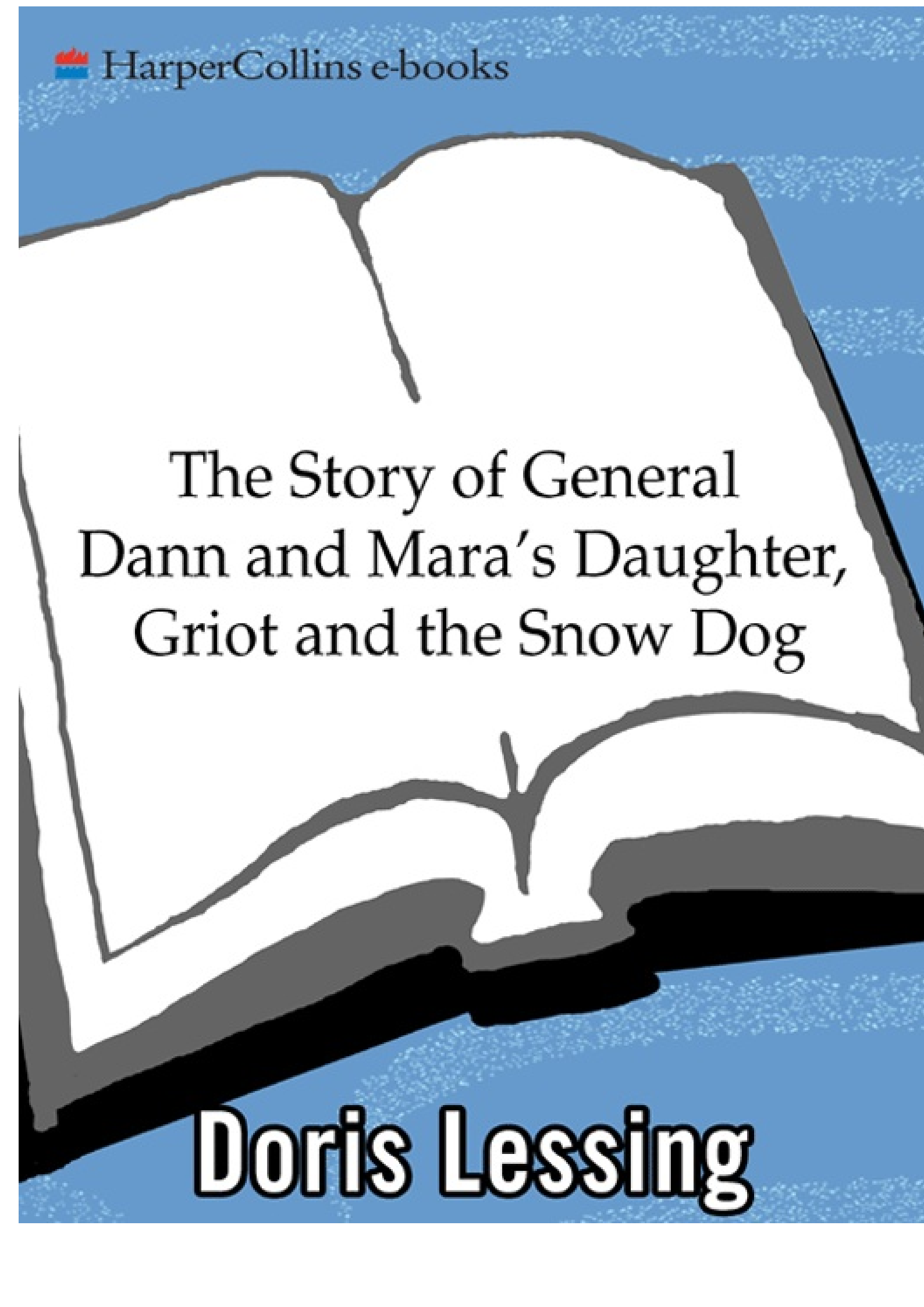




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The Story of General
Dann and Mara's Daughter,
Griot and the Snow Dog

Doris Lessing

The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot and the Snow Dog

A Novel

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A slight move to one side or the other—a mere hand's breadth—and Dann must fall.

He lay stretched, like a diver, and his fingers curled over an extremity of crumbling black rock, the tip of a shelf whose underside had been blasted away by wind and water, and which from a distance looked like a dark finger pointing at the cataract pouring over an edge of black rocks to become, at once, mists and spray that whirled and shifted, hypnotising him with movement: a cliff of thundering white. He was deaf with the noise, and fancied he heard voices calling to him from the thunder, though he knew they were the cries of seabirds. Lengths of white falling water filled all that side of his vision, and then if he shifted his gaze to look ahead, lifting his head from his arm, far away across the gulf he was poised above, those low clouds were snow and ice. White, white on white, and he was breathing a fresh sea air that cleared his lungs of the dull damp smell of the Centre. It was only when he left the Centre and its marshy edges he realised how he hated the smell of the place, and the look of the marshy land, all greys and drab greens and the flat gleam of water. He came here as much for the fresh lively smell as for the swirling movement that filled him with energy. White, and black, and above him the blue of a cold sky. But if he shifted to the very tip of the spit of rock, letting his arms dangle on either side of it, and looked down, far below there was the glint and glide of water, made blue by the sky.

This tip of rock could crumble and fall and he with it: the thought exhilarated him.

That water pouring over the rocks, he knew it; he had been swimming in the sea only a day ago. Salt and cold and strong it was, and the sea far below there was salty and cold but not so strong because of the water that was gushing everywhere from the snow and ice that began where the fall of sea water ended. The water down there was sea water diluted. Yet he saw the seabirds come from the waves to the rocky barrier and let themselves float down to the other sea, the low sea down there, so it was sea enough for them. And how did fish get down from the dangerous salty ocean to that other low sea? he had wondered, thinking that surely fish brought by the waves to the edge of the ocean and the rocks, and dashed over to fall in the white cascades, could not survive such a long gasping whirling descent. But whether they did or not, there was another way fish arrived in the lower sea. The falling masses of water span off foam, masses of it, in clumps many times the size of Dann. And in those clumps travelled fish.

