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THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS

*The following pages show the first two chapters
as they appear in ALL THE WAY,
the First Book in THE LAND.*

This is how the tale begins.

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THE MOUNTAINS

He was travelling in the Mountains of Loathing when it happened. First the sound of hooves on the trail; behind him, not ahead. He drew rein and looked back.

Then the dreaded sound: the rattling of chains. They had found him. There was no time to waste. He spurred his horse on to a fast trot; the soft thumps quickened beneath him.

He turned a boulder and saw the trail like a straight thread leading to a pass. He glanced back: still out of sight. The trot became a full gallop. At the pass the empty trail danced behind him and vanished. He looked ahead again.

The trail wound smoothly for a mile or more; too far, no escape. But then, just before bolting by, he saw it: a pattern in the rocks, a mere furrow; to the right and upwards. He forced the horse away from the trail; they rushed up between the crags.

Just as the trail disappeared from his sight the sounds returned. He stopped, dismounted, and crept back. They were fourteen and two pack horses. At a steady trot they rode past the furrow without a glance.

He saw them vanish and reappear twice before they were gone. The silence was overwhelming; relief engulfed him.

When he regained his senses he heard a soft whinny and looked into the eyes of Ashmane.

He sat up. Never before had anyone escaped them. But had he? He decided to stay overnight. Which way should he choose tomorrow? To follow would be dangerous: they were known to retread a doubtful trail to make sure. To go back might be disastrous: they were known to split up and reunite. His eyes fell upon the crags and the peaks above. Maybe. Tomorrow.

He rose and caressed the large white steed. A long way: three years, always on the move. He wished he could have offered him a better life: wide plains and ease instead of dark roads and flight.

He led him back to the crags and removed the wrappers; they had saved them more than once. Ashmane scraped the gravel as always when he was rid of them. They were almost worn and needed mending.

Maybe one day more, before he had to change them. But if he chose the heights there would be no need until they came down again; if they ever did.

They went on for an hour, maybe two; ever upwards, ever north. He was tired, but he felt that he had to get higher up. Suddenly his legs gave way. He knew that he was unable to walk and climb any further.

He unpacked the leather bucket and filled it halfway. While Ashmane drank he poured water into his mug and emptied it thrice. At last he filled the nosebag and opened the haversack; same as always, thrice a day. Afterwards he stretched out and looked for the first stars.

This was not right: there were no clouds, and yet the day faded into a gloom. Last night on the trail the stars had been there. He remembered the gloom which had seemed to reek from the mountains, more and more during the day.

Now he was inside the gloom. All shapes blurred and vanished; even Ashmane disappeared. The sounds changed too. The slow and steady munching turned into a dim rumble. When the gloom thickened into darkness time seemed to halt. At last he fell asleep.

He woke slowly and saw the gloom give way to a new bright day. He felt better; he felt safe: he might disappear in these mountains.

As soon as they had finished their meal he led Ashmane upwards, between the rocks. Every time he looked back the trail seemed less threatening. At noon he saw two riders meet and part.

After that the valley seemed to become formless, fading to the southwest. By evening he reached a shelf, and he never saw the trail again. The gloom returned, and he dived into a dreamless sleep.

He did not wake until Ashmane snorted right into his face. He got up slowly and looked round. Then he remembered where he was. The waterbag was almost empty now; soon he had to find a spring.

Late in the forenoon, trying to find a way across a gorge, he noticed that he cast no shadow. He could feel the heat of the sun in the back of his head. He turned and faced the deep blue sky.

The day waned. Of a sudden he became aware of the long shadows all around. He raised his eyes and saw it right over the ridge: the sun;

blue in blue. He stood dumbstricken and saw it shimmer before it melted into the peaks and was gone.

He came across a brook in the evening. He was so deep in thought that he might just have waded through if Ashmane had not stopped to drink; only then he felt the coldness of the water.

That night he changed between sleep and wake and wondered why he was there. The sky was pitch black, but the nearest hollows seemed to gleam faintly. It was like a reflexion of unseen stars.

The next day, the fourth day of his climb. Of a sudden he recalled his narrow escape and the days before it. He did not even know when it had slipped his mind. After a few moments it seemed to fade into unimportance; but he did not forget it again.

He had reached the northern tableland: the heart of the mountains. He had heard of it, and now he was here. If you want to know: go. He had never been sure whether it was a challenge or a warning; and he had neither decided to seek it nor to avoid it. He wondered whether he had been driven or dragged.

There was no trace of the sun. The sky had grown deeper, all shadows were gone. He lifted his eyes again. The sky was like an opening into a vast nothingness: an abyss above him.

He looked round. The mountains glowed; the peaks, the rocks, the stones, the smallest grain of sand, the ground itself, seemed to hold an inner sheen. He glanced at Ashmane. The belly was lit up from below, the back was dark; almost as dark as the eyebrim.

He sat down and picked up a little round stone. It dragged his fingers into a clutch. It was warm, and the light penetrated his fingers. Ashmane pushed him hard with the muzzle. He dropped the stone as he put out his hand; his palm glowed faintly. Ashmane pushed him again, gently. The fright of the horse stirred him; he rose and mounted. After a short while the palm ceased to glow.

