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Summary: In the year 13851, on the planet Farholme, Merral discovers evil beginning to encroach into his beloved countryside, where for centuries it has been absent.

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PROLOGUE

Listen!

This is the tale of how, at last, evil returned to the Assembly of Worlds, and how one man, Merral Stefan D'Avanos, became caught up in the fight against it.

But to tell Merral's tale we must begin with the Seeding of the planet of Farholme in the year of our Lord 3140. Eleven hundred years have passed since the long-prophesied incoming of all the children of Abraham and the spiritual renewals of the Great Intervention ended the shadowed ages of the human race. A thousand years have slipped by since the victory at Centauri ended the Rebellion and brought a final peace to the Assembly. Nearly nine hundred years have elapsed since the first of the interstellar seeding expeditions.

The location of the Seeding is approximately three hundred and fifty light-years from humanity's home planet, the blue world that is already becoming known as "Ancient Earth." Here, the long, gray, glinting needle of the Remote Seeder Ship *Leviathan-D* comes to rest around the dazzling whiteness of the cloud-wrapped second world out from the star so far known only as Stellar Object NWQ-15AZ.

Here the vast ship hangs for months, its pitted hull bearing the faded and scarred portrayal of the Lamb Triumphant on the Field of Stars, the emblem of the Assembly of Worlds. The ship spins leisurely on its axis as it watches, analyzes, and calculates every aspect of the sterile and still-nameless world beneath it.

Three times a plate slides open on one of the needle's six sides and ejects a probe. The first swings around the planet in a spiral orbit, mapping every boulder on its surface through the billows of gas and dust. The next two plunge down into the savage clouds and return

days later, battered, charred, and corroded, but bearing samples of rock and atmosphere.

There is no haste. After all, on the timescale its makers work on, weeks are nothing. Patiently, the *Leviathan-D* continues to watch, listen, and gather ever more data. It measures the orbital variation of the planet to centimeters. It looks at the local sun in all the ways known to humanity and scrutinizes its output on every wavelength. It stretches out thin, sail-like extrusions to sift the dust in the space around the planet. It maps and forecasts for twenty thousand years ahead the trajectories of the largest million rock fragments within the system's debris belts. And as they hang above the endlessly simmering cloudscape, the ship's computers whisper and sing to each other as they process the data, predicting, discussing, and debating in learned imitation of the flesh and blood that made them.

The results are marginal. Positively, the spectrum, intensity, and variation of the radiation from NWQ-15AZ; the planet's orbital eccentricity; and the value of its gravitational field are within acceptable limits. As these are unalterable, this is good news. Negatively, the meteorite flux is too high, the axis of rotation too tilted, and the speed of rotation too fast. Adaptable as humans are, no civilization has ever thrived on days shorter than twenty hours and here they are only sixteen. However these things, and the sterile nitrogen and carbon dioxide atmosphere, can be altered. After further debate, the circuits reach agreement. If the Everlasting wills it, another home will be made here for humanity.

Now on *Leviathan-D* the quiet hum of long-inactive machinery starts up again. Smoothly, the vast needle breaks into two unequal parts. From the larger segment, a hexagonal disk detaches itself from the end and slides away to one side. The two halves of the needle rejoin to give a ship now a tenth shorter. The segment formed from their splitting begins to expand outward evenly, creating a six-sided aperture at its heart. As an unshielded Below-Space Gate, this hole will be the key to the future of this new world. With it, no subsequent ship will have to make the six-hundred-year-long sublight-speed journey of the

Leviathan-D. If the Seeding goes as predicted, and this savage world is tempered enough for humanity, then long millennia hence, machinery and mechanisms to build a greater Gate with a shielded opening will come through it. Through that, in turn, will come men and women.

Carried on a column of brilliant light, the needle now withdraws from the target planet and releases two small disk-shaped satellites. One descends into a low orbit of extreme precision while the other races outward to take up position six months later underneath the rings of the nearest gas giant. When both discs are in position, the *Leviathan-D* brings into play a Local Gate linkage between the two satellites, and the disk above the planet's surface begins to slowly assume the mass of the planetary giant. The damping and correction of the orbit of the target planet begin immediately.