Now the booming of the water was augmented by a loud crashing: he knew what that was. A boulder was being dislodged from the rocky crest and was bounding down, invisible to him behind the

white mists, bouncing off hidden projections, and would land out of sight down there, in the water of this end of the Middle Sea. He knew that this chasm, this cleft, so enormous he could easily think it endless, had been a sea. He had known it on the old maps and globes in Chelops. At the Farm he had even tried to copy what was in his mind, on a globe that had drawn on it the Middle Sea, with below, Ifrik, and above it the ice masses of Yerrup, white all the way up to an edge of blue. He had stretched white leather from a goat over a frame of twigs. It was rough, but on it he and Mara had recreated the old Mahondi globe. Ahead, where he stared, more imagined than seen, because he knew it was there, were the regions of the Ice. And it was melting. It was melting into the ocean, and falling down the sides of the Middle Sea to where the sea was, at its bottom. All along a cliffy edge too vast for him to take in, ice water was pouring down into the sea there. So how long would it take to fill? He knew that once it had been full, and the surface of Middle Sea was not far below where he was now. Dann tried to imagine this great hole full of water, a sea almost at the level of the Western Sea—tried, but it was no good. So insistent and present was what he saw—the steep dark sides of the chasm going down to the present Middle Sea, streaked with grass and vegetation.

For weeks he had come to lie here, drawn by the fascination of the place, watching the thundering fall of water, listening, letting his lungs fill with clean salty air. He had looked around and across and down, and wondered about the lower sea. But now he didn't wonder, he knew: he had been down there himself.

During those weeks somebody watching the young man, who was more of a youth, slight, light and from a distance easily mistaken for a bird, must have wondered at his carelessness in that dangerous place. Gusts and swirls of wind came with the mists, and the spray and clumps of foam, but he did not attempt caution—he might sit up, or even dangle his legs over the edge, and stretch out his arms. Was he welcoming the blast that could take him over? And then that was what happened: he was lifted and flung down, landing on a long slippery slope of rock and sliding down it to stop in a grassy cleft. Below him was another descent of wet rock, and again the wind flung him down. These rocks were like glass, and were the work of water: the rub of water over stretches of time he could not begin to imagine had made them. He had slid, his boniness and the thin skin over his bones protected by his thick garments. As he slid, or even rolled, he looked for evidences of a path or at least a way of easier descent, and believed he was catching glimpses of some kind of a path. He knew—he had been told—that people did make this long dangerous descent, because of the good-tasting fish in the clean lower sea. As he clung to a bush, a sizeable clump of foam came to rest beside him, caught on the bush. Inside it he saw little fish wriggling. If they didn't reach water they wouldn't be wriggling for long. Dann stuck his arm right into the foam so that it clung to him, and he went on sliding and falling, down, down, aided by the slippery rocks, and then he was there, by the surface of the lower sea, which like its progenitor, the Western Sea—or part progenitor, the water from the icy cliffs supplied part—was lively, with little waves, but not like the great rollers of the Western Sea.

He flung the mass of foam off him and it lay rocking on the water and he saw little coloured fish swim off into the waves. From down here, the great fall of white water away up on his left hand was half the sky. He found an amenable rock, and crouched there, peering down into the sea, this Middle Sea, which had once filled all this vast space—he knew he was seeing only a tiny portion of its western end—and so he was crouching here on what had been once near the bottom. And would be again. When? So much water pouring in, salt water and fresh ice, and yet behind him the cliffy sides stretched up—and up.

Dann took off his clothes and slid into the water, ready to fish, but with nothing but his ten fingers. ~~There were a lot of fish of all sizes. He swam among them and they crowded around, jostling and nudging, not afraid at all.~~ He embraced a big scarlet fish, stuck his fingers into its gills and wrestled it up and out of the water on to a flat rock where it panted its way to death. He had his knife in his belt. He cut the fish into strips and stuck them on a bush to be cured by the sun. He had nothing like a bag or a satchel with him, and it was a big fish. He stayed for some time, until the sun had gone down behind the great cliff of falling water, and he was in danger of having to climb up that dangerous rocky edge in the dark. He made his way up in the cracks between the rocks. It took a long time and it was dark when he reached the top. He made his way to the Centre, and to his room, avoiding the old woman and the servitors, accepting the heavy damp of the air into his lungs with difficulty.

And next day early he went down the side of the Middle Sea, but this time with a sack to put the strips of fish in. But the fish had gone. Someone, something, had taken it. Alert, looking around, trying to be small and invisible, Dann squatted behind a rock and waited. He could see nothing, nobody. He decided not to swim and try for another fish in case this invisible thief should stop him getting out. The sun was straight above him, and it was hot. He did try a quick dip close to the shore and from the water he saw on a bush strands of coarse white hair. The hair was high on the bush. A largish animal, then. He climbed back up the sides of the chasm to his spit of rock and thought how different it was, believing yourself alone, and then knowing you are not, perhaps being observed.

When he had arrived at the Centre from the Farm—it seemed to him now a pretty long time ago at least half a sun's cycle—he had found that the man, who called himself Prince Felix, was dead and the old woman, Felissa, mad enough to believe that he had returned as a conqueror with the intention of setting her on a throne. She had an old piece of metal, a shield, from who knew how long ago, with a picture on it of a woman on a high chair, while people knelt around her. Dann wanted to find out from her what the metal was, what time it had come from, from which room in the museums she had taken it, but she only wailed and complained that he was of the royal blood and must assume his rightful place—at her side. He had left her to it.

Then, from the Farm had come after him a youth who had turned up there, looking for work. His name was Griot and Dann remembered those greenish eyes always following him, from as far back as Agre. He had been a soldier, under Dann, who had been General Dann of Agre. The fact was, he had followed Dann from Agre to the Farm, and from there to the Centre. Griot had said to Dann, 'When you didn't come back to the Farm, I thought you might have something for me here.' *Here* meaning the Centre, but his use of the word suggested larger purposes. The two young men had stood together observing each other, one with need, and Dann wanting to get away. Not that he disliked Griot: he had never much noticed him. A thickset young man, with a strong face, and greenish eyes that had to be noticed because eyes that colour were not often seen. Dann told him the Centre had plenty of space in it. Already all kinds of people sheltered there. It was much bigger than he and Mara had believed when they were here. That it was very large had to be obvious from a glance, but it was only when you knew it that the extent and the intricacy of the place became evident. Rooms led from rooms, rooms above rooms were reached by tiny wriggling stairs, half-ruinous areas that had been abandoned but now had inhabitants who did not want to be noticed, who kept out of sight. Beyond the encircling great stone wall on the side of the Middle Sea were buildings, made long after the main Centre was established, but they were sinking into the marshes. That was why it was easy to see the Centre as smaller than it was. It had been built on the highest place for a long way around, but as the tundra melted, the marshes encroached and the waters crept up. In some places the edges of the Centre were half under

water. How long had they been like this? What use asking, when the locals might say of a city whose roofs you could see shining as the boats passed over it, 'My grandfather said that his grandfather remembered this city when the roofs were above water.'

Only such a short time ago he and Mara had been here together, and he could swear that he remembered dry where now there was wet. Perhaps things were speeding up? Once it had taken generations for a city to sink down into the mud, but now, much less?