By evening the glow rose and filled the air. The darkness of the night was shut out. Every time he was dozing off Ashmane neighed fiercely and tossed his head.

He began to recall things long forgotten; fragments scattered over his entire life: small incidents in his childhood, the decision to leave, his first horse, mishaps and windfalls. There was no pattern; and yet they were all linked, like beads on a string.

At last the day broke. They ate quickly and set out early. All day he felt Ashmane quiver beneath him. They moved slowly upwards. The sky was almost black, the glow had become brighter. At sunset he dismounted to find a path round a boulder; and he saw that Ashmane glowed up to the fetlocks. The stallion trod as if on embers. After that he led him by the reins.

At nightfall they both glowed up to the knees. Ashmane seemed to be in pain, and there was a certain numbness in his calves. The sensation disappeared as soon as they stopped.

All night he stayed awake. He was immersed in vivid memories: names, places, facts. Every now and then he looked up and saw the wide staring eyes of Ashmane mirror the glow of the ground and the air.

On the sixth day the sky was a black void; the mountains blazed. He saw small wisps of clear light winding into the still air. Ashmane glowed, and his eyes were red; the hooves were like live coals; the mane and the tail seemed dark, like ashes on a smouldering fire. His hands were almost transparent with light. He felt warm and a little dizzy.

Now Ashmane led the way. Most of the time the reins were tight. It became more and more difficult to go on. At last Ashmane halted sideways in front of him. He mounted and rode until he suddenly slipped and fell to the ground. They were on a shelf with small mounds and a sharp edge to the north.

He felt a deep weariness and lay down. Soon the blackness of the void sky disappeared beyond the blazing air. Ashmane stopped gasping and put his soft muzzle to his ear. The live warmth and care made him feel refreshed; he prepared their meal.

Throughout the night he was aware of a growing restlessness in Ashmane. At the same time he felt an ease and relaxation that he had never

known before. A steady flow of forgotten events rushed through his mind.

He had tried to forget in all these years, tried to forget everything; and he had forgotten much. But now it came back to him, more and more. What had he been afraid of? What could harm him in these mountains?

When the void opened above him on the seventh day he looked round and saw a full circle of peaks, almost level: a world of highness. And he was in the centre.

He fed Ashmane and saddled him as he always did. The stallion was eager. But why not stay for a while? This place was as good as any. Better, even. Here, right here, he might recall all that he needed to know. He unsaddled and removed the bridle; and he sat down and tried to gather the impressions from the latest days and nights.

At noon, when the glow was weakest, Ashmane began to trot and to fro. By evening he reared and galloped. But it was impossible to move on; not yet. He wished to know everything about his life. A pattern was forming, he could almost grasp it.

All night Ashmane circled round him. Each round the glow in the eyes was wilder; but whenever the stallion was out of sight the pattern returned.

Warmth and nearness, tender care; until the bad years. His parents, whispering in the dark about poverty and hunger; about hopes that were crushed by frosted crops, draught, harvest cloudbursts; about illness, loss, oppression.

As he grew up he became their hope: two more hands in the endless struggle for food and security. The week they both died; the village elders deciding his future; the night he stole away, never to return. A boy of twelve, all his possessions in a sack. The long flight on foot. New lands; more poverty and hunger.

His stroke of luck: the old miller. The apprenticeship and the little horse, Redmare. The inheritance; a man in his own right. Till he heard of them again: the black men from the Black Land, searching for him.

The sale of the mill; the careful evasion; the death of Redmare, after eating the horsebane.

His long hiding in the Forest of Oblivion; the taming of Whiteskin. Two carefree years: they almost got him. One day on a bald hilltop Whiteskin tensed, and he saw them: two dozen horsemen on a distant ridge, black against the sky. A narrow escape; the exhaustion and death of Whiteskin when he had borne him into safety.

And until now, the endless flight. The random choice of roads; and Ashmane. They had reached safety.

He woke with a start: the eighth day. Ashmane seemed to reach far into the void; shivering and snuffling, eyes running, listless. Ashmane, the steed of steeds. Terror seized him: could he lose Ashmane too?

He tried to get up; everything seemed to sway. He reached out and felt the coldness of the bit. They both stirred. Ashmane froze, eyes flaming.

Of a sudden the stallion bolted to the edge, leapt, and was gone. A thunderous slide started. He staggered to the edge and looked down. There was nothing to see but sparkling dust. He closed his eyes. The silence returned, and he looked again; and he saw the bottom of the ravine: a mound of rocks.

He fell back and gazed into the void. He loathed these mountains. And it came down upon him: the senselessness; his whole life laid bare.

For seven days and nights he lay motionless. It felt like seven lives and deaths; each breath clung to his lips, and each pulse lingered in his breast. The pattern of his life unfolded before his unseeing eyes. He already knew too much. He tried to stop it, but memories kept flowing in; and the pattern was always the same.

