steps to the Hall, cutting off Roinje and her companions from the women.

Go home, Teuk! yelled the women. Go home to your womanless homes! We dismiss you! Go and commiserate with your miserable Eldest, who has lost his Lady Ruis, our Youngest! We have uncovered our heads to show that we do not need your company!

Roinje raised her hands in a bid to be heard:

Women of Wedge!

Women of Wedge! Women of Wedge! came the reply. Go

home, Teuk! We the Women of Wedge dismiss you, as the Lady dismissed you! We will talk with the Geordians!

And faced with the raging sea of free-flying women's hair, white and grey, yellow and red and black, the raised fists and flashing eyes, Teuk turned his horsemen and led them out through the Upper Gate.

And Roinje and Dokei sat on the steps and waited for the jubilation to subside.

Finally there was relative quiet. Women of Wedge, she said, without raising her voice. Sit with us and talk with us. But it seemed to Roinje that their numbers had thinned.

Tell us about the women of the Geordians, said a voice.

Tell us about the women of the High Moors, said another.

Dokei said: The women of the High Moors make food, and wash and clean, and tend the children, like you. Sometimes they get to ride with the roan, like the men.

Do they work hard? someone asked.

They work hard, as do the men. But some say that working hard on the open moor with the roan is a better life than working hard in the tent with the children.

There was laughter. Many of the women had seated themselves on the steps around Dokei and Roinje. And Roinje spoke.

We Geordians do not speak of the women of the Geordians, she said. We talk of crews, and parents and children. And while

the people grounded on planets quarrel and fight, cheat and steal, we live in luxury and poverty and make timeless works of art to celebrate their misery, we ride the great tides and watch for the beacons of light and peace to kindle here and there among the stars. We do not talk of men and women.

You speak for all Geordians? a woman said. You are sent here to speak for them?

Of course, said Roinje. I am old, I have experience, I am a spokesman for my people. Is this strange? You do not think it strange that Dokei speaks for the Hillmen.

All Hillmen are strange, said another. Dokei is Dokei.

No, women of Wedge, said Dokei, laughing. I am not thought of as strange among my people. There are others amongst us who are like me. For the Hillmen, it is you who are strange. We cannot understand why you allow your men to arrange your lives, to own you as they own their dogs. A man who behaved like that amongst us would be laughed at, and his woman would leave him and soon find herself a better man.

There was a silence. In Wedge, said a woman sitting close to Roinje, there are no better men.

Are you sure? asked Dokei. Look for them! They are here, but they hide their true thoughts. You also know there are men-women here in Wedge, like me: they too are in hiding.

This is Hillman talk, said one of the women, still standing. You know nothing of Wedge. Where would we be without our

men? Living in squalor and sin like the Hillmen? This is unnatural talk.

There were calls of agreement. Emboldened, the woman continued: The men think they control us, and let them think that. But in fact it's we who control them. You women who sit listening to the he-she Hillman there, you need to learn how to please your men, and how to control them. That is the way of the Women of the Men of Wedge.

And other women were on their feet again, shouting. Quarrels broke out throughout the crowd.

Roinje stood up.

Women of Wedge! she called.

Women of the Men of Wedge! called someone else.

Get back to your miserable men, and give them their evening meal! shouted another. You who have men who can't feed themselves.

There was shouting and pushing.

Dokei turned to Roinje: Now I blew it, she said, smiling her wide, warm smile. Come, let's get out of here.

Perhaps we planted the seed, said Roinje.

It had already sprouted, said Dokei.

Ios said to herself: I have come back into time.

The last three days were sharp and clear in her mind, minute by minute, while the five years of nightmare were sinking into the distant past. The long swim in the racing seas, the roan submerged under their riders, head and horns hardly rising above the waves, and the dancing marquils. Time and time again both roan and rider sank into the foam, sometimes gaining the sandy bottom and bounding up out into the sunlight, sometimes rolling helpless in the cross-currents as the tide ripped here and there across the rippled sands. And then the Hillman riders, their horses' eyes blazing over the churning waters, gripping the women one by one, laying them like sacks of plunder over their saddle-bows, until the horses floundering up onto the dry, warm sand and stood there steaming as the women lay coughing and crying on the sand about them. A group of Geordians on horseback were waiting for them, not having dared ride into the churning waters. The roan stood together on the higher sand, their bodies steaming; and the marquils danced between them. Ruas stood apart, bedraggled and dripping.

The horsemen put the women two and two on their horses and led them over the grasslands to the higher ground east of

Wedge and up into the woods. Ruas walked wet and miserable after them for a while before turning off into the town: no one saw him go. Soon they came upon a group of low Hillman tents in a well-concealed clearing in the woods, where more Hillmen had warm dry clothing ready for the women. Inside the tents they cast themselves exhausted onto skins and slept.

The next morning the train of horses, Geordians and skin-clad women and Hillmen, made their way northwest up through the woods until they found the Wintergate road, the one that Ios, Pileo and the crew had ridden as the marquils drove through the night five years before. Ios felt her body reacting with fear as they passed through Wintergate Village and began to climb the road up towards Lye. The Hillman walking beside her noticed this, and gripped her arm. Have no fear, he said. Sheug is gone. The Hillmen hold the farm.

And standing in the yard at Lye were Lankar and Hersili, their arms flung wide in greeting. Behind them stood a small grey-haired man in a Geordian cape, who took Ios's hand in both of his and looked at her with twinkling eyes. I am Yrre, he said. Roinje and I didn't get to see you five years ago in the Winter City. We would have tried harder if we had known what was in store.



The weather was warm, and Ios and the women sat on



benches at a table in the farmyard. Hillmen brought food, and Lankar, Hersili, Dokei, Roinje and Yrre sat with them.

There is turmoil in Wedge, said Lankar. Roinje has started a wildfire that will burn there for a long time, and perhaps spread throughout the Domain.

We did little, said Roinje. The time was ripe, and the terrible practice of taking women to the sea had finally come to be seen for what it was. The misbalance between men and women has long been unsustainable, and was bound to come to a head. But any change will not come easily. The People of Wedge are now deeply divided, and the way forward is fraught with uncertainty.

And my comrades here, the Fallen Women? said Ios. What will become of them?

Let us call you the Free Women, said Hersili. We shall have to see how things turn out. But until you can return—and wish to return—we can offer you shelter and friendship.

And then there are the Paulian slaves, said Lankar. We must hope that the agreement between our Speaker Dokei and the Elder Ruas will hold after these latest events. Our Geordian friends are here to supervise the return to Carhault for those who wish to return. What is your wish, Gernubai?

I wish to stay with the Lady, said Gernubai.

There is no Lady, said Ios; but I would dearly like your company, Gernubai. I hope to return to Tanquish.

We will take you there, said Yrre. But I would ask you to come with us to our ship and meet our crew first. We have many things to talk about.

I should like that, said Ios. But I have a prior arrangement. Dokei is taking me to the Mountain. We are going to the top.



On their way up to Winter City Dokei and Ios and their five Hillmen companions had met groups of noisy Hillmen families on their sledges heading down to the summer encampments. Winter City was half empty, moving into its summer season, when it would be occupied by the few who preferred the high snows to the pollen-rich summer, and who volunteered to maintain and refurbish the City while the Hillmen were in their summer encampments. Dokei and Ios rested themselves and their horses, and they and the group of five young Hillmen who had accompanied them up the mountain slept in the empty quarters of their choice. Ios slept little, her mind racing.

Early next morning Dokei took her out to take stock of the weather. It was mild and clear, with a faint breeze from the north-west, off the mountain. Belinc says we have three days before the next weather, said Dokei. There is a good frost on the mountain and the going should be easy. We are fifteen hours to the top.

How many times have you been up there? asked Ios.

Twice. First with Lankar and Hersili when I was a child. I remember little. But two years ago I went up with three friends. We told nobody. It was very stupid.

Why stupid? asked Ios.

The route is easy to follow in good weather, said Dokei. But if the cloud descends you are in trouble. If you go too close to the edge of the ridge you are on an overhang of snow, and you are in trouble. Best to dig yourself into the snow and wait for help. Belinc can find you, but that is their matter, and they cannot be called. They have their own agenda.

So we should start this morning? said Ios.

Now, said Dokei.



By mid-morning the group had rounded the high cliffs above the City and were heading for a deep gulley that led up to the flank of the mountain proper. They were well equipped with Hillman high mountain gear, light oiled skins over warm furs and spiked snow-boots of roan-leather. They carried snow-staves in each hand and small packs of delf and herb-water on their backs. Dokei and two of her companions had ice-picks and light ropes of horse-hair on their shoulders.

The route up the gulley was difficult; at two places they stopped to rope themselves together and Dokei and the two Hillmen climbed first, using the ice-picks to cut steps. But they

made good progress, and by midday they were out of the gulley and onto the snowfield. The long curving shoulder of the mountain soared above them; and for the first time Ios saw the summit. The path seemed clear to the top.

Dokei's companions produced two light tents from their packs and started to dig themselves in. Herb-water was boiled on a small spirit-stove and the group munched delf.

No dallying, said Dokei. We will have company up to the night camp; the others will stay here. The two Hillmen who had led the way up the gulley, a man and a woman, stood up and strapped on their packs.

The climb was gentle at first, becoming steeper as the afternoon wore on; but the going was still comfortable over the hard snow. As they climbed, the lower grasslands began to spread out below them, and the shoulder of the mountain began to recede until the far vista of sands seemed to merge with the lowlands that stretched beyond the roots of the mountain. Ios fancied she could see farms under the mountain. It that the sea? she asked suddenly, pointing.