He had said to Griot that he, Dann, was not looking for company. It was hard to say this into the face full of expectation. Griot had said that he knew a lot of crafts, had many skills; Dann would not find him a liability. Dann asked Griot where he had learned so much, and heard a history not unlike his own: Griot had spent his life on the run, from wars and invasions, as much as from the drought. Dann said there was something valuable Griot could do. Every day more refugees came to the Centre from the wars that were going on in the east, in countries Dann had scarcely heard of. He had had to acknowledge that there was more to the world than Ifrik. On the goatskin where he had sketched his map of the world was Ifrik, in the centre place, and above it the Middle Sea and above that Yerrup, with its ice masses. And, to the west, the Western Sea. That was about it. In his mind now were shadowy eastward extensions of this central Ifrik, filled with images of war. Griot could teach these people his skills, keep them out of mischief and stop them pilfering from the museums. Griot was pleased. He smiled: Dann had not seen this serious youth smile.

Then he watched Griot on a level, comparatively dry area with about a hundred people, not all youths, or men, for there were women among the refugees. He was teaching them to drill, march, run. They were using weapons. From the museums?

Dann said to Griot, 'People trained to be soldiers will want to fight, have you thought of that?'

And there on that stubborn face was an acknowledgement that Dann had said more than he thought he had. Griot nodded, and stared straight into Dann's eyes. What a look that was, asking for so much.

'You were a general in Agre,' said Griot softly.

'Yes, I was, and I remember you, but I am not looking for more fighting.'

And now Dann found himself being examined, most thoroughly, by those unsettling eyes. Griot did not have to say *I don't believe you*.

'It's true, Griot.'

It certainly was odd, the way people again and again expected him to step into some space in their imaginations, fit into their dreams.

He said, 'Griot, when Mara and I came here we found two lunatic old people who wanted us to start a new dynasty of Mahondis. They called us prince and princess. They saw us as a breeding pair. They saw me as someone who would create an army.'

Griot's eyes did not leave Dann's face: he was searching for what Dann was not saying.

‘I mean it,’ said Dann. ‘Yes, I was a general, and yes, I was, I believe, good at it. But I’ve seen too much of killing and people being made captives.’

‘Why did the old people want you to have an army? What for?’

‘Oh, they were batty. To conquer everything. To subdue all of Tundra—I don’t know.’

Griot said, ‘There is always killing, and people running from wars. And new wars.’

Dann said nothing and Griot asked—and clearly this was the moment of definition for him, ‘And so what do you want to do—sir?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Dann. ‘No, I really don’t.’

Griot said nothing. He had taken in all that Dann had said, but his conclusions were not what Dann would have approved of.

At last Griot said, ‘Very well. I’ll do what I can with the refugees. Some of them are not bad. They can teach me a thing or two sometimes. And I’m arranging the food supplies. There is plenty of good fish down in the Bottom Sea—not the muddy marsh rubbish around here. And I shall get some seed grain that I saw growing in water. And there’s a marsh pig we can breed.’

Dann saw that Griot was taking on the tasks that he had expected Dann to do.

‘Thank you, Griot,’ he then said.

Griot saluted, and left.

That salute—Dann certainly did not like it. It was establishing some kind of contract between them that Griot needed.

The encounter between the two young men had been some weeks ago.

Dann tried not to run into Griot or even to notice much what he was doing.

On this day after he had noticed the hair of the animal stuck on the bush, he was lying stretched on his rocky spit, and thinking of the Farm and of Kira, who was pregnant with his child. It would be born soon. And Mara’s child too. Interesting that Griot had not expected him to return to the Farm, yet Griot had stayed there long enough to learn what was going on, and who belonged to whom. That was a joke; Mara belonged to Shabis. And so Dann wouldn’t go back. He thought of Kira and it was painful. How he did love her—and how he did hate her. Love? Well, he loved Mara, so he should not use that same word for Kira. He was fascinated by Kira. Her voice, her way of moving, that slow, lazy, seductive walk...but to be with her was to be humiliated. He thought of how, on the night before he left, she had stretched out her naked foot—and she was as good as naked—and said in that sweet singing voice of hers, ‘Come here, Dann.’ They had been quarrelling. They always quarrelled. He had stood there, a few paces away, and looked at her, and wanted to do what she wanted, which was to get on his hands and knees and crawl to her. She half lay, holding out her naked foot. She was pregnant,

but it was too early to show. She needed him to lick her foot. And he desired to, he craved to, he longed to give himself up to her and stop fighting. But he could not do it. She smiled at him, her malicious smile that always made him feel she had cut him with a whip, she had wiggled her toes, and said, 'Come, Dann'—and he had turned and run out. He picked up some clothes, some essentials—and left the Farm. He did not say goodbye to Mara because he could not bear to.

Dann lay on his shelf of unsafe rock and knew it was time he left. He was so restless. Well, hadn't he spent nearly all his life on his feet, walking, walking, one foot after another? He had to be in motion again. But to leave here, leave the Centre, meant going even further away from Mara. She was a few days from here, on the shores of the Western Sea which he was observing for hours of every day from this perch of his, seeing it crash over the rocks down in sheets of foam to the Bottom Sea. The waves he saw break into spray were the same as licked the coast below the Farm. But he had to leave. He told himself it was because of Griot, always spying on him, and now there was this new animal down there, watching him too. He stretched and craned over the edge of his rock finger to see if somewhere was an animal, perhaps expecting more fish from him. For a few minutes he fancied he saw something big and white, but it was too far away. If it was watching Dann, it would be hiding itself. The thought made him feel prickly and caged. No, he must leave, he must go, he would leave Mara.

'Oh, Mara,' he whispered, and then shouted her name into the noisy water. It seemed to him her face was in the patterns the water made. A rainbow spanned the Rocky Gates and little rainbows were spinning off and away with the clumps of foam. The air seemed full of light, and noisy movements—and Mara.

He was heavy with sorrow, felt he could easily roll off that rocky protuberance and let himself fall.

He was leaving Kira too—wasn't he? But he scarcely ever thought of her and the child she was having. His. She had not even bothered to tell him she was pregnant. 'I don't think I'd get much of a look in with that child, even if I were a good father, hanging about, waiting for the birth—which must be soon.' So he excused himself. 'And besides, I know Mara will see that my child will be looked after, and there is Shabis, and Leta and Donna and probably other people by now.' It made him uncomfortable, saying *my child*, though it was. The thought of Kira was like a barrier between him and this soon to be born infant.

He stood up at the very end of the rocky finger and dared the wind to swirl him off. His tunic filled with air, his trousers slapped against his legs: his clothes were willing him to fall, to fly, and he felt the tug and lift of the wind over his whole body. He stood there, upright, not falling, so he left the rock and went to the Centre. There he visited the old woman who screeched at him, and so did the servant: two demented old women, in a bad-smelling room, berating him.