The care of his mother was faded, withering into the harshness of reality. His father, from strong to weak, from courage to despair; always bent over the tools and the leather. The elders, from just to grim. His life, from hope to loss. He loathed his childhood.

He remembered the fun and games between duties; in the early days. Rowan and his little sisters Cherry, Rose, and Apple; Alder, his sister

Hazel, and his elder brothers Birch and Hornbeam; Yew, Pine, and Juniper; the twins Aspen and Poplar, and the cousins Beech and Oak; and Linden. They had all sworn friendship for life, and they had clasped wrists to seal it. But playing disappeared as life grew harder; and he lost them all when he left. That was eleven years ago; they must have forgotten him. He loathed his loneliness.

He left his name behind, and he went far; east, south, west, north. He saw things that he had never seen before, and he came to places where many people met; some had brown hair or even yellow hair, and pale eyes. He became used to strange names and customs, and he saw freedom and ease; but he always had to go on. Further and further away; two years. Through the wilderness, on the road, in the villages, in the towns and cities. And he had learned the name: the Black Land. First as a whisper, later as a murmur. The shadow of his life: it always reached him. He loathed that name.

He became Millboy, and Mill was like a father to him; and he got Redmare. But he did not make any real friends; and soon Mill lost his strength so the work grew harder. When the old man died, he himself became Mill. He was free, and yet he felt trapped. He tried to decide, to stay or to go. Soon the answer came: rumours about men from the Black Land, searching for someone. Men with pale skin, raven beards and hair, and eyes like coal; clad in black; riding with chains. He received many a strange look before he sold the mill. They drove him away, and he lost Redmare. He loathed the thought of them.

In the Forest of Oblivion he bore no name, and he could forget. He came to know about horses in those two years; but they stole his youth. He was nineteen when he saw the black men on the ridge, and it cost him Whiteskin to get away. He loathed those years in the north.

New names again. At first he was Tamer. On the Outer Plains in the far east he was just called Horse. He kept with his favourite wild herd; and Ashmane came to him. They came to be so close that the herdsmen named them Manhorse. But they had to go on, year after year. Once they found a place where they might stay; until he asked if there was word of black men. No one spoke to him after that: they only waited for him to leave. He never asked that question again, and he tried to leave

before the rumour arrived; before anyone would know. But they seemed to get closer and closer, as if they learned his ways. Three more years lost. He sought ever more remote places; and he ended here, on the border of the West. No more to lose, nowhere to go. He loathed his life.

It was only a pattern, no beginning and no end. He relived it, over and over. Every time a chain of events faded into senselessness, another followed; an endless flow. He felt the glow of loathing: it was burning him. He was melting into the mountains, like the others before him. He could sense them about him: all the small mounds. He longed for a gloom to cover him, to shut out his life; to end as a mound. He and Ashmane.

He tensed. Ashmane was not here; Ashmane had leapt to meet another end. He was alone, would be for ever; the pattern of his life. He laxed again.

But this was wrong: Ashmane had followed him every step of the way. Now he should follow, meet the same end. But he felt life pass into the air in small radiant wisps. He blinked, and he saw: the wisps; and the sun.

He tore himself from the ground. The glow rose to a roaring blaze, higher and higher. He crawled to the edge. With a last effort he got upon his feet, swayed, and let himself fall.

He grasped his knees and rolled down the slope. The slide started. He was the centre of a spinning and roaring world: alive.

At last everything slowed down. He stopped rolling, and the rocks stopped pushing him. The world became still.

He was covered with dust, he was bruised, and his back was burning. At last he got up and looked round. On his left the ravine wound its way down between peaks; on his right, the huge mound of Ashmane. He tried to climb it and to lift a few rocks, but he was too weak. He looked down at his own mound. So small, it had not covered him: Ashmane had cleared the way.

He did not want to go on without Ashmane, but if he stayed here all would be in vain. His legs were shaking, and he stumbled many times on his way down the ravine. At the bottom it bent and widened into a valley

to the north. He looked back at the mound, the slope, and the edge of the shelf. He sensed a gloom shrouding a glow. He had no feelings. He turned and went.

At the far end the valley narrowed into a rift in the high ridge to the north; he reached it at sunset. He beheld a green band beyond the outer ridge of the mountains; and fainted.

He woke long before dawn. After a while he remembered. He started early and reached the ridge at noon; he was exhausted and starved. Far below, after miles of rocky slope: a grassland, stretching east and north and west, sinking into a darker green; and beyond it: a greyness. He gazed up at the sun; he looked back, into the mountains; he loathed.

All afternoon he staggered down. At last he felt the soft grass. He turned slowly and faced them: the Mountains of Loathing. There was no future for him, and he was almost spent; so they did get him after all.

He felt a gentle push, and he heard a low nicker; life welled up. He whirled round and embraced Ashmane. Through tears he saw that the horse looked strong and healthy. He sank to his knees and caressed the forelegs.

And he saw that the pasterns and the fetlocks were singed. He put his hand upon the back of his head. Most of the hair was gone, and the remains was like felt. A little later he became conscious of the pain in his back. The coat was tattered, and the skin was sore to the touch; the burning ache went deep.