They took the opportunity for a short break and sat leaning against their packs in the snow with a small slice of delf each.

That's the sea, said Dokei. Ios shuddered. So close, she said, and so far.

From the top you should see over the whole plain to the Western Mountains, said the man. I have seen the Gaps north

of Tanquish from the top.

Nonsense, said Dokei. They're below the horizon.

You decide your own horizon, said the man. You say that yourself, Speaker.

Speaker me no speaker and horizon me no horizon, said Dokei; and the Hillmen laughed. Explain to Ios, said one of them.

It's a story, said Dokei. Let's get to the top first.



As the afternoon drew on the descent became less steep. The route up to the far summit lay along a long curving dune of ice and snow which seemed an easy path to the top; but Ios guessed it was far longer and more arduous than it seemed. The sun was sinking towards the far sea-horizon in the west, and as the shadows lengthened the soft breeze dropped and the frost began to sparkle on the snow. Finally Dokei decided that the time had come to pitch camp for the night. They unpacked a small tent and produced poles and stays from Dokei's pack. Ios watched with some misgivings as they dug out a shallow pocket of level snow for the tent to sit in: surely it was not big enough for four people. But Dokei seemed unperturbed. Delf and cold tea, she said: who could ask for more? Now you will have to learn how to sleep in a real mountain tent, she said to Ios. Two and two together, head to foot. We wrap our furs around each

other. Two people together in their furs are twice as warm as one.

The sun had dropped below the horizon. Instinctively, Ios searched in the east for the Span. The Outriders should be well up by now, she thought, and soon Tenes will kindle. Tenes, the yellow jewel of the Span.

Dokei followed her gaze.

What is this? said Dokei thoughtfully. Have I mistaken the time?

Tenes should have come up by now, said the woman. But I don't see her.

Dokei had taken her glasses from her pack and was training them at the Span.

Tenes is dark, she said. What does this mean?



Ios slept warm, hugging Dokei's knees. Everybody was up before dawn. The skies were still clear, the weather calm, and a hard frost.

We will go on alone, said Dokei. My friends will follow our progress. There is a crater at the top: they will lose our signal if we descend into it. We'll decide about that when we see how the snow lies.

And Dokei and Ios set off, still munching delf.



By late morning the sun was warm, and Ios was sweating. This is not good, said Dokei. Loosen your furs. We'll take a break, and go on slower. There's no hurry: we should reach the top soon after midday. But time passes quickly on the top. We should bet back to Keri and Resis by nightfall.

The final stage of the journey followed the high, narrow ridge to the summit. There were terrifying drops on both sides, but Dokei kept close to the northern face, away from the great overhang of snow and ice to the south. The wind had dropped to nothing, and Dokei was anxious. I didn't expect this calm weather, she said. Not here on the top.

And suddenly, the slope levelled out. In front of them lay a stadion-wide crater, almost filled with snow: a shallow white bowl on the top of the world. Ios stopped, and said nothing.

It is as I remember it, said Dokei.

Yes, said Ios.

Dokei looked at her. Is it as you remember it? she said.

Yes, said Ios. It was like this. But at night. Tungel lit it. And the Three-Beyond-Tungel.

Five years ago? said Dokei.

Yes, said Ios.

I shall wait here for you, said Dokei. Go down into the crater.

She watched as Ios made her way down the gentle slope, until she stood, a tiny black figure against the white snow, in the centre of the bowl. And Dokei turned, and moved away, so that when Ios turned and looked up at her friend, there was no figure on the sly line. Ios sat cross-legged in the snow, alone at the top of the world, where she had come before, where countless people had come in the times of their greatest need. Above the rim of the crater Three-Beyond-Tungel were rising. She closed her eyes and settled into her own Time.



Mother!

Hush children. Ios is in the crater. Listen.



Are you here, Rautte? asked Ios. I could not hear you when I was here before. You were here, Pileo. But Rautte was not.

I am here now, said Rautte.

Ios felt a great peace within her. Dearest Rautte, she said. I did not know you.

You knew me well, my lovely Ios.

They sat together on the hillside above Ariel, holding hands and looking down at the town and the great plain that stretched



beyond.

But I did not know I knew you, said Ios.

Were we together in Ariel? In Tanquish? On the mountain?  
Out on the sands?

We were never together, Rautte, said Ios. I never wanted that. I just wanted to hold your hand.

Our memories are different, said Rautte.

I'm so sorry, Rautte. You should have stayed with us. You should have grown old.

Perhaps next time, said Rautte.

They sat silently together, holding hands on the warm hillside above Ariel. Below the women were chanting derisively at the soldiers, and they watched the car draw up to at the checkpoint and the guard peering in through the open canopy, talking to Pileo.

Telis is waiting for you in Tanquish, said Rautte.

Was it good, you and Telis? asked Ios.

Yes, said Rautte. We were happy.

I shall take Telis to the Qert, to see the elves, said Ios. I wish you could come with us.

Perhaps next time, said Rautte.

Next time, said the Mother, I shall suckle you both.

And Dokei was calling: Ios! we must return! The weather is turning!



The last storm of the departing winter had broken on the upper slopes of Three Mountain, and the light was failing by the time Dokei and Ios came down to the tent, but the Hillmen had seen them coming an hour before, and set a flag for them to follow. They had piled snow around the tent and the blizzard was laying down its blanket over everything. Inside was warm, the spirit-stove was singing, the kettle was on the boil, and Ios and Dokei dived into their companions' warm beds, Ios with the woman and Dokei with the man. The storm raged throughout the night, but they slept warm.

The blizzard continued unabated the next morning. The frost had slackened. It will be heavy going down the mountain when this lets up, said Dokei. But better down than up.

About an hour after midday they became aware of movement outside: something was walking on the snow over the tent. Then there was a scrabbling at the tent flap, and two marquils pushed their way in, blanketed in snow. They shook themselves and scattered ice over everything. Then they looked Ios and Dokei in the eye and mouthed clearly over the noise of the storm: *Blink*. Ios heard: Time to pack up and go. Dokei heard: It will be clear by mid-afternoon.

Leave everything, said Dokei. We'll pick it up later. The humans roused themselves, pulled on their furs and skins,

bound up their snow-shoes, and forced their way out into the storm in the wake of the dancing marquils.



Izza to Yrre: greetings.

The girl Telis has arrived.

There is unrest in Tanquish between factions that support Carhault and those who support Traffic, and thus the Bases. My position is difficult. I may have to return to Carhault.

Mining operations are underway in the Span, working directly from the Bases.

I fear a new Regeneration Program.

When do you intend to return?



She fears a new Regeneration Program! snorted Roinje. It's barely five years since her own failed. I don't trust her.

She's the de facto Traffic in Tanquish, reporting to the Bases, said Yrre. And yet she communicates with me in this way.

She's a Paulian, said Roinje. Her loyalty will always be with Carhault.

Her loyalty will be to herself, said Yrre. We must go home and talk to her.

Home? So Tanquish is now home to you, Driver?

Yrre smiled. I need to talk to Teod, he said.



Maro's grave-mound was a studded with tiny flowers. I gather them on the moors and plant them here, said Ested, and in late summer I gather seed-pods. The children help, and they do the same for other mounds. And then they pick them and play with them. I'm getting good at the language. This is a lovely place.

She and Ios sat together on a low stone wall that wound between the grave-mounds.

It's good to see you after all this time, said Ested. I never went back to that dreadful Wedge-place. It's been five years, my lass.

Something went wrong with my time, said Ios. It was a nightmare. Suddenly I feel much older.

You are, said Ested. I remember Yrre when we took him to the Qert. He was a stuck-up young man. Maro didn't like him, not then. Pileo liked him, though. He's so different now. Now I like him.

Ested was quiet for a while, lost in thought. Then she said: Yrre was Reagh's lover. Reagh lies in the barrow up above the Laer.

I didn't think the Gleaners' gods could die, said Ios. Wasn't it a shock when Reagh died?

Gods don't die, said Ested. They don't live in the same way as we do. They are closer to the One. Reagh took a young woman's body to be with us. The body died. All bodies do.

It sounded reasonable. Ios's Paulian education had come late in her development, and she didn't feel the revulsion towards the Gleaner's beliefs that Izza had felt. Her brief time in Reagh's Lodge remained in her memory as a time of happiness, and she longed to see her old friend and teacher Teod again.

Won't you come back to Tanquish with me, Ested?

Not yet, said Ested. I feel safe here, and close to my Maro. The Hillmen are good to me, and Hersili is my friend. Lankar is a darling. Dokei is like a daughter. Or a son, I really don't know which. She makes me laugh so much. She teaches me Three, and I can talk to the children. But I was glad to see Yrre again. He doesn't look so different, only older. Like me, I suppose. Roinje is wonderful. I've never really met a Geordian before. She bowls me over. I can't see what she sees in Yrre. It's confusing, Ios, isn't it?

Most things are, said Ios.



Yrre embraced Ested, and she cried a little. And Ested hugged Gernubai. Stay close to Ios, my lass, she said. You won't come to harm with her.

Ios clung to Dokei. You'll come to Tanquish and see me, she

said. I will, said Dokei. Tell Telis I miss her.

I miss everybody, said Ios. She hugged Hersili and Lankar.

You are a sentimental bunch, said Roinje. Come along, Ios, if you want to go to Tanquish.

Where's the marquil? asked Ios.

Went on ahead, said Dokei.

## 22

The four travellers stood with their faces to the wall, their hands above their heads, palms against the stones. The guards at the South Gate of Tanquish were debating in k2or, and the woman Entelisseem listened to the bewildering range of their modal phasing, hearing the indecisions but not understanding more than the odd word. After a while they fell silent.