He chose a few things, put them in his old sack, found Griot and told him he would be away for while.

How those sharp green eyes did peer into his face—his thoughts.

And how much he, Dann, was relying on Griot, and that made him feel even more caged and confined.

‘Would you ever return to the Farm, Griot?’

‘No.’

Dann waited.

‘It’s Kira. She wanted me to be her servant.’

‘Yes,’ said Dann.

‘I’ve had enough of that.’

‘Yes,’ said Dann, who had been a slave—and worse.

‘She is a cruel woman,’ said Griot, lowering his voice, as if she might overhear.

‘Yes,’ said Dann.

‘So, you’ll be off, then?’

Dann had gone a few paces when he felt the need to turn, and he did, and saw Griot’s betrayed face. But had he made Griot any promises? He had not.

‘Griot, I’ll be back.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know.’

Dann made himself march away from Griot’s need.

Dann set off around the edge of the Middle Sea, going east. He had meant to walk right round the edges of the Bottom Sea, but that was before he had seen it, so rough, often piled with detritus from rockfalls. Up here on the top edge there was a road, more of a track, running between the precipitate fall to the water and the marshes. He had left the stale mouldy smell of the Centre, but the smell of the marshes was as bad: rotting vegetation and stagnant water. He walked, thinking of Mara and the past. His mind was full of Mara, and of sorrow, though he had missed the news of her death. She had died giving birth. The messenger from the Farm had come running to the Centre, but Dann had left. Griot had thought of sending the messenger after Dann, but said that Dann was away. Griot was glad he did not have to tell Dann. During his time at the Farm he had observed, had taken everything in. He knew how close Mara and Dann were: one had only to see them together. He knew the two had walked all the way up Ifrik through many dangers; his own experience had told him what a bond shared danger was. He had seen that Dann suffered, because Mara belonged not to him but to her husband Shabis. To tell Dann his sister was dead: he was in no hurry to do it.

Dann had wanted to leave the Centre—leave the past—because of the weight of sorrow on him, which he believed he understood. It was natural. Of course he was bereft, but he would get over it. He

had no intention of subsiding into unhappiness. No, when he got walking, really moving, he would be better. ~~But he had not got into his stride, his rhythm: it was what he needed, the effortlessness of it,~~ when legs and body were in the swing of the moment, a time different from what ruled ordinary sitting, lying, moving about—never tiring. A drug it was, he supposed, to walk like that, walking at its best, as he had done sometimes with Mara, when they were into their stride.

But Mara was not here with him.

He kept at it, thinking of Mara; well, when did he not? She was always there with him, the thought of her, like the reminder of a beating heart: I am here, here, here. But she wasn't here. He let his feet stumble him to the very edge of the declivity that ended in the Bottom Sea, and imagined her voice saying, *Dann, Dann, what did you see?*—the old childhood game that had served them so well. What was he seeing? He was staring into streaming clouds. Water—again water. His early life had been dust and drought, and now it was water. The abrupt descent before him ended in water and a blue gleam of distant waves, and behind him the reedy swampy ground with its crying marsh birds went on for ever...but no, it did not. It ended. And on the other side of the northern cloud mass, he knew, were shores loaded with ice masses. Much more to the point surely was, *Dann, Dann, what do you know?* He knew that the vast emptiness of the gulf before him had been sea that came up almost to where he stood now, with boats on it, and there had been cities all around its edge. He knew that cities had been built all over the bottom of the sea, when it was dry, which were now under water, and on islands, still inhabited, but many of those had emptied, were emptying because everyone knew how fast the waters were rising, and could engulf them. Everyone knew? No, he had met people coming to the Centre who knew nothing of all this. *He* knew, though. He knew because of what the Mahondis knew, fragments of knowledge from distant pasts. 'It is known,' one would say, giving the information to another, who did not have it, because they came from a different part of Ifrik. 'It is known that...'

It was known that long ago when the Ice first came creeping and then piling into mountains all over Yerrup, the mass and pack of ice had pushed all those wonderful cities along the edge of that shore that stood opposite to him now, though he could not see it, over the sides and into the great gulch which was already half full of detritus and debris, before the people of that time—and who were they?—had taken up the stones and blocks of cement that had built the old cities and used them for the cities on the land which was now behind him, but then things changed, the Ice began to melt and the cities sank down. That was when the tundra turned into water. Cold, cold, a terrible cold that destroyed all Yerrup but how was it this sea, the Middle Sea, had been a sea but then was empty? 'It was known that at some time a dryness, just as frightful as the all-destroying Ice, had sucked all the water out of the Middle Sea and left it a dry chasm where cities were built. But it did not fit—these bits of fact did not fit. His mind was a map of bits of knowledge that did not connect. But that was what he did know as he looked into the moving dark clouds, and heard the seabirds calling as they dropped their way down to the lower sea. And, at his back, the marshes, and beyond them, for they had an end, scrub and sand and dust, Ifrik drying into dust. He and Mara had walked through all that, walked from deserts into marshland, and both were on their way to their opposites, through slow changes you could hardly see, you had to know.

What do you know, Dann?—I know that what I see is not all there is to know. Isn't that of more use than the childish *What did you see?*

He returned to the track and saw stumbling towards him a man ill with exhaustion. His eyes

stared, his lips cracked with his panting breath, but although he was at his limits he still moved a hand to the hilt of a knife in his belt, so that Dann could see he had a knife. Just as Dann's instinct was; his hand was actually moving towards his knife when he let it fall. Why should he attack this man, who had nothing he needed? But the man might attack him: he was well-fed.

'Food?' grunted the stranger. 'Food?' He spoke in Tundra.

'Walk on,' said Dann. 'You'll find a place where they'll feed you.'

The man went on, not in the easy stride Dann was wanting to find, but on the strength of his will. If he didn't fall into a marsh pool, he would reach the Centre and Griot would feed him.

What with? That was Griot's problem.

Dann went on, slowly, thinking that it was easier to walk fast on dust and sand than on this greasy mud that had already been trodden and squashed by a thousand feet. Plenty of people had been this way. More were coming. Dann stood at the side of this track and watched them. They had walked a long distance. Men, then some women, even a child, who had dull eyes and bad breathing. He would die, this child, before he got to the Centre. In Dann's sack was food, which would save the child, but Dann stood there and watched. How would he ever get into his stride, his own beautiful rhythm, when these refugees came past, came past...