He got upon his feet again; with great effort he mounted. He clung to the stallion and was carried away from the rocks, deeper and deeper into the grassland, into the night. Even as he was losing consciousness he glimpsed a hut, light shining through an open door.

First the smell of hay; then the sound of steps. He opened his eyes. The old man bowed his head. 'So you made it; at least this far.' The snowy beard and hair dangled as the man shook his head and looked up again.

'Your horse saved you, but you know.' 'Yes, Ashmane saved me.' The old man raised his hand. 'No names are used here. Let me have a look

at your back.' He turned over and felt the bandages being removed. The back was not sore, but there was a strange numbness.

'You must have been lying there for more than a week, maybe seven days. A day or two more, and you would never have seen the sun again.' He rolled back and felt the pang of hay touching flesh. 'Steady now.' He turned over again. 'You are healing from within, but it will take some time; you have been here for ten days now. Rest and sleep.' His eyes closed by themselves. The sound of steps; the smell of hay.

When he woke again the night was giving way. The growing light entered through the louver and showed him the thatch, the log walls, the fireplace, the table, and the bench. There was no ache in his back, but he felt weak.

At last he sat up. He was clad in a grey coat and his own brown trousers. His knife was missing; he must have lost it on the slope. He had lost everything in the mountains. No, not everything; he felt the little flask in his pocket. So he still had the leather oil.

The door opened, and the old man entered. The morning sun shone through his hair and partly through the hand that held the door. The grey clothes were worn. 'This may be the day. Come and eat.'

He rose from the couch and stood swaying in the middle of the room. The dizziness cleared, and he put on his boots; they were singed at the heels. He went on and sat down at the table. The old man picked up a basket with roots, stalks, and a bread, and set it on the table along with two large mugs and a jar. They ate in silence. The water was fresh and clear, and the food had a strong, healthy, earthlike taste.

After their meal he opened his mouth; the old man shook his head. 'Let me answer before you ask. Your horse knew the way because I brought him here; five weeks ago today. I went into the mountains when the gloom spread. Then followed glow and thunder, but no one came, and the glow remained; so I went on to the ravine. Your horse was buried in dust, had been for a day. I could see nothing but the nostrils, and it took me an hour to dig him out. He is quite a horse; once he got up he was ready for anything. But he waited for you until nightfall before I could persuade him to follow me. We came here two days later, but he

ran back and kept close to the rocks until you turned up. Now he is enjoying the grass to the full.'

The old man looked at him with a faint smile. 'Your next question is about me. I came forty years ago. I was older than you, and I had no horse. I tore myself from the shelf sooner than you did; and I found the hut myself. My forerunner cured me in a week: just five days. I have been alone ever since, between the mountains and the swamps. Until your horse turned up.'

There was a long silence. Through the doorway he saw Ashmane, grazing at a distance. It might be possible to get away; perhaps through the swamps. But did he want to? If this place had no name, if no one knew of it? He might be safe here as long as he wished. But did the old man know the way? And what had happened to the one before him? So many questions.

Forty years with no mothers. His mother and the old woman always said it: mothers give birth and life; to the tame and the grown and the wild; the touch of a mother blesses the food and the new crop with life; and the song of mothers blessed every new month, till the elders forbade it; his mother had always whispered, lest it be heard. And often the old woman would add: the elders rule over more and more, but always remember: they have no power over life; they need it and fear it.

But this old man had lived for forty years on unblest food; so it was really possible. He had done it himself for months when he was alone; in the Forest of Oblivion, on the plains with Ashmane, on the road; and men were at the pots at many inns, so he never knew. No one seemed to care about blessing and life, so it was always a relief to receive food from a woman; and it always made him feel stronger.

The old man looked straight at him. 'Yes, this is the day. I wonder whether it be yours or mine; close the door.' He got up and reached for the handle. There was a gentle breeze and the smell of grass; and Ashmane seemed to thrive. He shut the door and returned to his seat. The old man gave him a sidelong glance. 'Now, be careful how you ask.'

He took a deep breath. 'Can anyone find this place but the way I did?' The old man smiled. 'No.' 'Could I leave if I would?' The old eyes grew anxious. 'Yes and no.' It might be wise to change the subject, but

one question was urgent: 'Can you show me the way out?' The old face relaxed. 'Yes.'

He was puzzled. 'Can you leave?' 'No.' There was a certain tension. 'Can I return?' 'Yes and no.' Tension grew. 'Shall one of us be alone here today?' The old man looked into his eyes. 'Yes.'

He knew that they were reaching the end. 'Did your forerunner leave?' The old man shook his head. 'Is he dead?' The old man spread his arms. 'Where is he?' The old man pointed at a hatch in the wall beside the couch. Their eyes met.

He rose slowly and went to see; he knew that somehow this was the end. His fingers trembled as he opened the hatch. At first he saw nothing but the grass outside. But as he lifted his eyes, over the grass, over the rocky slope, he saw: the rift in the mountains, opening into the valley. He lowered his eyes, and he saw the letters carved into the frame:

ONCE YOU READ THIS,
LEAVE NOW OR NEVER.