Kef looked over his shoulder. How long do we stand here? he asked, in the Evenspeech.

You silent, came the reply. You wait. Face to the wall.

They waited.

Entelisseem heard the door open, and the movement of feet. A juicy voice spoke, in simplified k2or, without phasing. It came to her that the man was a Paulian. She understood: No weapons?

No, my Lord.

No money?

Three copper pennies, my Lord.

Where from?

From the South, my Lord.

Idiot, I see that. And the woman?

I am from Water Eye, said Entelisseem, in the Evenspeech. I come to visit Teod of the Gleaners. He knows of my coming. My companions travel with me.

Turn, said the voice. Entelisse turned.

He was a tall, portly man in a purple cloak, unhooded, his dyed black hair hanging over his shoulders, shot with gold: clearly a Paulian.

You are no woman of Water Eye, he said.

I was not born there.

You are from where?

I am from Three Mountain, she said.

The Paulian stared at her in silence.

From which place in Three? he asked at length.

From Wedge Town.

A woman of Wedge in Water Eye? he said incredulously.

I was banished, she said.

My information is that women banished from Wedge are taken to the sea, said the Paulian.

Telis was silent.

Unless you are the daughter and the sister? said the Paulian.

I will speak with Teod, said Telis, not with a man who sat at table while his soldiers were run into the sea.

The Paulian smiled. So you are Telis, he said. You will come with me. No—your fellow travellers stay here.



Leave us, Naguad sef, said Izza.

His stare was incredulous. But Izza merely smiled. If you



would be so good, she said.

The Lord Sodt swept his beautiful hair disdainfully over his shoulder, turned on his heel and left.

Sit with me, my child, said Izza, leading her to the window. They sat looking out over the square. The small café opposite reminded Telis of the café in the town where she had been offered lentil soup.

How long have you been in Water Eye? asked Izza.

Since the Rout, said Telis. She was rewarded by Izza's almost imperceptible eye-movement: she had taken the thrust.

So it is more than five years since you have seen Ios?

It was Telis's turn to be surprised. I have had word of Ruis, but not of her, she said.

Of Ios?

Yes. Of Ruis. Telis was fencing the Paulian.

How have you had word of her?

From the birds, said Telis.

You don't expect me to believe that, said Izza.

Not for a second, said Telis; and saw that Izza was beginning to regret having called her My Girl.

You will be meeting Ios here in Tanquish? said Izza.

Teod sent for me, and has doubtless also sent for Ruis. Ios that is. I trust you can persuade your guards to give her free passage when she arrives.

Izza was silent, watching the birds flocking over the café.

I shall have you escorted to Teod, she said at last.

Together with my companions from Kirfa, said Telis.

They are illegal immigrants in Tanquish, said Izza. It is a matter for the Tanquish authorities.

Your gentleman with the marvelous hair seems to have authority over the guards, said Telis.

Everyone had authority over the guards, said Izza. The authorities in Tanquish are a different matter.

You must speak to them, said Telis.

My dear girl, said Izza. You have to find them before you can speak to them. Even Naguad sef has not managed that yet. I shall speak to the guards.



Telis remembered the smell as she climbed up into the old Tanquish carryall: she remembered the wheezing motor, and the smell of Pileo and her crew, and the marquill under the skins.

The driver leant over and took her hand. My name is Sweoppe, he said. You must be Telis. Teod is hopping with excitement.—He spoke the Evenspeech in a way which told Telis it was his native tongue, and his handshake was warm.

The guards were pushing the three men from Kirfa up into the back of the wagon. You must unshackle them! cried Telis.

Teod will unshackle them, said Sweoppe.

She looked at him, her eyes searching.

Teod has the key? she asked.

He looked her in the eye without replying.

But she did not take her eyes from his. She had seen something else.

Yes, said Sweoppe. Rautte was my younger brother.



Teod hugged her as if she were a daughter. Not like the Daughter and the Sister, she thought. Like Pubriassem had hugged her.

They sat alone together by the great hearth. For the first time in many weeks Telis was no longer hungry. Teod wanted to hear of Water Eye, and she told him what she knew. Then he asked about Wedge, and about Ios.

I can tell you of Ruis—Ios—before the Rout, said Telis. Before I went to Water Eye. And then the birds brought only small news. She has much to tell us all. When is she coming?

Soon, said Teod. Time enough for you to learn to be a Gleaner.

Telis did not reply. But then she said: Where are my companions?

They are being looked after, said Teod. They need food and sleep.

Telis took a deep breath. Her voice was low as she asked: Why were they shackled? And why do you have the key?

Teod's eyes were troubled. This is not the first time, he said.

The Gleaners shelter the refugees? she asked. The authorities allow this?

It is the way of the authorities, said Teod. You will understand in time. The Gleaners tread carefully. Care for the elves is our first priority. For three years under the Code we were not allowed to travel south to tend them. They suffered greatly. We cannot afford to upset the authorities.

And what will happen to the boys?

What will happen to you and me? asked Teod. What will happen to the elves?

Who are these authorities?

Tanquish is not what it was, said Teod. The people are not what they were. As we say in our language—and the sentence he spoke sounded like music: Time becomes.

## 23

The four ships of the Geordian Fleet drifted together in the Span.

There were cheers on Nostra's flight deck, as usual, as Roinje and Yrre came aboard, with Ios and Gernubai, disorientated, as the Geordians' guests ever are, by the suddenness of the transition. I shall drive you up, Yrre had said. So this is driving, thought Ios.

Tuusa took Ios's hand. Welcome, comrade, she said. We've heard about you. We have some serious talking to do. And this is Gernubai? You are a Paulian?

Gernubai signed her breasts briefly in Paulian manner, overcome, her eyes down. Everyone knew that Geordians wore no clothes on the flight deck, but the stark reality was merciless. Tuusa took her hand. Come, she said. Crei! she called to a young man working on a tab. Put on your robe and take Gernubai down to off-duty. Show her her quarters. Let her meet the Grandfathers. Show her the doings. Don't push her.

Shall do, shan't do, said Crei. Come on, lady.

Grandfathers? said Yrre.

Terei and Donnai, said Tuusa.

Of course, said Yrre. Terei and Donnai. Oh yes, of course.



Where are we? said Ios, gazing in awe at the silent asteroids, and the three other ships drifting a few hundred stadia from the pasdaghe on which they stood.

We are in the Span, said Tuusa. We are recording.

Recording?

The Span is breaking up.

How, breaking up?

It's not in balance any longer. Perhaps it never was. There have always been adjustments, collisions, losses. Once or twice a century. Tuls collected some data before he went down to Huld. The Gleaners have records going back nearly two hundred years, and perhaps the elves remember longer. But now the changes are rapid. Tenes, the Yellow Light, has broken up, and its debris is spreading out and sending other bodies out of orbit. We think it was started by mining from the Bases. The Three-Beyond-Tungel are moving apart, two away from Tungel and one towards. We're working out the trajectories. At the moment it looks as if its going to collide with Tungel.

What would that mean? asked Ios.

We will have an answer in a day or two, said Tuusa. Assuming our tracking is accurate. It's probably not. We're working on it.

Is it dangerous for Huld? asked Ios.

As yet it's too early to say. But I would guess it'll be a long time before some sort of balance is regained. The Span will never be the same.

Never was the same, said Roinje. Where are the miners now?

We found their ship, said Tuusa. It was a huge vessel, and we're guessing it had taken on a big cargo of ore, too big to be screened from the par-field. If so its movement alone within the Span would be invasive and potentially dangerous. But it had also been hit by something moving fast, because the ore had scattered in all directions. If there were any other ships, they're not there now. We've asked Traffic but Izza is not being cooperative.

She's probably juggling to keep her position on Huld, said Roinje. That has never been easy. Carhault and the Bases are two very different masters.

I'm going down to Tanquish with Ios, said Yrre. Can you stay around for a bit?

That's up to Roinje, said Tuusa. But I feel we should stay around at least here until we've scanned the main orbits. There is no detailed data on the Span later than Tuls. How long will you be?

As long as I may, said Yrre.



It was as if Izza had been listening. Soon after the evening

meal the drive pad became active. The Tanquish driver is asking to come aboard, called the outlook.

I'll take it, said Yrre.

No you won't, said Roinje. You'll stay here and talk to Izza. Who's the host on rota? she asked Tuusa.

Fennei, said Tuusa. Is he OK?

Fennei is good, said Roinje. Let her come aboard. We've a lot of talking to do.

Fennei was already on the flight couch. Closing, he said.

Be careful out there, said Tuusa. Nothing deep. Keep shallow around everything.

Promise, said Fennei. Here she comes.

His eyes flickered. Trace in two, said his lips

Tracing in two ... two ... three, counted the outlook.

There was the usual ten seconds of suspense. Then his lips moved.

Trace in three, said Izza. She opened Fennei's eyes. Good, she said as she raised herself carefully on the couch. She looked round. Yrre, she said. And Roinje. Splendid timing.



You are getting old, Yrre, said Izza. I had forgotten.

Yes. What about you?

We can talk of old times if you come down to Tanquish again to see me, said Izza.



We intend to.

Fennei has eaten, said Tuusa, and you know us well enough to skip protocol. Will you come down to the Council Room?

That seems sensible, said Izza. They supported her off the couch, a little unsteady in Fennei's body. Yes I can tell he has eaten said Izza. Something disgusting. But I prefer to talk with you here rather than down in Tanquish, where the Lords of the Bases can hear my every word.—And where is this High Lady of yours?