He had not made much progress that day, and he was already tired. The sun was sinking over there in the west, behind him. Where was he going to sleep? There wasn't a dry bit of earth anywhere, all was wet and mud. He peered over the edge of the chasm to see if he could find a good rock to stretch out on but they all sloped: he would roll off. Well, why not? He didn't care if he did. He went on, looking down at steep and slippery rocks that had been smoothed by thousands of years of the rub of water—but his mind gave up: it was hurting, to think like this. At last he saw a tree growing aslant a few paces down. He slid to it on glassy rocks and landed with his legs on either side of the trunk. This was an old tree. And it was not the first that had grown on this site. Remnants and fragments of older trees lay about. Dann pulled out some bread from his sack, hung the sack on a low branch and lay back. It was already dark. The night sounds were beginning, birds and beasts he did not know. Overhead was the moon, for the clouds had gone, and he stared at it, thinking how often its brightness had been a threat to him and Mara when they had been trying to escape notice...but he didn't have to hide now. Dann slept and woke to see a large animal, covered with heavy shags of white hair, standing near him on its hind legs, trying to pull down his bag with the food in it. He sat up, found a stone and flung it, hitting the side of the animal who snarled and escaped, sliding and slipping on scree, before reaching some rocks.

It was halfway through the night, and chilly, but worse than that, damp, always so damp. Dann wrapped himself well and thought that if he put the bag with the food under him, the hungry animal might attack him to get it. So he left the bag where it was on the branch and dozed and woke through the rest of the night, waiting for the animal to return. But nothing happened. The sun rose away to the east where—he *knew*—the shores of the Middle Sea ended, and beyond them unknown lands and peoples. For the first time a doubt appeared in his mind. He had been thinking—for such a long time now—that he would walk to the end of this sea and then...but how far was it? He had no idea. He did not know. He ate some bread, drank water from a little stream running down from the marshes and climbed back to the path. He was stiff. He must find his pace again, which could carry him all day and

—if necessary—all night.

On his right the marshes were opening into larger pools, and places where you could stand and look down through water on to the roofs of towns. And what roofs—what towns. He remembered the boatman who had brought him and Mara north: he had said he didn't enjoy looking down to see buildings so much better than anything anyone knew how to build now. It made him miserable, he said. Yes, thought Dann, exactly, it did make one miserable. Perhaps this weight of sorrow on him was simply that: he was ashamed, surrounded always by a past so much more clever and wonderful and rich than anything they had now. Always now you came up against *long ago...long, long ago...once there was...once there were*, people, cities and, above all, knowledge that had gone.

So, what did he know? When you came down to it? Over there the ice mountains were melting over Yerrup and their water poured all along those coasts he could not see, down into the Middle Sea. Water poured from the Western Sea down over the Rocky Gates into the Middle Sea. The marshes had been frozen solid as rock where cities had been built to last for ever but now they stood down there deep under water. And southwards, beyond the marshes, Ifrik and its rivers were drying into dust. Why? He did not know. He knew nothing.

Dann's thoughts were stumbling as wearily as his feet, he was burdened with the weight of his ignorance. And of his shame. Once, *long ago*, people knew, they knew it all, but now...

A man came towards him, tired out, like them all, and Dann called out in Tundra—but saw from the face it was not understood. He tried Mahondi, he tried Agre, and then the odd phrases of the half-dozen languages he knew enough of to say, 'Where are you from?' At last one man did stop. The two were alone on the track. Dann pulled out some bread and watched the starving man eat. Then he said, 'Where are you from?'

Dann heard syllables he recognised.

'Is that far?'

'I have been walking forty days.'

'Is your country near the end of the Middle Sea?'

And now a blank face.

'This is the Middle Sea. We are standing on the edge of it.'

'I don't know anything about that.'

'What do you call this, then?'—Dann indicating the great emptiness just by them.

'We call it the Divide.'

'Dividing what from what?'

'The Lands of the Ice from the dry.'

‘Is your land dry?’

‘Not like this’—and the man looked with repulsion at the dull low gleam of the marsh near them.

‘How far then to the end of the Divide?’

‘The end?’

‘It must have an end.’

The man shrugged. He wanted to be on his way. His eyes strayed to Dann’s sack. Dann pulled out the food bag and gave him another bit of bread. The man hid it in his clothes.

‘When I was a child I was told my grandfather had walked to see what lands there were beyond ours and found none. He walked many days.’

And he set off towards the Centre.

Dann stood there, full of dismay and cursing himself for arrogant stupidity. He had taken it for granted that of course he could walk to the end of this shore; why not? Had he not walked all the way up Ifrik? But how long that had taken...and between him and the end of this shore were wars; these people walking and running, some of them wounded, with bandaged arms and dried blood on them, had run from wars. Did he really want to walk into a war? Into fighting?

What was he going to do, then? Dann went on, and on, slowly, not finding his pace, as he was continually having to stop because of the parties of refugees coming towards him, and so it was all that day and at evening it was like the last, wet everywhere, the reedy marshes and—this evening—pale mists moving over the water, and the smell even worse, because of the mists. It was getting dark. Dann looked east into the dusk and thought he would never see the end of this coast. What did he think he was doing, why was he here?

On a patch of smooth hard mud at the edge of the road he squatted to draw with his knife’s tip a circle, then an oval, then a long thin shape, a circle stretched out—the Middle Sea. Every puddle, every pond, every lake had a shore that went round, enclosing water. Why had he wanted to walk to where the shore of the Middle Sea ended, to turn around on itself? Because he wanted to see the Ice Cliffs of Yerrup for himself, that was the reason. Well, there might be easier ways of doing that than walking for another long part of his life, and marching straight into wars and fighting.

He slid from the edge, as he had done the night before, and landed in a patch of grass where bushes stood about, bent all in one direction, because of the wind from the Ice. He put his sack under his head, his knife ready on his chest, and was pleased with the occasionally appearing moon, which let him keep watch.

He woke in darkness. A large vague white mass was close to him and the moon appeared, letting him see it was another of the great beasts lying there, its eyes open, looking quietly at him. Dann’s hand, on his knife’s hilt, retreated. This was no enemy. The moon went in. There was a smell of wet fur. The moon came out. What was this beast? Dann had never seen anything like it. Impossible to tell under all that fur what its body was like, but the face was fine, eyes well spaced, a small face

surrounded by bursts of white hair. This was a beast for cold; one did not need to be told that; it would not do well on desert sand or anywhere the sun struck down hot. Where did it come from? What was doing, lying so close? Why was it? Down Dann's face wet was trickling. There was no mist tonight. Tears. Dann did not cry, but he was crying now, and from loneliness, his terrible loneliness defined because of this companionable beast so close there, a friend. Dann dropped off but woke, slept and roused himself so as not to miss the sweetness of this shared trustful sleep. In the early dawn light he woke and the animal was there, its head on its vast shaggy paws, looking at him with green eyes. Like Griot's. This was not a wild animal: it was accustomed to people. And it wasn't hungry; showed no interest in Dann's provisions.