He swayed, reached for the frame, and felt the letters. At last his decision was made. He turned round. 'I will leave. Show me the way.'

The old eyes were filled with relief and sorrow at the same time. 'So this is your day; and I shall live and tend this place. Come, I have something to show you.'

They went outside. He stopped for a moment and glanced at the mountains on his right; they loomed from east to west. He turned and followed the old man round the corner and into a small shed. It was almost filled with firewood. In the darkest corner he spotted a saddle of an old fashion and a bridle to go with it. 'It was here when I came; now it is yours. I can offer you nothing but this and a waterbag. I will fill it while you saddle your horse.'

There was no need to whistle or call: Ashmane was there already, eager, dancing round him until he saw the saddle; then the stallion stood as though he were carved in stone. After saddling he looked up. The old man was regarding them.

Now the face seemed ancient, eyes filled with tears. But the old man straightened himself and hung the waterbag at the pommel. 'Let us go.'

They walked side by side, away from the hut, away from the mountains. At the edge of the swamps the old man halted. 'I can go no further.' He pointed at a large stone beside a tall tree. 'The track is safe if you follow the stones; always keep close to the stones.'

He knew that he had to go, but somehow it was not right to leave without a final word. 'I know I can never repay you: you saved my life. May I ask you a few questions more?' 'You are free to ask now, but you have to go before the day wanes.' Now the old man seemed calm and collected.

'If I had chosen to stay, should you have to go back yonder?' 'Already I should have been on my way. But as I said: this is your day.' The old eyes were almost joyful. 'Do not worry about me. When my day comes, somehow it will be a relief. That shelf has been the centre of my life for forty years. It has been good to see you and talk to you; and that horse of yours is a wonder.'

The old man patted Ashmane on the neck and caressed his muzzle. 'Farewell, you steed of steeds.' All questions seemed unimportant now. He embraced the old man and mounted in silence. At the second stone he turned in the saddle. The old man was on his way back already, towards the hut, towards the mountains; he did not look back again.

The track wound its way through the swamps. Some of the time he rode back towards the grassland again; but there was always a new stone to show the way.

At last he came to the fringe of the swamps. It bordered a stony plain with few plants. And there he suddenly felt free. The sun was setting. To the south he could see nothing but the swamps and the peaks of the mountains. They were behind him.

He had travelled west for seven days and a half; and now it was a little past noon. His waterbag was empty, and he was very hungry: the old man had only given him food for two days. There had been more and more grass, and groves; but few streams, and the leaves were pale. The sad wind seemed to dry up everything.

On a flat hill he turned his head, towards them: the Mountains of Loathing. They still loomed over the land, from east to south, a score of miles away.

He shuddered. It seemed impossible to get away from them; he had not seen the southward outer ridge until yesterday evening, almost ten score of miles from the swamps; now he had ridden ten and a half. He did not like the thought of turning south and keeping close; on the other hand there seemed to be nothing to the west.

Ahead of him, voices: children. Soon they appeared right in front of him. They stopped short, wheeled round, and ran. Ashmane trotted forward. A few moments later he halted above the hillside and looked down. The children had disappeared, but many huts and houses clustered in the shallow dip, as if they hid from the wind. A few dozen brown figures moved about.

A wolf howled, and everyone looked up at him. Before he reached the village they had all gathered to meet him. They looked lean and hardy. An old woman went forward, and their eyes met. He started and almost fell off Ashmane when she suddenly spread out her arms and said: 'Welcome!' with a beaming smile.

He relaxed and dismounted. At the southern side of the largest house there was a long trough with water. They all watched him unsaddled and let Ashmane drink. The old woman touched his arm. 'Broom can take care of him; come inside.'

They entered through a wide door in the eastern end. His eyes became used to the dim light in the house, and he saw the rows of boxes in the long walls: boxes with barrels, sacks, stalks, branches, and things that he could not make out; one was empty. In the middle of the room there was a long fireplace. On either side it was faced by a narrow table and a bench.

He was seated at the southern table, and food was brought to him. The old woman sat down on his right, and a group of children gathered before him, on the other side of the fire. 'Who are you?' 'Where do you come from?' 'What is the name of your horse?' 'Why do you wear a grey coat?' 'Where are your things?'

The old woman hushed them. 'Let him be. Whoever comes from the mountains eats much and talks little. Leave us.' The children left. She turned to him. 'You need blessed food. Eat.'

For a while there was nothing but the food, and the growing strength. But eventually he became aware of the sharp look in her brown eyes. 'Now is the time for talking. Follow me.'

They went out. All the villagers had gathered in the open space to the south; they were more than a hundred. He followed the old woman and sat down beside her in the middle.

He glanced at her and wondered whether he should speak or be silent. There were no sounds, except for the wind whispering in the brooms and the long grass.

A man in his middle age stood up and pointed at him. 'He is no stayer, he is a leaver; the sooner the better.'

A young man sprang to his feet. 'Tell us your tale, tell us of the mountains.'