Her gaze settled upon Ios. Ios returned it.

You'll come with us, my dear, I hope, said Izza. It's you I want to talk to.



In the Council Room, as Tuusa called it, Ios braced herself for questions. Izza began almost before she was seated.

You were a Paulian, I am told?

For a short while, said Ios. I was trafficked from Feis, and rescued by the Paulians. I had two years of convent life in Carhault before Pileo rescued me and brought me to Huld.

Rescued? Izza raised Fennei's eyebrows. Kidnapped, I would have said.

Rescued, repeated Ios evenly, holding Izza's gaze. She could feel Izza's eyes on her, a Paulian's eyes, not the open Geordian regard of the host Fennei.

Izza said: It seems five years as High Lady in Wedge has done you a lot of good.

No, said Ios. The last weeks have.

But Izza's words had hit hard, in spite of herself.

The Code destroyed you on the wash-plain, said Izza, as if stating a fact.

No, said Ios again. I was not in the car. The Code killed my companions.

And you resequenced?

I rewrote, said Ios.

Was that the first time you managed to resequence?

No, said Ios. I learnt to rewrite in childhood.

Who taught you?

Ios's eyes were steady, returning the cold regard.

My father taught me, said Ios. And his friends.

Your father was an adept?

Yes, said Ios after a pause. He was an adept.

She waited, watching Izza formulate her next question. As Izza drew breath to speak, Ios broke in:

He was an adept at violating his daughter, and selling her to his drunken friends. But I rewrote them, every time. So it was simple for me to rewrite your bloodthirsty guards at Ariel, who killed the kindest man I have ever met, and your murderous warplane on the sand who killed him again, and with him the crew who were my only family, and if you weren't in a good

Geordian's body I might be tempted to rewrite your evil presence on this ship.

Izza looked at her for a few moments; and then turned calmly to Yrre.

There is unrest in Wedge, she said. Ruas has reneged on his agreement to return the Paulian slaves, now he has no Lady to check him. The slaves are in revolt, and refuse to work. The faction that supports women's independence has allied itself with the slaves. Fighting has broken out.

Eus would never renege on such an agreement, said Ios. It is not in his nature.

Whatever, said Izza. There is unrest in Wedge, as there is in Tanquish. I fear it is of the same order as the unrest here in the Span.

You will have to explain what you mean, Izza, said Yrre.

As you and Roinje well know, this High Lady of yours had no part in the failure of the Code's Regeneration Program five years ago. For a time we thought there were forces in Three Mountain which might prevail against our Program, but when we saw the resequencing after the skycraft attack on the sands we started to focus on Ios. That was our mistake.

Why was it a mistake? asked Ios.

We had never really understood resequencing. We did not see the connection between it and driving.

What connection? said Yrre.

The par-driver relocates a node, said Izza. We never understood how, we just used the technique: and we still do. Some of us are better than others. Yrre is said to be the best, although I doubt that. But it never occurred to us that relocation and resequencing were the same process. Until we saw what Ios was doing. Then it became obvious. Ios calls it rewriting. Editing the chronology. Drivers edit the location. When you do one, you do the other. You position yourself in a new place in time.

And now the Bases are using this understanding?

So the true reason for the failure of our Regeneration Program was that the Bases were interfering, said Izza. They had found the calculus. They can resequence on a large scale. Which means they can also relocate on a large scale. They are on the verge of dispensing with drivers. They are going to close down Traffic here in Tanquish.

So that is what is happening, said Yrre. Here and in Wedge.

The new Change? said Ios.

The new Regeneration, said Izza.

There was a silence.

It seems, Izza Isqad, that we are on the same side, said Roinje.

Izza (Guerlec) to you, said Izza Isqad.



Phew, said Fennei.

Difficult out there? said Tuusa.

Not that, said Fennei. I hung around and listened to Izza.

Tuusa stiffened. Roinje exploded: You broke the first rule! You know how dangerous it is to interfere with a driver!

She wasn't driving, said Fennei. You were talking together. She wasn't going to drive, we knew that. I wanted to hear what was going on. And I could pick up on some of her thoughts.

Yrre broke in: Izza came aboard as a driver, and took a host's body, but did not intend to drive. It never occurred to me. Now *that's* a breach of protocol!

She has done that before, said Roinje, remembering the first time she had met Izza. But that's not all. She boarded a ship of the Fleet, extra-par. If the Bases work that out, she's in real trouble. What was she thinking?

Her first priorities were to meet Ios, obviously, said Yrre.

She was really thrown by Ios, said Fennei. She kept thinking: She's a driver. She was afraid. What was going on?

He looked at Ios. She was looking at him rigidly.

I'm sorry, Ios, said Fennei. I'm not Izza any more. Really.

Ios allowed herself a smile. Forgive me, Fennei. I've never seen Izza. She still looks like Fennei to me. I hope I'll get used to you.

Do your best, said Fennei.



Tuusa, said Roinje, can you leave the flight deck? I want to go down to the off-duty and let Ios meet the crew. Come with us.

Terei spread out his arms, but did not try to stand up. Donnai, sitting beside him, rose to his feet and came forward to embrace Yrre, chuckling. The old revolutionary, he said, bubbling with pleasure. Terei, it's Yrre.

I can see who it is you old pantaloons, said Terei. Let me get hold of him! And Yrre dropped into the seat between them. They each took one hand. So you came back to the old pasdaghe, said Terei. Fed up with wandering about in the cosmic dust?

Haven't been doing much of that of late, said Yrre. Been wandering about on the ground, doing what Roinje tells me to do. I'm just a mouthpiece.

Our Roinje got you on a leash, said Donnai. I always thought she was one of us. More fool I. Organizing, she calls it. I call it bossing others around.

Watch I don't start organizing you, Donnai, said Roinje.

Too late, Roinje my love. Terei and me we've got ourselves organised. Who's this?

This is Ios, said Yrre. Roinje has got designs on her, too.

Ios took the old men's hands in hers. You're Gernubai's lady, said Terei. But you're not a Paulian, Gernubai said you were a

Paulian.

You met Gernubai? Where is she?

I'm afraid you've lost Gernubai, said Terei. We don't have servants on the pasdaghe.

She is my friend, not my servant, said Ios, a little pointedly.

Then that's all right. But I think you'll find she is Crie's friend, too. Do us good to have new blood aboard, said Donnai. Too many pure-blooded Geordians on this ship. I once had good hopes for Taarh—remember him, Yrre?

I do, said Yrre. Reagh's brother. We were all young then. You rather fancied him, didn't you Terei?

We were all young, then, said Terei, grinning at Donnai. We were a good crew. You going down to Tanquish, Yrre?

Taking Ios, said Yrre. Want to come?

I've not been on the ground since me and Roinje nearly lost our lives in Goose, said Terei. Not risking that again.

No, you stay here, you old pantaloons, said Donnai. Keep me warm.

Gernubai, said Ios, won't you stay on the pasdaghe?

Gernubai looked at Cie. Yes, she said. I'll stay here.



Mother! There is trouble in the Span.

What do you see, my children?

Tenes is broken; she cannot shine.

The Mother is old, and the light of her eyes is failing, but she can still smell the stars. Can you see the Three? she asks.

Yes, but there is movement, says her great-grandchild's child.

The Star People are abroad, says the Mother.

I am afraid, said the child, creeping closer.

There is no need for fear, said the Mother. The spring is upon us, the seals will be coming ashore, and the Little People will come, and bring us medicine in the spring, and I shall be strong again. But there will be new faces, they live so short. Pileo is gone. The Birds say Entelisseem will come, the Healer.

Why are the Star People in the Span? says the child.

Ask Taarh, says the Mother.

Taarh is gone, great Mother.

Ah yes. Taarh is gone. He could smell the Span.



The Span was sinking in the west. Telis looked up at Teod as they stood in the courtyard of Reagh's Temple.

Tenes is dark, she said.

The old man had his arm over her shoulder, for his balance was not good. He drew Telis close.

So I am told, he muttered, as if to himself.

What does this mean? said Telis.

I fear the Bases are operating in the Span. I have feared this



for some time. I must speak to Izza.

Izza has no eyes for the Span, said Telis with disdain.

Never underestimate Izza, said Teod. She is a driver: she has wandered in the Span. She is a big name in Carhault, and Carhault has allied herself with us against the Bases. At the same time she is our Traffic Comptroller, and so speaks for the Bases. Izza is playing a dangerous game.

He looked down at Telis.

Come in, Telis my little one. Winter is lingering, and tonight we sit by the fire. You have much to learn if you are to take Ios with you to the elves.



And in Wedge, Captain Teuk knocked and entered the Elder's office.

Ruas looked up. More bad news? he asked.

The Bases are mining in the Span, said the Captain. They have destroyed the Yellow Star.

## 24

How do you write your name? asked Telis. She had only ever heard it: Chawt.

Teod traced his name with his finger on the table: TEOAD. She asked: What is its phase?

He looked at her with a glint in his eye. So you have learnt about k2or?

Rautte taught me a little, she said.

Names have no phase, said Teod, until they are spoken in a sentence. They are not like other thoughts, which have their phase from the beginning.

It is a strange language, said Telis. Rautte could speak it.

Rautte had a good ear for language, like his brother. I shall send you to Sweoppe for lessons.

Shouldn't I learn from a native speaker? said Telis.

Sweoppe knows more about k2or than any Gleaner, said Teod. We ask him when we are unsure.

Telis thought: Rautte would have found that strange.

Teod, she said, where are the boys from Kirfa?



And so Telis was wafted back and forth between Teod and

Sweoppe.

Teod tells me you wish to learn k2or, said Sweoppe.