Dann slowly stretched his hand towards the animal's paws, where its head lay. It closed its eyes in acknowledgement of him, and then again. Dann was crying like a child, and thought, *It's all right, there's no one to see.* The two lay there as the light strengthened, and then the beast's pointed ears stood back and it listened. There were voices up on the road. At once it got up, and slunk down the slope of scree to where a white skeleton bush stood shaking in the wind. There it hid.

Dann watched it go, watched his friend go. Then up he leaped, to face the people up there, face what he had to—though he was not sure now what that was.

With his head just above the edge he watched a group stumbling past, too exhausted to look up and see him. He waited. No one else seemed to be coming. He got back on the track and saw that soon the ground rose dry towards a low hill, with trees. He had to fill his water bottle, if the marshes were ending. He stepped off the track on a dryish edge between pools, and stood, his face to the sun, letting it warm him. He had been dreaming, as he lay with the beast so near, and it had been a bright dream. Mara, yes, he had been dreaming of her because of the sweetness of the beast's companionship. How strange it was, the visit of that animal, in the night.

Dann was looking into a clear pool, with some weed drifting in it. There were three masses of—well, what? Three masses of whitish substance, just below the water. Two large masses and a smaller one...bubbles were coming from it, a muzzle, pointing up...they were animals, like his night's companion, they were drowned, but wait—bubbles meant life; that smaller thing there, it was alive. He knelt on the very edge of the marshy pool, risking the edge giving way under him, and pulled at the beast, brought it close to his feet, and lifted up the weight of it with a jerk beside him, nearly falling himself. Dann raised up the sodden mass by the hind legs and watched water stream from the pointed nose. Water was streaming from everywhere. Surely it must be dead? There was not a flicker of the resistance of life, of animation. And still water was pouring from the mouth, from between new little white teeth. The eyes were half open under mats of wet fur. This was a young animal, the cub of those two cloudy masses of white lying so close. Perhaps they weren't dead either? But Dann had his hands too full, literally, with this young beast. Which suddenly sneezed, a choking spluttering sneeze. Dann put his arm round the heavy dense wetness and held it so the head was down, to let the water out. It was so cold, the air, a heavy deadly cold and the animal was a cold weight. Dann did not feel cold because he was used to exposure, but he knew this animal would die if he couldn't warm it. He laid it on some grass tussocks, between the pools, and in his sack found the bundle of clothes he always carried. He used one to wipe the beast's wet skin, where lumps of wet hair lay matted, and then wrapped it in layers of cloth. What was needed here was blankets, thick layers of warmth, and he had nothing. Surely it should be shivering? He could not feel breath. He opened his jacket, of layered cotton, that was warm enough for him, and buttoned the beast against him, head on his shoulder, feet

nearly at his knees. The weight of sodden cold made him shudder. What was he going to do? This was a young thing, it needed milk. Dann stood, holding the beast to stop it sliding down, and looked at the two foamy submerged masses which would lie there for days in this cold water before going putrid. Unless something came to eat them?

Marsh birds? There were plenty of small marsh animals. He couldn't concern himself with them; he doubted if he could have saved the great beasts, even if they did have life in them. He doubted whether he could help this one. He stepped carefully between the marsh tussocks to the path, afraid of overbalancing with this dead weight, and wondered if he should return to the Centre? But that was a good two days' fast walking to the west. What if he ran? He could not run, with that weight on him. Ahead was the track, winding along the edge of the cliff, but wait—the ground did rise there ahead and where there were trees must, surely, be people. Despite the weight Dann tried to run, but staggered to stop, and felt against his chest a small but steady beat. At the same time it began sucking at his shoulder. It wanted to live and Dann had nothing, but nothing, to give it. He was crying again. What was wrong with him? He did not cry. This was an animal, out of luck, and he had watched so many die, with dry eyes. But he could not bear it, this young thing that wanted to live and was so helpless. Although the weight was giving him cramps in his legs, he resumed his stumbling run and then, ahead of the dark edge of the wood showed a path going up and, as he thought, *people*—the beast stopped sucking and whimpered. Dann ran up the path, running for a life, and when ahead he saw a house, more of a shack, with reeds for a roof and reeds for walls, he clutched the animal, because his now familiar bounds and leaps were shaking it too much.

At the doorway of the shack stood a woman, and she had a knife in her hand. 'No, no,' shouted Dann. 'Help, we need help.' He was using Mahondi, but what need to say anything? She stood her ground, as Dann arrived beside her, panting, weeping, and opened his jacket and showed her the soaking bundle. She stood aside, put the knife down on an earth ledge on an inside wall, and took the beast from him. It was heavy and she staggered to a bed or couch, covered with blankets and hides. He saw how nimbly she stripped off the soaking clothes, which she let fall to the earth floor. She wrapped the beast in dry blankets.

Dann watched. She was frantic, like him, knowing how close the animal was to death. He was looking around the interior of the shack, a rough enough place, though Dann's experienced eye saw it had all the basics, a jug of water, bread, a great reed candle, a reed table, reed chairs.

Then she spoke, in Thores, 'Stay with it. I'll get some milk.' She was a Thores: a short, stocky, vigorous woman, with rough black hair.

He said in Thores, 'It's all right.' Apparently not noticing he spoke her language, she went out. Dann felt the animal's heart. It did beat, just, a faint, I want to live, I want to live. It was not so cold now.

The woman returned with some milk in a cup and a spoon, and said, 'Hold its head up.' Dann did as he was told. The woman poured a few drops into the mouth between those sharp little teeth, and waited. There was no swallow. She poured a little more. It choked. But it began a desperate sucking with its wet muddy mouth. And so the two sat there, on either side of the animal, which might or might not be dying, and for a long time dripped milk into its mouth and hoped that would be enough to give it life. Surely it should shiver soon? The woman took off the blanket, now soaked, and replaced it with another. The animal was coughing and sneezing.

As Dann had done, she lifted it by its back legs, still wrapped in the blanket, and held it to see if water would run out. ~~A mix of water and milk came out. Quite a lot of liquid.~~ 'It must be full of water,' she whispered. They were speaking in low voices, yet they were alone and there were no other huts or shacks nearby.

Both thought the animal would die, it was so limp, so chilly, despite the blanket. Each knew the other was giving up hope, but they kept at it. And both were crying as they laboured.

'Have you lost a child?' he asked.

'Yes, yes, that's it. I lost my child, he died of the marsh sickness.'

He understood she had been going out of the room to express her milk to feed the beast. He wondered why she did not put the animal to her breast now, but saw the sharp teeth, and remembered how they had hurt him when the animal sucked at his shoulder.

Such was their closeness by now that he put his hand on her strong full breast, and thought that if Mara had had her child, she too would have breasts like this. It was hard to imagine.

He said, 'It must hurt, having that milk.'

'Yes,' and she began to cry harder, because of his understanding.