An elderly woman rose and folded her arms. She glared at him and shook her head. 'I lost two sons because of a tale: they disappeared in the swamps. They would have been grandfathers now; and they were not the only ones.' She looked round. Five other women and three men rose and folded their arms.

A very old man right next to him was helped to his feet. His voice was feeble but clear. 'Maybe they had not heard enough. In my days no one wanted to go; and we even had a mountain man then.' The old woman smiled, but she remained silent. 'And what about the youngsters gone this threescore years with no one coming? Rumours make things grow, and ugly becomes nice.'

The old man sat down. A very young woman with black hair and dark eyes stood up and smiled. 'I wish to hear.' All the younger villagers rose

and gathered round her. There was a long silence, and they sat down. All eyes rested upon him.

At last the old woman rose. 'My father was a mountain man. He came here seven years before the Blazing Light, in the birth year of Gorse.' She smiled to the old man.

'My father told the truth, the full story; and no one went. Not until that lad came and told a different story before he left again; I was eighteen, and my father was in the long sleep. Thence came the long years: nothing but reek and glow, once or twice every dozen years; and the mountains have grown stronger in the minds of the young. Now, at last, we may hear the story from one who was there.' The old woman looked deep into him. 'Tell.' She sat down.

He rose slowly. Young, eager faces; elder, grave faces; old, calm faces. The old woman had the ghost of a smile on her lips. He knew that his story was the fate of the village. He cleared his throat.

'You have heard tales of the Mountains of Loathing. So have I, as long as I can remember; different stories. Some asserted that they were beautiful, others warned against evil, and still others told of great challenges. I did not go because of the tales. I went because I decided to travel the trail that runs through the mountains from east to west; or at least I thought I did. But I strayed from the trail, and suddenly I had reached the heart of the mountains.'

He sought the right words. 'The warnings are true: there is no beauty; there is no challenge, no bold defiance; but there is evil. The Mountains of Loathing are luring. If you go it is by their will, and you have already been defeated. I was lured, and I went: I was defeated. But for my horse, I had still been there; but for an old man in a hut, I had fallen in their shadows; but for you, I had died within sight. I was defeated.' He sat down.

He looked at the elder villagers, and he saw their anxiety; he looked at the young ones, and he saw their excitement; and he looked at the old woman. He rose again. 'Ask me.'

A boy of ten or twelve sprang up. 'The glow is so marvellous. It must be beautiful when you get really close. What is it like?' Four other boys continued: 'Is it true that the ground is like one big glowing rock?' 'Do

you begin to glow yourself?' 'Can you really melt into the mountain?' 'How do you get loose again?'

The memories were stunning; he almost groaned at first. 'The glow is terrible; I wish I had never seen it. Everything glows, and there is fire in the air. You start glowing where you touch the ground, and it creeps into you. You lose your strength, you fall, and you start melting. How I got loose?'

His voice failed him. He flung off his coat and turned a full round. The skin was still red and peeling. Everyone stared at him. 'I tore myself loose. My old skin is up there.' He almost shouted, pointing southeast. 'And some of the flesh, too.' He looked at the boys.

One of them still met his eyes, daring. He pointed at the boy. 'Which house do you live in?' The boy hesitated for a moment before pointing at a small house in the middle of the village. 'That one; with my parents and my little sister.'

He gazed at the boy, and his voice became calm and strong. 'You think fire and danger are great. But what if it were your house burning? Would you enjoy that? And what if your family were inside? Or you yourself? Would you lie down in the embers and be brave? If you cannot go through with that you are not ready for the mountains.' The boy sat down, horrified.

He looked round again, and his voice was strong. 'Ask me.' For a long time there were no sounds but the wind. At last a young man rose, almost his own age. 'I do not understand. How can you know there is no beauty? Something must be there. If not, what is the glow? I have looked at the mountains all my life. I know they cannot be reached through the swamps, but there are other ways. And I feel that there must be paths unknown, secrets yet unseen. This place is so dull and useless: nothing happens, nothing to achieve.'

He breathed deeply. The air seemed hot. He felt that he was burning; eyes glowing, voice resounding. 'There is nothing there; nothing but your own life. You bring it, and it burns. And unless you get away, all is lost, all is loathing. Where I come from we have a saying: no one can cure a fool but a greater fool. See my folly and be cured.' The young man sat down.

He was tired and disheartened. He was about to sit down, but all at once he knew what to say. He straightened up again and glanced at the old woman; and he spoke, loud and clear: 'You live here, so close. The mountains tempt you and challenge you, always. But you withstand them, you endure; that is the greatest courage. And you help those who failed. If any mountain man tells a different story he is only trying to hide his shame. I honour you all.'

He felt the relief and pride in all of them. He sat down and wept; and many hands touched his shoulders and caressed his hair. At last he raised his eyes again. He was alone with the old woman; his coat had disappeared. 'Come,' she said.

He followed her into the large house. The whole village had gathered inside, and a meal was being prepared. Of a sudden he felt hungry, and he realized that the day had passed. At his seat were a brown coat, a pair of boots, a soap bag, and a knife.