Well he said he thought I ought to, said Telis.

It is the same, said Sweoppe. You must begin with the Propositions.

As you say, teacher.

Here is the first Proposition you must learn. In order to understand a sentence in k2or, you have to hear it first in monophase.

And what is monophase? asked Telis.

Sweoppe looked at her inquisitively. Why do you want to learn k2or? he asked.

I knew a man from the East who had lived in Tanquish, said Telis. He had begun to learn k2or.

That is hardly a reason, said Sweoppe.

He died, said Telis. And I would like to finish what he started.

You are talking of Rautte, said Sweoppe.

Yes.

Sweoppe thought a little, and then seemed to make up his mind. So, he said, what was your question again?

What is monophase? said Telis.

Ah yes. Every word has its own Time. And every place in the sentence has its own Time. Now you have learnt three Propositions. That is enough for our first lesson.

No, please, a little more, said Telis. Perhaps you could teach me some real sentences, and then I might understand what monophase is.

Monophase is when you speak the words only in their own Time, said Sweoppe, a little impatiently. I should have thought that was obvious.

It is now, said Telis. Could you give me an example?

Sweoppe closed his eyes, joined his hands together and intoned a sentence in k2or. It sounded to Telis like the Gleaners' songs around the hearth.

That was lovely, she said. What does it mean?

Man is the Eye and the Mouth of the World, said Sweoppe.

Was that in monophase? asked Telis.

Of course not. That is the first verse of Book Fourteen, said Sweoppe. You cannot recite from the Books in monophase. That would destroy the meaning, and detach it from the story. But you must learn to *hear* it in monophase.

Thank you, said Telis. Yes, perhaps that is enough for the first lesson.

Let's have a coffee, said Sweoppe.



How are your lessons going? asked Teod.

We have only just begun the Propositions, said Telis.

Ah. Man is the Eye and the Mouth of the World?

That's right.

Splendid, said Teod. Sweoppe knows his stuff.

Where are my friends from Kirfa? said Telis.

Be patient, said Teod.



I have been thinking, said Telis. When you say that every word has its own Time, is that the Meaning of the Word By Itself?

Sweoppe was delighted. That's a very good way of putting it, he said.

And the places in the sentence which have their own Time, is that the Shape of the Sentence?

Wait, said Sweoppe.

—So when the word finds its place in the sentence, it adds the Time of that place to its own Time?

That's utterly amazing, said Sweoppe.

So that would be polyphase?

Polyphase? said Sweoppe doubtfully.



Teod, said Telis. What is polyphase?

What does Sweoppe say?

He doesn't know, said Telis.

It's something to do with grammar, said Teod.

Where are my friends from Kirfa? said Telis. Why can't I see them?

Yrre would know about polyphase, said Teod. You can ask him. He's coming this evening. Ios is coming with him.

Ruis?

Yes, said Teod. Ios.

Ruis, here? Telis felt the breath leave her body.

Yes, this evening.

It's been five years, said Telis.

## 25

Telis and Teod came out onto the steps as the old carryall wheezed in through the gate with Yrre and Ios on board.

Telis and Ios stood, and looked long at each other. Then they hung together, rocking and weeping, as was to be expected.

Women, said Teod. But his eyes were moist as he turned to Yrre. How long has it been, young man? he asked.

More than thirty years, said Yrre.

Nearly five cycles, said Teod. Tungal was kindling at its farthest west, and the Span was in the Wolf, and you left to find the Fleet. And Reagh was gone.

We have a lot to talk about, Teod, said Yrre.



The gleaners gathered on the flet, and the cup went round. Yrre was lost in memories from thirty years before, Ios seven. Telis watched them both, seeing how their memories ruled them.

A low voice began singing. Yrre's eyes sought Ios's: Pileo always began the song, he said. Ios's eyes were glinting in the light of the fire.

Sweoppe came in and sat on the flet between Ios and Telis.

Ios put up her hand to stroke his cheek.

I looked up about polyphase, he said to Telis. I'll tell you tomorrow.

Telis smiled at him.

So you met Sweoppe? said Ios.

He's teaching me k2or, said Telis.



Yrre and Teod sat together by the fire.

It's good to have you here, young Yrre, said Teod.

Young Yrre? said Yrre laughing. I am an old man, Teod.

You were younger than I am now when we first met. When the son is old, the father is barely older. So it is with us.

You have seen more Time than I, said Teod. It has aged you. I have still to grow up. He chuckled.

I was a child here in the old days, said Yrre.

It was a good time here on Tanquish Laer when you and Reagh were lovers, said Teod. You brought great beauty and peace into the world.

I knew nothing, said Yrre. The Gleaners were very good to me.

Pileo was soft on you.

We desired each other, but we were never together, said Yrre. It was her decision, and she was right.

Heleui her mother was the light of my life, said Teod—and



she would never have me. And now they are both gone. But now Ios is back with us. Pileo lives in her.



And suddenly Telis stood up. She turned and looked at Ios, her eyes wide.

Where are my comrades from Kirfa? she said, her voice breaking.

Sweoppe stood up and took her hands in his. Telis, he said. Where are they?

Ios was also standing by now. What comrades? she asked.

The brothers from Kirfa. They kept me safe on the road to Tanquish. They gave me food. Why were they shackled? Where are they?

Sweoppe drew her towards him, as if to calm her. She pushed him away. Where are they? She had raised her voice.

Telis, said Sweoppe. These are terrible times.

Telis looked around, her eyes wild. Yrre and Teod were sitting together by the fire: they had turned to look at her.

Where are they, Teod? shouted Telis. What has happened.?

Teod stood up. Come, he said. Come to my rooms. Ios, Sweoppe, come with us. Telis, please come.



I had to choose, said Teod. For three years under the Code we could not go south. It was catastrophic for the elves. Many of them died, particularly the old ones. Some of them were over three hundred years old, and they died in those three years.

Where are my comrades? said Telis.

The guards took them, said Teod.

You told me they were safe!

I am sure they are safe. I spoke to Izza, and she gave me Naguad Sodt's assurance. The guards respect him. They will be treated well, and taken back to Kirfa.

Telis shouted: There is nothing but death in Kirfa!

I had no choice, said Teod, his voice low. The guards were threatening to close the Lodge, as they did under the Code.

And why was I allowed to stay?

Sweoppe said: You are not from Kirfa.

She stared at him. Then she turned and stared at Teod. She put her face in her hands, her body shaking.

I left my children to come here, she said.



For two days Telis kept apart, speaking to no one. The weather was warm, and in the mornings she walked alone on

the hillside above the Lodge, coming down to eat alone. She brushed off all contact.

But on the third day Ios walked with her, and they climbed far up the hillside. When they came down they sat apart from the others, eating the afternoon meal together. Nobody heard what they said.

The next morning, Telis was gone.

The preparations for the Gleaners' first expedition of the year to the elves of the Qert were, for Yrre, a powerful exercise in nostalgia. The Tanquish carryalls had hardly changed in the thirty year interval, and he remembered vividly the ordered chaos with which the equipment and provisions were stacked in them. There were to be three cars and a crew of five Gleaners, whose names he was still struggling to remember: two young people, a sighter and a runner; Sweoppe and a name beginning with G as technicians, and Neori the leader; three women and two men. And the two outsiders, Yrre and Ios.

It was to have been Yrre and Pileo's return to the elves: Yrre who had first spoken to them, Pileo whom they had first suckled. Teod seemed to regard Ios as taking Pileo's place. You took to each other when you first came, said Teod. Now Pileo follows you. The elves will smell Pileo in you.

Unencumbered with the Gleaner's centuries of prejudice and misunderstanding, Yrre had been the first human to establish common ground with the elves; it was his presence at Qert and his relationship with the goddess Reagh that drove the momentous events which led Roinje's crew to join the Geordian Fleet. Without him, Pileo would never have given herself to the elves as she did, and become Pileo whom the elves had suckled.

For Ios, the discontinuity was only seven years, of which her five in Wedge had run into one. She had never been on an expedition, but had worked under Teod in preparing the sap for the injections which kept the geo-pps elves healthy in an increasingly geo-oos environment. She had been due for her first trip to the Qert when the Code shut down the Lodge.

The trip turned out to be more comfortable for Yrre than the expedition of thirty years past, and the cars seemed to cover the ground faster. He, Ios and Sweoppe shared a car, and so they could talk together in the Evenspeech. Ios would have preferred to practice her k2or skills with the Gleaners, but she wanted to be near Yrre, and the old man seemed to seek her company. Sweoppe was open and friendly, as Rautte had been when Ios first met him, and the three were relaxed together.

And so they came to the long shoreline that stretched down towards the Qert.



The sullen line of surf curved off along the black sand into the mist. I know where we are, said Yrre suddenly. I remember this. Can we stop?

Sweoppe took the stick and the car slowed and lowered itself onto the sand. As usual, they were following the other cars, and Sweoppe tapped the screen to let them know. They both came to a halt. Yrre wants to stretch his legs, said Sweoppe.

A voice came from the screen: Here? The river's only ten minutes away; much nicer to stop there.

I know this place, said Yrre. Just a quick stop.

What happened here? asked Ios.

This is where Pileo and I pitched tent, said Yrre.

This is where Pileo said No? asked Ios mischievously.

Everyone knew the story.

This is where, said Yrre.

I never heard Pileo say No, said Ios.

You didn't know her thirty years ago, said Yrre.

He stood and looked at the surf. He felt aware of his younger self, standing in his body now, looking out of his eyes. He felt Pileo's presence behind him in the tent. He felt the tears welling. Ios climbed out of the car, came to him and put her arm round his shoulder. I never saw Pileo again, he said, his voice a little high-pitched. What was she like?