And so they laboured on through the day and then it was evening. During that time they saw only the beast and its struggle for life, yet they did manage to exchange information.

Her name was Kass and she had a husband who had gone off into the towns of Tundra to look for work. He was a Tundra citizen but had made trouble for himself in a knife fight and had to look out for the police. They had been living from hand to mouth on fish from the marsh and sometimes traders came past with grains and vegetables. Dann heard from Kass a tale of the kind he knew so well. She had been in the army, a soldier, with the Thores troops, and had run away, just like him and Mara, when the Agre Southern Army had invaded Shari. The chaos was such that she imagined she had got away with it, but now the Hennes Army was short of personnel and was searching for its runaway soldiers. 'That war,' she said, 'it was so dreadful.'

'I know,' said Dann, 'I was there.'

'You can't imagine how bad it was, how bad.'

'Yes, I can. I was there.' And so he told his tale, but censored because he wasn't going to tell her he had been General Dann, Tisitch Dann, of the Agre Army, who had invaded Shari and from whom she had run.

'It was horrible. My mother was killed and my brothers. And it was all for nothing.'

'Yes, I know.'

'And now Hennes recruiting officers are out everywhere, to enlist anyone they can talk into going back with them. And they are looking for people like me. But the marshes are a protection. Everyone

is afraid of the marshes.’

And all that time of their talk the animal breathed in shallow gasps and did not open its eyes.

The shack filled with dark. She lit the great reed floor candle. The light wavered over the reed ceiling, the reed walls. The chilly damp of the marshes crept into the room. She shut the door and bolted it.

‘Some of those poor wretches running from the wars try and break in here but I give as good as get.’

He could believe it: she was a strong muscled woman—and she had been a soldier.

She lit a small fire of wood. There was nothing generous about that fire, and Dann could see why probably this rise with its little wood was the only source of fuel for a long way walking in every direction around. She gave Dann some soup made of marsh fish. The animal was lying very still, while its sides went up and down.

And now it began to cry. It whimpered and cried, while its muzzle searched for the absent teats its mother, drowned in the marsh.

‘It wants its mother,’ said Kass, and lifted it and cradled it, though it was too big to be a baby for her. Dann watched and wondered why he could not stop crying. Kass actually handed him a cloth for his eyes and remarked, ‘And so who have you lost?’

‘My sister,’ he said, ‘my sister,’ but did not say she had married and that was why he had lost her: it sounded babyish and he knew it.

He finished his soup and said, ‘Perhaps it would like some soup?’

‘I’ll give him some soup tomorrow.’ That meant Kass believed the creature would live.

The cub kept dropping off to sleep, and then waking and crying.

Kass lay on the bed holding the beast, and Dann lay down too, the animal between them. He slept and woke to see it sucking her fingers. She was dipping them in her milk. Dann shut his eyes, so as not to embarrass her. When he woke next, both woman and animal were asleep.

In the morning she gave it more milk and it seemed better, though it was very weak and ill.

The day was like yesterday, they were on the bed with the beast, feeding it mouthfuls of milk, then of soup.

By now she had told him that because of the ice mountains melting over Yerrup, there was a southwards migration of all kinds of animals and that these animals, called snow dogs, were the most often seen.

How was it possible that animals were living among all that ice?

No one knew. ‘Some say the animals come from a long way east and they use a route through Yerrup, to avoid the wars that are always going on along this coast, east of here.’

‘Some say, some say,’ said Dann. ‘Why can’t we *know*?’

‘We know they are here, don’t we?’ The animals Dann had seen when sleeping out on the side of the cliff were snow dogs. This was a young snow dog, a pup. Hard to match this dirty little beast with the great beasts he had seen, and their fleecy white shags of hair. He was far from white. His hair was now a dirty mat, with bits of marsh weed and mud in it.

Kass wrung out a cloth in warm water and tried to clean the pup, but he hated it and cried.

The helpless crying was driving Dann wild with...well, what? Pain of some kind. He could not bear it, and sat with his head in his hands. Kass tried to shush the animal when it started off again.

And so another day passed, and another night and at last the snow pup seemed really to open its eyes and look about. He wasn’t far off a baby, but must have been walking with his parents when they fell into the marshes.

‘They must have been chased into the marsh,’ said Kass. People were afraid of them. But they do not attack people, they seemed to want to be friendly. People were saying, suppose the snow dogs become a pack, instead of just ones and twos? They would be dangerous then. Yet there were people who used them as guards. They were intelligent. It was easy to tame them.

Kass warmed water, put the pup into it and quickly swirled off the dirt. It seemed to like the warmth. After his bath he was white and fleecy, with large furry paws and a thick ruff round his neck. His intelligent little face looked out from a frame of white ruff.

Then, one day, he actually barked, as if trying out his voice.

‘It sounds like Ruff, Ruff, Ruff,’ said Kass. ‘We’ll call him Ruff.’

And now, at night, they set the pup on one side, wrapped in a blanket, instead of lying between them, and they held each other and made love. Both knew they were substitutes for absent loves—her husband, for Kass. For him, that was not easy. Kira was, had been, his lover, but it was Mara he thought of.

Suppose Kass’s husband came back suddenly?

She said, yes, she was thinking of that. And what did Dann propose to do next?

Dann said he was going to walk, walk right to the end of this side of the Middle Sea.

He was trying her out and she at once said that he was crazy, he didn’t know what he was talking about. And there were at least two wars going on not far along the track. When people came through from there, they brought news, and war was the news they brought.

And Kass knew much more about the Bottom Sea than he did. The opposite north shore did not run in a straight line from the Rocky Gates to—whatever was the end, where it turned to become the

southern shore. It was much broken with fingers and fringes of land, and down in the Bottom Sea were a lot of islands, large and small. And that was how the snow dogs came across from the north shore. They swam from island to island.

So what did Dann want to do?

He wanted to walk. He needed to walk. That meant leaving here.

With every day the snow pup was stronger. He sneezed a lot: there was still water in his lungs, they thought. He was a pretty, fluffy young snow dog, who never took his green eyes off them. He loved to lie beside Kass on the bed, but liked better to be with Dann. He snuggled up to Dann and put his head on Dann's shoulder, as he had been on that walk, or rather run, to get here.

'He loves you,' said Kass. 'He knows you rescued him.'

Dann did not want to leave the snow pup. He did not want to leave Kass but what was the use of that? She had a husband. He loved that animal. That angry fighting heart of Dann melted into peace and love when the snow dog lay by him and licked his face or sucked his fingers. But Dann had to move on. At first he had thought the snow pup would go with him, but that was impossible. Ruff was being fed, carefully, on thin soup and bits of fish and milk, not Kass's now, but a goat's, who lived in its pen and bleated because it wanted company.

Ruff could not travel with Dann, and Dann had to move on.