He stayed in the village for three weeks less a day. He knew it would not last, but somehow he managed to postpone the decision. Each day he felt stronger, and he came to like the wind. It had seemed sad at first, but it was soothing, and it reminded him of the Outer Plains.

There was little work during the summer, especially for the young villagers. He enjoyed being with people of his own age; and they played much more than he had imagined.

At first he was shy and awkward, but he soon found out that he was rather good at many of the games; most of all the nimble games like stiltwalk and rockjumping.

Most of the games were nice, but some of them frightened him although he had liked them as a child. The hunt games were the worst. Fox and rabbit was bad enough, but hide and seek made him sick: every time he hid he started shivering and gasping for his breath; and every time he found one of the others he felt guilty.

He both liked and disliked the fight games. One against one was all right, but he did not like to be many against one. It was very exciting to be the one against many, but he had to restrain himself not to overdo and become dangerous.

They talked a lot; mostly about their life at the northern fringe of the known world, by the Stony Waste. Everything seemed simple and easy. He was amazed how much they were at rest in their own world. And all their names reflected the plants of the plains; much like the names at home, in the lower villages, below the hills, below the forest. But they hardly ever used names when they spoke to one another.

They were curious enough about other places nearby that he did not know. But they asked little of the lands far away that he knew.

Anything more than two weeks away on foot was the Grey Land: a mixture of everything long since muddled into a dull and boring grey-ness that made everyone unhappy and dissatisfied. So they never asked him about his own home and his travels before the mountains; and amongst all the villagers he was the mountain man.

Every day he rode bareback on the plains. Once they even reached the waste. The land went on, but somehow the land ended here.

The children were very fond of Ashmane; they swarmed almost as thickly as the flies. They had heard of horses, but they had never seen one. At first they would shout and laugh and clap their hands, but they soon learned to be quiet. He had nothing to worry about: when Ashmane tired of them he just went out of sight.

Often they would ask him about small things: the names of the flowers, what the bees were doing, and where the wind came from. That made him remember hither and thither. He had learned it from his mother, and now he taught it to them; with the wind between the houses, and with the bees between the flowers.

Every time he lifted a down and said: 'Hither,' they would shout: 'Thither!' pointing at different houses; and every time one of them had pointed at the next flower they would all cheer, and that child would be proud.

He also had many a talk with the older villagers; sometimes until late at night, before he went to sleep in the empty box in the large house. He learned of the small towns to the south, the nearest one being four days away on foot. Men from the Grey Land came there, but not much. And no one was come this far for more than a hundred years.

‘So you are not afraid of strangers?’ The old man, Gorse, met his eyes and said: ‘It takes a stranger to fear a stranger. We have nothing that anyone wants. Many ages ago men travelled north to search for riches in the waste, but they found nothing. Far to the west they found salt, or so we have heard. And we heard that there was fighting and killing, and now there is a city; that is one month on foot hence.’ Gorse waved his hand.

‘But we have seen fear.’ He received a sharp glance. ‘In the days of my grandmother a man came from the Grey Land. He asked if he could live here, and they decided to see. But he became more and more restless, and he stayed for weeks alone in the waste. After half a year other grey men came and asked of him. My grandmother told me that fifteen of them went to look for him. When they returned all the grey men left; but he was not among them, and he was never seen again.’

Gorse saw the terror in his eyes. The old man smiled and patted his hand. ‘None of them were anything like you. They looked quite normal, no offence, no stranger than other strangers, I mean. They merely seemed to have an old score to settle; and they obviously did. No one is ever come following a mountain man from the east; but we believe that this is no hiding place. The only place of that kind is between the mountains and the swamps.’

All questions were settled at the meetings. Most of them were led by Spelt, the old woman. He never spoke again at any meeting, but often he was asked about details; until all curiosity had died out. About the gloom and the glow and the sun and the sky and the shelf. And the way from the trail to the village; many times he scratched a map in the bare soil by the trough.

Mill had taught him how to do it: always with his back to the midday sun, facing the Still Light of the north; one length for a day on foot or wheel, two lengths for a day on horseback; a line across for the night, or an arrowhead to show the way; a dot for every day of rest; every moon and every new month. Hills were round, rocks pointed; many for mountains; and valleys were like troughs. Roads were straight, trails sawlike, rivers wavy; lakes were waves. Tufts for swamps and marshes, trees for

groves and woods; many for a forest. A ring about the road for a village or a clearing, a square for a town, a square within a square for a city. And at both ends: the month. A sprout for Sprout starting at Midspring, a leaf for Leaf, and a flower for Bloom; a branch for Growth starting at Midsummer, an ear for Seed, three berries for Fruit, and two lines for the single week of Rest; an acorn for Fade starting at Midfall, a mushroom for Rot, and a square for Soil; a candle for Light starting at Midwinter, a star for Frost, and a cross for Change at the end of the year.

He drew it again and again, all the way from that day on the trail, the tenth day in Leaf: a short climb, five days north, eight days on the shelf, two days and a ride into the grassland, four weeks less a day in the hut, half a day north through the swamps, seven days and a half to the west, to the village; on the three and twentieth day in Bloom.