She was glorious, said Ios, holding him closer. She took out an oily cloth and dabbed at her eyes, and then passed it to Yrre. He blew his nose on it and gave it back to her. She wrapped it up and put it back in her pocket.

As he made to walk down the beach towards the sea she released him.

When the clouds rise, you see the Qert from here, said Yrre.

Siix hours' walk.

He waited for her to follow him, but she stayed up on the bank of shingle.

Yrre, she called. Don't go too close.

And then he realised what it was.

Ios, forgive me, he said, returning. There are no tides here to be afraid of. The beach is steep, and the tides make little difference.

I know, said Ios. But I can't take it.

We will keep our distance, I promise. Remember you have Pileo with you. Soon we shall meet the elves.

I'm excited, said Ios.

So am I, said Yrre.



They clambered back into the car, still red-eyed. Nostalgia, said Sweoppe, very improper. Never see a Gleaner crying.

What about Teod? said Ios.

Teod is the Old Sage, said Sweoppe. Sages get away with everything.



But why did you walk from here? asked Ios as the cars moved forward again. Six hours walk? Why not drive there?

It was the way of the Gleaners back then, said Yrre. Elves and men were terrified of each other. We slept the night on the sands and waited for the cloud to lift, so that we could approach them openly, so they didn't think we were creeping up on them.

Yrre and Pileo changed all that, said Sweoppe. They're not scared of cars any more. Or not as scared. I'll put you down an hour's walk from the Qert. Teod said take twenty phials.

Won't you come? asked Ios anxiously.

No. You two go alone. Teod said so. We'll go over the top round the Qert. You'll have three days alone with the elves.



And so they stood together on the sand. The cars turned west up towards the moorland, and had soon disappeared over the brow of the hill. There was a cold wind from the south in their faces, and a hint of snow.

We are less than an hour from the Qert said Yrre. We shall see them soon.



And again, the Mother:

Do you hear them, children? Yrre and Pileo are coming!

With their healing needles?

Yes. And we shall hug them both and keep them warm. It



will be cold for them tonight.

Why will it be cold for them?

When there is snow and wind from the south, the little people cannot live long. They need sun and green grass.

Don't they eat fish?

They like hot things. They burn their fish and eat them hot. There is no fire here.

How do we keep them warm?

We put them between us, and lie close to them, and speak softly.

Why speak softly?

Their ears are so large and sensitive. They like to listen to the Birds of Water Eye.

We shall ask the Birds to sing for them, Mother.



Ios winced as the thunder hit her chest, two hundred yards from the rocks at the base of the Qert where the group of elves were sitting and standing.

Listen, said Yrre. They are welcoming us. Listen with your heart. You won't understand if you think language.

Come, Yrre and Pileo, heard Yrre.

Come, Yrre and Ios, heard Ios.

Ios counted seventeen huge figures under the rocks, some sitting, others lying, and five or six smaller ones, children

perhaps, hopping from one leg to the other. As they came closer, their great smell flooded her senses.

We need to inject the ones who are sitting or lying first, said Yrre. They are the sickest. Then we can see to the others. There are more elves up the beach behind the outcrop. We give the sick ones a third of a phial each, the others a quarter. The children get nothing until the end of the summer.

He took off his pack, spread his arms wide and strode towards the huge female sitting in the middle of the group.

I see you, Reagh, he said. I see you again.

She raised her heavy arms and took him into her embrace. It was as if he disappeared into the massive body.

And Pileo, she said, stretching out one arm to take Ios into her bosom. The children were thundering and hopping. The noise and the stench was overpowering. For many minutes they lay together in the Mother's embrace. Ios began to relax as the cool warmth of the creature's body flowed into hers. She felt her heart slowing, her head clearing. She recognised Pileo's quiet warmth: this was where it came from.



At length the Mother released them. Several of the older elves were holding out their forearms to the humans. Yrre took the phials and the needles out of the packs and arranged them on the sand. Watch how I do it, he said.

And as he injected them, he realised why Teod had sent him, an outsider who had not seen the elves for thirty years. He remembered again how simple and obvious it had seemed to him when he and Pileo had met the elves so long ago. Or perhaps it was the elves who remembered. He knew, and they knew, how the needles slid into the cool-warm flesh, how the life-giving sap spread up the arm and through their bodies, how their eyes calmed and their fever abated. Ios watched, and then set to work as he did. They finished four phials.

Finally Yrre turned to the Mother. But the Mother's great body rumbled at him: a gentle thunder, as if she were whispering. No Yrre. I need no medicine. Keep it for my people.

But you are sick, too, Reagh.

No Yrre. I am not sick. I am old. My time is coming.



Around the outcrop of rock further along the sand cam a slow troop of stooping figures, walking hesitantly, turning and looking back at each other.

Come, my people, thundered the Mother. These are Yrre and Pileo. They bring the healing sap.

And when they had at last finished, there was half a phial of medicine left.



The wind had increased, and the temperature continued to drop. There was a dusting of snow on the black sand. Yrre had heated water over a small stove sheltered by stones, and they ate delf. The equinox had passed, and there would be ten hours of dark. Elves and humans settled down for the night, the humans swaddled in sleeping-bags on the sand in the lea of rocks. As darkness fell they felt the huge bodies of the children nestling up to them. The smell filled their senses, and they fell into deep untroubled sleep.



Reagh smiled at Yrre, almost shyly, and her hand brushed the grey bristle on his cheek.

You are such a young woman, said Yrre. Were you really that young?

You once asked whether I was a figment of your imagination, said Reagh.

Really? said Yrre. I suppose I sometimes wondered. But when we made love, that was not my imagination alone, and not yours alone. It was more.

Human love making is a rare reality, said Reagh. I overcome the She in me. The flesh becomes spirit. I become

You.

Exactly, said the Birds of Water Eye.

But Ios's dream was of Reagh the elven Mother, nursing the sleeping Ios in her arms. The sea was close. The Mother's great hands were pushing the teat into her mouth. The taste of the cool-warm milk flooded her mind: it was at the same time the sea, rising up the Mother's body as she waded out to meet the jumping seals. The sea was cool and warm, like the milk, like the smell of the Mother's flesh. The Mother lay back into the waves and floated, with Ios still cool and warm in her embrace. The seals surrounded them, drawing them out towards the open sea. This is how the elves die, thought Ios. But she had no fear.

You will rewrite this all, my little Ios, rumbled the Mother. You can rewrite everything. This is why you must return to the Span, to help the little space-people. You must save Tungel.

You must save Tungel, sang the seals, sang the Birds of Water Eye.

Far, far out on the ice, a day's journey from the village, the tiny group of huts were lashed to iron pegs hammered into the thick frozen crust of the water. The great blizzard raged over them, the wind sweeping the ice clean of the driving snow, raising it in wheeling clouds into the dim sky and rolling it into the far forest. The stove crackled with burning fish-oil. The boy cuddled up to his father, watching the movements of his grandfather over the open hole in the water, waiting for the next fish to come up on the hook. His sister waited with her knife.

They were both too young to have taken names, and still answered to the child-tags their mother had given them: Ette and Assi, children of Runasashi.

The pegs will hold, said Pubriassem as if to himself.

Sing the wind-song, said the boy. Tell us what the wind says.

And then the sun-song, said the girl. To bring the sun back.

The snow-wind keeps the sun below the ice, said the boy.

The sun is in the south with the birds, and shines high in the sky on the other side of the world, said the girl.

Perhaps the wind will blow your mother home, said Runasashi.

No not yet, said the boy. She will come in the spring, with

the Birds.



The two marquils sat together under the merciless sun in the middle of the dusty empty street, apparently untroubled by the unrelenting heat. They gazed with unblinking eyes on the low ragged row of white houses and the water tank wedged on stone blocks at the near end. They watched as the sky boat slowly descended, and the little homely twists of blown dust were sucked into the dust-storm of the turbines. The whine of the motors died, and there was silence again in the street. The sultry breeze gradually cleared the dust. The boat stood and gleamed in the sun.

The hatch opened, and three figures clambered out, their faces hidden behind scarves and dark sun-glasses. They stood and surveyed the silent houses.

There's no one, said one of them: a woman's voice. Kirfa is a dead city.

A fourth figure climbed down from the sky boat, a bareheaded woman in a grey smock, a water-container and a small pack hanging from a strap over her shoulder. She stood and looked around her. It was Telis.

The marquils had disappeared.

And then a door opened in a house some fifty metres up the road from the sky-boat, and a child came out, struggling with

the weight of a bucket. Other doors opened and men and women appeared with earthenware bowls and jars. They were emaciated, their eyes sunken into their brown faces. Their braided dusty hair hung down over their shoulders.

The crew opened a hatch in the side of their sky boat and rolled out a length of pipe. The people lined up with their vessels and held them under the pipe one by one, and the water splashed and flowed. The people drank, and held out their vessels for more. Then one by one they carried their jugs and bowls back into the houses and closed the doors behind them. The child was last.

The crew of the boat unwound the pipe further and dragged it to the water tank. They lifted a hatch on the top of the tank and inserted the pipe. A motor whined and the hollow noise of thumping water came from the tank, changing quickly into the noise of water falling into water. After some time the whine of the motor raised its pitch briefly before shutting off. The crew fed the pipe back into the side of the sky boat, closed the hatch and climbed back into the boat, leaving the woman in the grey smock standing by the water tank. The engines fired, the dust swirled, and the boat rose and swung away north east over the sands.