When Dann set forth, the pup wailed and toddled after him along the path. Kass had to run and try to lift him to carry him back. Kass was crying. The snow pup was crying. And Dann cried too.

He told himself that when he was with Kass and the snow pup he had cried most of the time. But he was *not* someone who cried, he repeated. 'I don't cry,' he said aloud, running faster to get away from the snow pup's wailing. 'I never have, so now I must stop.' Then he realised he had found his pace, he was going at a good loping run along the track, and slowed to a fast walk which would sustain him without tiring. It was a wonderful release for him, and he stopped crying and went on, marshes on one side and cliffs on the other, without stopping or changing pace. No refugees came towards him now. That meant the wars had ended, did it? The fighting was over?

Dark came and he slid over the edge to find a bush he could hide in, or a cleft in the rocks. He dreamed of Kass's kindly bed, and of her, and of the snow pup, but woke dry-eyed, and had a mouthful or two of her provisions, and returned to the path, the sun full in his face. He saw the marshes were less. By that night on his right hand were moors, and he slept not on a sloping cliff face but on a dry rock under sweet-smelling bushes. To be rid of the dank reek of the marshes...he took in great breath of clean healthy air and so it was all that day and the next, and he thought he must be careful, or he'd run straight into the fighting, if it still went on. And all that time no people had come towards him along the track. Then he saw them, two—well, what were they? Children? When they came close, stumbling, their knees bending under them, he saw they were youngsters, all bone, with the hollow staring eyes of extreme hunger. Their skins...now, what colour was that? Grey? Were there grey people? No, their skins had gone ashy, and their lips were whitish and cracked. They did not seem to see him; they were going past.

These two were like him and Mara, long ago, ghostlike with deprivation, but still upright. As they came level the girl—it was a girl?—yes, he thought so—nearly fell and the boy put out his hand to catch her, but in a mechanical, useless way. She fell. Dann picked her up and it was like lifting a bundle of thin sticks. He set her by the road on the side where the moors began. The boy stood vaguely, not understanding. Dann put his arm round him, led him to the grass verge, put him near the girl, who sat staring, breathing harshly. He knelt by them, opened his sack, took out some bread, poured water on it to make it easier to eat. He put a morsel in the girl's mouth. She did not eat it: had reached that stage of starvation where the stomach no longer recognises its function. He tried with the boy—the same. They smelled horrible. Their breath was nasty. Then he tried out his languages, first the ones he knew well, then the odd phrases, and they did not respond at all, either not knowing any of them, or too ill to hear him.

They sat exactly where he had set them, and stared, that was all. Dann thought that he and Mara had never been so far gone they could not respond to danger, had lost the will to survive. He believed these two were dying. To reach the Centre would take many days of walking. They could reach Kass, after a few days, but would be met by her broad sharp knife. Beyond them the moors stretched toward Tundra's main towns, a long way off. And if they did manage to get themselves up and walk, and reached the marshes, they would probably fall in and drown, or tumble over the edge of the cliffs.

And then, as he sat there, seeing how the morsels of food he had placed in their mouths were falling out again, they crumpled up and lay, hardly breathing. They would die there. Dann sat with them, a little, then went on, but not in his pace, his rhythm: he was thinking of how Mara and he had been so often in danger, but had always come through, had slid through situations because of their wariness and quickness, were saved by their own efforts or because of the kindness of others. And by luck...those two back there had not had luck.

He saw coming towards him a slight figure, walking in a slow obstinate way that Dann knew: the person, a man, was walking on his will, which was far from the ease of how one moved on that rhythm that seemed to come from somewhere else. He was thin, bony, but was in nothing like the bad state of the two youngsters. Dann called out in Mahondi and was at once answered. He could see the man didn't want to stop, but Dann held out some bread, a dry piece, and walked forward with it, and the man stopped. He was a small wiry fellow, yellowish in colour—which was his own real colour and not because of starvation—with dark serious eyes and black locks of fine hair. He had a sparse beard. This was no thug or rough.

Dann started his interrogation, while the man ate, not in a frantic grasping way, but carefully.

Where had he come from?

From a very long way east.

But surely there is a war?

Yes, two, bad ones. The one nearest here had fought itself to a standstill, there was no one left but real soldiers, preparing to make a stand. The one further along was raging. His own country had been invaded; there was civil war. He had left, made a circuit around the further war, knowing it was there he had worked for a farmer for shelter, and some food. And now, what would he find if he went on?

Dann told him, carefully, watching him nod, as he took in the important points. He must not let himself fall into the marshes or over the cliffs. If he went on long enough he would come to a vast complex of buildings, called the Centre, and there he could find a man called Griot, who would help him.

And why did Dann do all this for this stranger? He liked him. He was reminding him of someone a friend who had helped him, Dann thought, and there was something about that intelligent face...

‘What is your name?’

‘They call me Ali.’ He added, trusting Dann as Dann trusted him, ‘I was the king’s scribe. I had to run away—I was too well known.’

‘And your country’s name?’

Dann had never heard it. It was beyond Kharab—and Dann scarcely knew where that was.

He gave this Ali a hunk of Kass’s bread, and watched him hide it in his clothes, before he went on, hesitant at first, because he was tired, but then stronger, and steadily. Then he turned and looked back at Dann and gave a little bow, hand on his heart.

And as Dann watched him, thinking of him as a friend—why did he feel he knew this Ali?—he heard shouts and the sounds of running feet. What he saw then made him drop over the edge of the cliff, though it was steep there, because he knew these people meant danger. A large noisy crowd and they were hungry, and some wounded, with old dried blood on them, and half-healed cuts. If they knew he had food they would kill him. He could see all this from that one glance.

He did not put his head up over the edge until they had gone on.

He knew Ali was quick and clever enough to hide from them.

And what was Griot going to do with this crowd of bandits when they turned up?

He saw near him a quite large path. Down he went between slabs of dark rock that had been smoothed by water, thinking that previous descents to the Bottom Sea had taken him half a day, but the Middle Sea was deeper here, for darkness fell when there was a long way to go. He ensconced himself for the night in a shelter for travellers, hoping he would not have company, but though he slept with his knife ready there was no knock, or intruding feet, or the strong smell of an animal. He stood outside the hut door as the sun rose, seeing that this part of the Middle Sea was full of islands, some whose tops were level with and even higher than the edges of the sea. And the islands were wooded, he could see that, easily now, and there were lights on them that went out as the sunlight grew strong.

He was thinking of those two who probably still lay by the side of the track, whom he had seen wavering towards him, as if blown by the wind, hatchlings in a storm—and why should he care more about them than so many others? But he did think of them. The crows or other raptors of the wild moor would have found them by now.

He let the sun flush his stiff limbs with warmth and took the path again. Many used it. Before he

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