And beside the crosslines: the waxing moon on the first day of his climb; the full moon that he never saw on the shelf; the waning moon, a flower for the first day in Bloom, a line for the new moon, and the waxing moon, during his long stay in the hut; and the full moon on the third day from the swamps. And at the ends: a leaf for Leaf, and a flower for Bloom.

At last even the children were satisfied. ‘That is where we live,’ said Harebell, a little girl with yellow hair and dark blue eyes.

All his maps had been different: it was difficult to draw. But at last he was satisfied, too. And it made him remember the maps he had seen at the mill: the maps that Mill drew, and the maps on pale paper from the south.

They were different, and some of them faced south, towards the midday sun. Mill had always shaken his head and explained that south was down, down under the sun that was rising ever higher; and the Still Light was almost still in the sky, all night, all year, ever north.

One of the men with the maps had used to smile and say that it must be down north because the Still Light was higher in the north. But they were old friends so Mill had always smiled back.

As time went by he noticed that some of the young women often chose his company; most of all Ling who had said that she wished to hear at

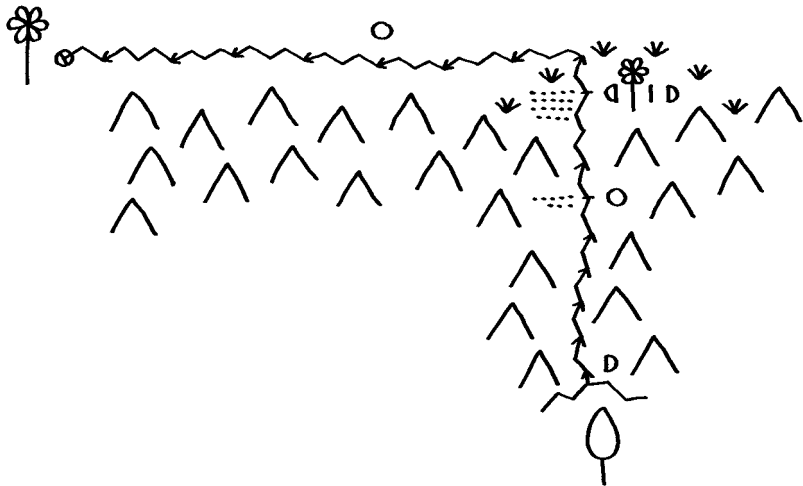
the first meeting. She had looked much at him at Midsummer, over the flutes and the drums, the fire and the dance. Also, he became aware of an anxiety among the young men. And Foxtail, one of his best friends, seemed to be very fond of Ling. He knew that it was time to leave.

He told Spelt a week after Midsummer, and she was sad. 'I thought so. Yours is a long way. I had hoped that maybe, but you are right. Never forget; we shall not. You are always welcome, for a while or for ever. You gave more than you took: the village is at peace.'

Two days later, on the eighth day in Growth, he went south with ample provisions. Ashmane had to get used to the saddle again, but he was as frisky as ever. Foxtail and Mugwort followed him to the nearest town.

It was a quiet journey, both sad and friendly. The mountains seemed to withdraw very slowly. Everything was fresh and green under the high sun: woods, groves, grass, and the banks of the small rivers and streams from the east.

When the town was in sight his friends would go no further. He felt very lonely when he rode on in the light of the setting sun; but he had become used to the mountains looming on his left.



THE TOWN

Gorse had warned him not to cross the fields near the town. 'The tillers are very particular. They seem to think that their soil is ruined by feet; so what of hooves?' For that reason he turned west, round the town. The widest track led south, and he decided to follow it.

He had food enough for weeks, and there was plenty of grass and water. Besides, he was in no hurry to be seen or to hear news, or as Gorse had put it: 'If you ask, they will ask; if they see you, they will know; if you see them, you will know.' And the old man had added: 'Never talk first, but always answer: they will be pleased and not offended. But tell little of yourself; else they will never stop asking.'

A day and a half later he reached a crossing, and the track widened into a road. He chose to leave it and travel along the meadows at a safe distance to the west. In that way he could see the road and yet ride unnoticed. He still ate and slept without a fire. One day more, and he rode round the next town, between the walls and the fields to the west.

Next morning he saw that the countryside had changed: tilled fields, meadows with cattle, stone fences, windows with glass; and people everywhere. He had to return to the road.

He smiled to himself; four days with Foxtail and Mugwort on foot and three days on horseback: this must be the Grey Land. The mountains were still looming from north to south, less than two days away.

He met a few carts from time to time, but no one spoke to him, and he remained silent. He slept in the roadside, holding the reins. He started early, but he took his time with many rests. The days were hot so he rode with his coat open; and he saw that Gorse had been right when he said that grey men wore shirts under their coats, even in the summer.

Early in the afternoon on the third day in the Grey Land he reached a larger town. The fields reached the walls so he decided to go through. He had become so unused to paved streets and houses that the sound of hooves and wheels was like thunder, and the voices were like a gale through the forest. It scared him, and all he wanted was to get away.

In the middle of a square a little sturdy man pointed and shouted at him across a crowd. He felt an urge to slip away, but the warning from