As the breeze cleared the dust the two marquils could be seen again, gazing unflinchingly at the woman. She put down her hand and one of the marquils ran towards her, leapt up her



arm and sat on her shoulder. The other marquil turned on its heel and bounded away up the dusty street.

Telis and the marquil sat in the shade of the water tank and waited. The sun continued its slow descent towards the eastern horizon. Later, as it set, the far outline of the low mountains came into silhouette.



Telis and the marquil slept. The air was cool under the stars, but the sand radiated heat. The spark of Tungal threw shadows over the street.

The child appeared with her bucket, and approached the sleeping woman. She stood in front of her, gazing at her white uncovered face. The marquil watched her. The child said something in a lilting tongue.

Telis opened her eyes and looked into the eyes of the child. Shall I help you with the bucket? she said in the Evenspeech.

When the bucket was full, she lifted it, wondering how the child had been able to lift it that afternoon. The child reached up and took her other hand, and led her back towards the open door. In the night there was the muted sound of birds chattering together on the roofs. The two marquils ran on ahead.

The light of Tungal shone in through the open door of the hut. Two young men lay together on woven matting, their black

dusty hair in long braids hanging down over their ochre faces. The child pushed herself in between them and sat looking at the silhouette of the woman with the bucket. The marquill stood beside her.

Benc led me here, said Telis. I knew they would. Do you recognize me?

She sat before them on the dust floor, and began to open her pack.

Where is Aku? she said.

He didn't make it, said Kef.

Telis took out a small packet of delf and put it into Rek's outstretched, broken hands. They made three portions, for themselves and for the child. They told her the child's name. It was very long and melodious, and sounded like a sentence.

Did they do this to you in Tanquish? asked Telis.

They nodded, munching. They broke our fingers, said Kef. But Aku, they broke his feet. We could not carry him, said Kef. We stayed with him until he died.



For hundreds of thousands of cycles, Tungel and the Three-Beyond-Tungel had been locked in an elegant quadrille. They were all composed of the same crystalline rock which made them bright reflectors of their sun, Seli9, and were said to be the remains of a larger moon which had disintegrated. Tungel

was the largest, measuring 1082 by 486 stadia: a rolling pear-shaped lump of rock roughly as long as the distance between Tanquish and Ariel, with a rotation period of a quarter of a Huld day about an axis with a regular  $87^\circ$  nutation over a period of a twenty-third of a cycle. Around this rolling giant trotted the Three-Beyond-Tungel in a procession of careening epicycles. The whole system had a period which the astronomers of Tanquish had adopted as the so-called Cycle.

And now the dance was broken. Debris from shattered Tenes was swirling through the system, and the smallest of the Three-Beyond had broken ranks and was spiralling in towards Tungel.

According to our calculations, said Tuusa, it will take up an unstable orbit close to Tungel within the year. The orbit will hold briefly, perhaps another year. We think collision is inevitable.

And what does that mean? asked Roinje.

I can tell you that when the exact trajectories of the collision become clear, said Tuusa. Tungel is likely to disintegrate. Debris all over the place.

In two years? asked Yrre.

The break-up will begin in about two years, said Tuusa. Meteorite bombardment will go on for centuries.

Bringing danger to life on Huld?

Large-scale extinctions at very best, said Fennei. If our

calculations are correct.

Can you re-run them?

We have, many times.

There was a long pause.

A good driver could intuit them, said Yrre.

Yes, said Fennei. I have.



They sat around the tracking table on the flight deck of the Nostra. Tungel rolled slowly on the centre screen, the sharp shadows revolving in its brilliant craters. Fennei zoomed out until the Three-Beyond came into view. Closer, above and below the flight deck, drifted two ship of the Fleet.

Are we watching from here? asked Ios.

The camera is a minute out, said Fennei, orbiting us.

The Three still look stable, said Roinje.

Seen from here, said Fennei. The smallest in the middle is much further out towards Tungel.

You could never drive, Roinje, said Yrre.

I have my feet on the deck, said Roinje. Like Gernubai. Ios is the driver, if I'm not mistaken.

Ios's eyes were on the screen. It happens twice, Rautte had said.



Ios and Rautte sat on, hand in hand on the hillside above Ariel, watching the guard talking to Pileo.

I can't watch, said Ios.

Yes you can, said Rautte.

Suddenly the old engine fired, and the car rose screaming over the barrier, over the heads of the women, and went racing down the road.

Keep watching, said Rautte.

The guards were running out of the guard house. They levelled their weapons and fired round after round after the fleeing car.

Watch, said Rautte.

She waited in horror for the blood to curtain the canopy.

Suddenly, instead, the car disappeared. The dust of its screaming cushion hung silent in the air. The soldiers raised weapons and stared. There was no car.

Watch closely, said Rautte. It happens twice.



You call it rewriting? said Fennei.

It's only a story, said Ios.

We call it driving, said Fennei. It's only a location.

Ios's eyes flicked to Yrre's: he was watching her.

I want to go out there, Yrre, said Ios. Will you show me how?



Every driver has their own description of what it's like to drive, said Yrre. I've heard some weird accounts. And yet we're all doing the same thing.

Teod said you took the passage into orbit around a star and then moved the star, said Ios.

I remember trying to explain it to the Gleaners, said Yrre. But you can't explain it in words. Yes, I used p-stars back then, when I worked for Traffic. Most of us did. Later I realised I didn't need a p-star. I could use myself. You just let yourself become the place.

You let yourself become the time, said Ios.

Rewriting and retiming, said Yrre.

He looked at her. You want to try? he asked.

Yes, she said.

Yrre turned to Tuusa. There's still a traffic flight couches down in the off-duty quarters? he asked. She nodded. Will you watch over us? he said. She nodded again.



Ios felt an absence of place and time such as she had never

felt. She fell in all directions. She felt panic.

Is this normal? she asked Yrre.

Quite in order, said Yrre. Just enjoy the scenery.

She was surrounded by the enormity of the Span. But she saw nothing else, not Yrre, not her own body.

If you want to look better at anything, just move towards it, said Yrre.

How?

Like that, said Yrre.

Ah, said Ios.

You've done this before, said Yrre.

Not *this*, said Ios. But I've moved like this before.

As she had, often; but always before in pain. This time there was no pain. The panic subsided.

Look at Tungel, said Yrre. Can you see the Three?

She could.

We call them One, Two and Three, by their size. There is also a fourth, further out, a tiny one. You see how they have broken ranks?

No.

Three is further away, drifting towards Tungel.

It's small, so if the Three are in orbit around each other, it's bound to be further away, said Ios.

Yes. But it's no longer in orbit. It's always on the Tungel side of the other two. If you see what I mean.

She did.

Come and see it closer, said Yrre.

Three was a whale-backed mountain, pocked with small craters, slowly rolling. Ios steadied herself on its flank, feeling nothing in her palms against the broken rock, but the mass and the motion in her mind. The great momentum took her into its roll.

Ios could feel that it did not know its orbit, any more than she. The little moon was afraid: Maybe, it said, I won't find an orbit before I hit.

Be patient, said Ios. There is time.

Help me, said Three.

What can we do? she asked Yrre.

You can rewrite, said Yrre.

I cannot rewrite a mountain, said Ios. Not by wanting, not by deciding. I don't know how. This is so huge. It is not just one body. It is a mighty dance. You must help me.

I can rewrite a whole ship in orbit, said Yrre. You can surely rewrite a moon.

But to rewrite the whole Span, said Ios.

We need strong minds, said Yrre.





We must return to the Mountain, said Ios.

To the Qert? said Yrre.

To Three Mountain, said Ios. To the crater. We must find your Goddess.

On Three Mountain?

You found her at the Qert, Yrre.

Then we go to the Qert, said Yrre.

The Centres are the same, said Ios.



Gernubai, said Ios. We are going down to the Domain again. Do you want to come?

Shall I serve you, my Lady?

No, said Ios. You will never serve me. You are my friend; you saved me from Wedge. But we have work to do, both in Wedge and in the Span. We must work together.

Will we return to this ship, my Lady Ios?

Yes, my Lady Gernubai. If you so wish.

The old centre of Wedge was burning, and the village of Wintergate was swollen with refugees: mostly women, but there were many men with them. Lankar had gone down to Lye with Dokei and a troop of Hillmen. The old farmhouse at Lye had become a makeshift hospital.

Dokei found Ruas lying in one corner, his face to the wall, his burnt hands swathed in Nightwort leaves and Bluestalk pounded with wood ash. He turned to look at her, feeling her presence. His eyes were staring.

Dokei, he said.

You are not badly burnt, said Dokei. You will heal.

Dokei —

You will come up to the City with us, she said. We will heal your mind.

The women took Teuk and the Horsemen out onto the sand, said Ruas. They would not take me, they said I had taken my punishment there. They are like demons, Dokei. They came back with the horses, singing.

The people of Wedge have a long age of demonry to deal with, said Dokei.

Yes, said Ruas. But there is also outside evil. Have you not felt it on the Mountain?

We have felt the tremors, Eus. But against the evil we have defences.

Tenes is broken, the Three are scattered, and the Mountain is stirring, said Ruas. The Code is restored.

Not the Code, said Dokei. Carhault leans to us now. This time it is the Bases that bring evil. That is why the Mountain stirs.



They came four together out of the entry port in the Hillmen's Winter City high on Three Mountain: Ios and Yrre, Roinje and Gernubai. There was no one to meet them. They made their way into the Great Hall. The City seemed abandoned: the Hillmen had departed for their summer encampments.

And then a small child appeared in the doorway in the far end of the hall. Hallo! it called, in Three.

Hallo, called Ios. The child waved and ran away.

After a while a young woman appeared in the doorway, putting up her hair. She stopped as she saw them, and then turned and spoke in a low voice to someone out of sight. Ios heard: The Geordians have returned.

Two Hillmen appeared beside her, a white haired old man holding the child, and a tall young man. They looked hesitant. Welcome, said the young man.

And Ios felt a movement behind her. A marquill leapt to her shoulder.

Come, said the woman. Let us drink tea.



The woman removed the pot from the stove and sprinkled herbs on the water. There's almost nobody here, she said. Tanis was born the winter before last, and suffered badly in the summer from grass fever. We decided to stay up in the snows this summer.

Gernubai lifted the child and buried her nose in its hair. Then she opened its mouth and smelt its breath.

She needs meadow-quill, she said. It grows in the valleys. She'll be fine.

Are you a physician? asked the woman.

Yes, said Gernubai.

Tankar and Dokei are coming with the women from Lye, said the woman.

What women?

There is fighting in Wedge. Lye is filling with refugees. There is little room in the summer encampments, so they will bring them here.

Paulian slaves? asked Roinje.

Slaves and other women. There has been terrible fighting.

Gernubai spoke without emotion: If they are Paulians, they

will have meadow-quill with them.



The refugees began to arrive that evening. Lankar and Dokei had little time to show their happiness at the return of their friends before they began to organize bedding, water and food from the resources of the city, helped by the young man and woman and the handful of Hillmen who were still in the city. Gernubai went among the refugees, directing and arranging with the child on her hip, followed anxiously by the white-haired old man. Finally the old man took the child and Gernubai disappeared among the refugees.

At last, by late evening, Lankar and Dokei sat with their friends drinking herb-water.

So you have come back to us, space-men, said Lankar.

You seem to need us, and we seem to need you, said Roinje.

Wedge is burning, said Dokei. And the mountain is shaking. Is that why you are here?

We are here for both of these, said Ios. We must put out the fires. And we must mend the Span and calm the mountain.

How will you do these things? asked Dokei.

Everyone looked to Ios.

We shall go back to the crater, said Ios. Will you guide us,

Dokei, as before? In the crater perhaps we can ask the right questions.

All of us? asked Yrre.

Just you and me, Yrre, said Ios. We will find your goddess and she will fly with us in the Span. Gernubai will go down to help her people. Roinje will go with Gernubai. They are the peace-makers.

We do as we are told, said Roinje.



The crater on the summit of Three Mountain was deeper, the snow steeper on its flanks. In its centre was a sunken wrinkled eye. There is heat in the crater, said Dokei. We have seen steam rising.

Ios started down the slope.

Don't go down, called Dokei. Not when the mountain stirs.

I have ridden an asteroid in the Span, said Ios. I can deal with Three Mountain. Yrre, come.

Dokei stood for a while undecided on the rim of the crater. Then she turned and dropped below it.

Are you there, Rautte?

We are all here, said Rautte.

And Pileo, and Maro?

We are all here. Many of us. And Reagh is here.

Reagh? said Yrre.

She is here, said Reagh.

We need you, Goddess, said Ios.

Of course, said Reagh.



A woman was shouting from a distance. Doors were opening, and people were talking. Telis opened the door of the hut and winced at the heat and the blazing sunlight.

The people were leaving the houses, making for the voice of the woman. Telis followed

On the dry stony bank of the river the people had broken into a low song. A brown ooze of water was trickling down from the north, its snout heavy with dust and floating debris. By afternoon the trickle was a small brown stream, murmuring among the stones. The birds flocked to it.

After five days it was a steady stream of clear water. By the end of the summer, as Tungel kindled again in the Span, there were fish.



We have no Elders, no Eldest, said the women. Ruas tends his father's grave in Lye. The Lady Ios is leaving us, and going back to the stars.

Gernubai turned to Ios. Will you kiss Crei for me? And say that I shall never forget him?

Yes, said Ios.

Gernubai turned to the women.

Speaker Dokei will protect us, she said. And I shall be your Speaker in Wedge. Until we have found the Way.



And?

We have pulled back from the planet Huld, my lord.

And the Span?

And from the Span, my lord. A tactical retreat. Pending further intelligence.

We were told the Span was secure. Why were we given false information?

There has been unforeseen interference, my lord.

The (Guerlec) woman?

No, my lord. Another Paulian. Apostate, according to Carhault.

The woman who went to the Domain? The benc-woman?

The same, my lord.

What has she achieved this time?

We believe she has been active in the Span, my lord. It seems the Span is stable again.

Explain.



Our first calculations indicated instability among the Huld satellites, my Lord. There was a mining incident. But either we were mistaken, or someone has intervened. The woman has intervened before. And now it seems the third asteroid will go into stable orbit around the largest satellite.

Is that a good thing?

Stability is always preferable, if it please your Lordship.



The little bird sat on Telis's finger, cocking its head towards her.

I am many hundreds of thousands of cycles old, I said. My little wings live for four or five years; they live and die into me. I have seen many changes. I have been small. I have been fragmented. I have had friends and enemies, I have split and merged, and long, long ago I was not I, I was We. It has been said that in time I shall become You.

Do you still sing in the trees by my village on the Water?  
asked Telis.

I try, Entelisse, I answered.

Telis pictured to herself the wheeling, folding universe of birds over the blue water. She turned to the two young men of Kirfa, with the child standing between them. Will you come with me to Water Eye? she asked. You can swim in the water, and eat fish and roots. You will find companions, and raise

families.

They nodded.

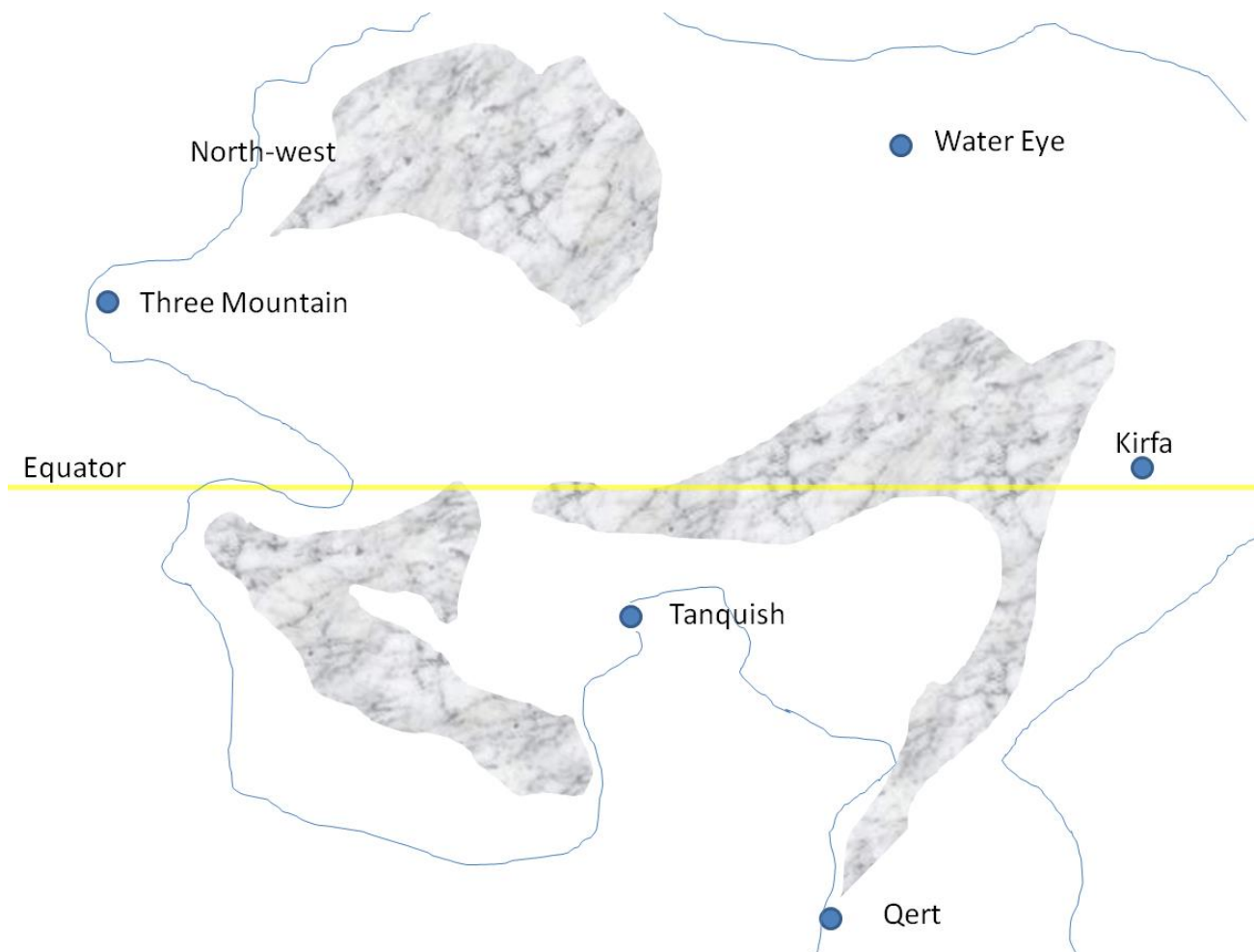
Are you strong enough to lead us back to the Eye? she asked me.

Of course I am strong enough, I said. I shall be strong for many centuries yet. And I shall sing as never before.

Seltjarnarnes, February 2019

Eilífsdalur, April 2021

Seltjarnarnes, May 2024



A stadion is about 172 Haric metres.  
A league is 28 stadia.