It is time to begin modifying the atmosphere. Two further Local Gates are released, one landing on the surface of the planet below and the other on one of the ammonia-sheathed moons of the gas giant. The Gate linkage is slowly brought on line, and a hissing and boiling exchange of gases begins.

Computer modeling of the planet for thousands of years ahead suggests that greater climatic stability can be achieved by sculpting the surface to allow linkages between what will become the ocean basins. For weeks, the Mass Blaster of the *Leviathan-D* pounds the planet with repeated energy pulses of overwhelming force, vaporizing millions of tons of rock and hewing and hammering out the channels, straits, and seaways of the future.

As the blast debris settles out of the atmosphere, the computers on the *Leviathan-D* decide it is time for a gentler but no less vital technology. In the sheltered core of the great needle, proteins are assembled and woven into helixes of genetic matter, each strand tuned and programmed to feed and multiply on the scalding gases below. The genes are inserted into biological cells and the cell cultures inserted into five cylindrical polymer cocoons. Then a panel on the side of the ship slides open and the five containers are propelled into space.

There, in the shadow of the great ship, as dwarfed—and yet as consequential—as acorns before an oak tree, they linger, waiting for the word of command to send them to seed the planet.

Then, although there is no one other than God and the angels to hear, the ship speaks. In a dozen frequencies, as programmed by men and women now long dead, the solemn charge rings forth.

*In the Name of the High King of heaven,
We name this star Alahir
and this world Farholme.
We of the Assembly of Worlds now command you:
Go forth and multiply.
Redeem this waste world.
Bring air and water, land and sea, day and night.
Produce a home for the Lord's people,
to the praise and glory of the Messiah,
the Lamb who was slain.
Amen.*

The response is the faint, silent flickering of lights on the ends of the cylinders as, one by one, they propel themselves away, onward and down into the swirling gases below.

For a final time, a port on the ship opens and a last satellite emerges to take up a high orbit above the newly christened Farholme. This Overseer satellite is to superintend the Seeding and to attend the planet in lonely vigil for the centuries that the work will take.

The needle now begins to move. The decision has been made that what is now known as the Alahir System will be the last target on the mission schedule. The systems scanned ahead by the *Leviathan-D* show little promise. After six centuries between the stars, the survey of fifteen worlds and the seeding of six, it is time for the *Leviathan-D* to return to port. But the homeward journey will be far swifter. Using the trail of Below-Space Gates it has left behind, its journey back will take a millionth of the time and energy of the outward journey.

The ship adjusts itself delicately in space on pulses of light until one end is perfectly aligned above the axis of the Gate. In a movement of slowly gathering swiftness, the needle's tip stabs into the strangely star-free blackness at the Gate's heart. Nothing comes out of the other side. Vanishing from view, the ship slips through the hexagonal aperture with a handbreadth of space to spare on every side. A second after the tail torch nozzle disappears there is the brief, ghostly gleam of a blue aurora around the hexagon and the Gate is empty.



As the long years roll by, the Overseer satellite high above Farholme watches, without emotion, the spreading smear of green in the cloud systems as the cells begin to absorb and break down the gases. In time new types replace these, each successive generation pushing the atmosphere closer to that in which oxygen-breathing life can live without being choked, boiled, or burned.

And as life grows and increases on the new world of Farholme, the echo of the commissioning charge radiates outward through the Alahir System and beyond into the silent, unvisited spaces between the stars.

*... To the praise and glory of the Messiah, the Lamb who was slain.
Amen.*



And time passes, not just in those petty quantities that we call days, weeks, and years, but in long centuries, and even multiples of centuries. It is now the year of our Lord 13851, and the Seeding of Farholme is ancient history to its thirty million human inhabitants; as primeval and distant to them as the final waning of the ice sheets was for the first space travelers. More precisely, using the language of a long-dead calendar, it is December 22. In short, the Feast of the Nativity is just over two days away, and on over sixteen hundred inhabited planets the nearly one trillion citizens of the Assembly are preparing to celebrate the Incarnation.

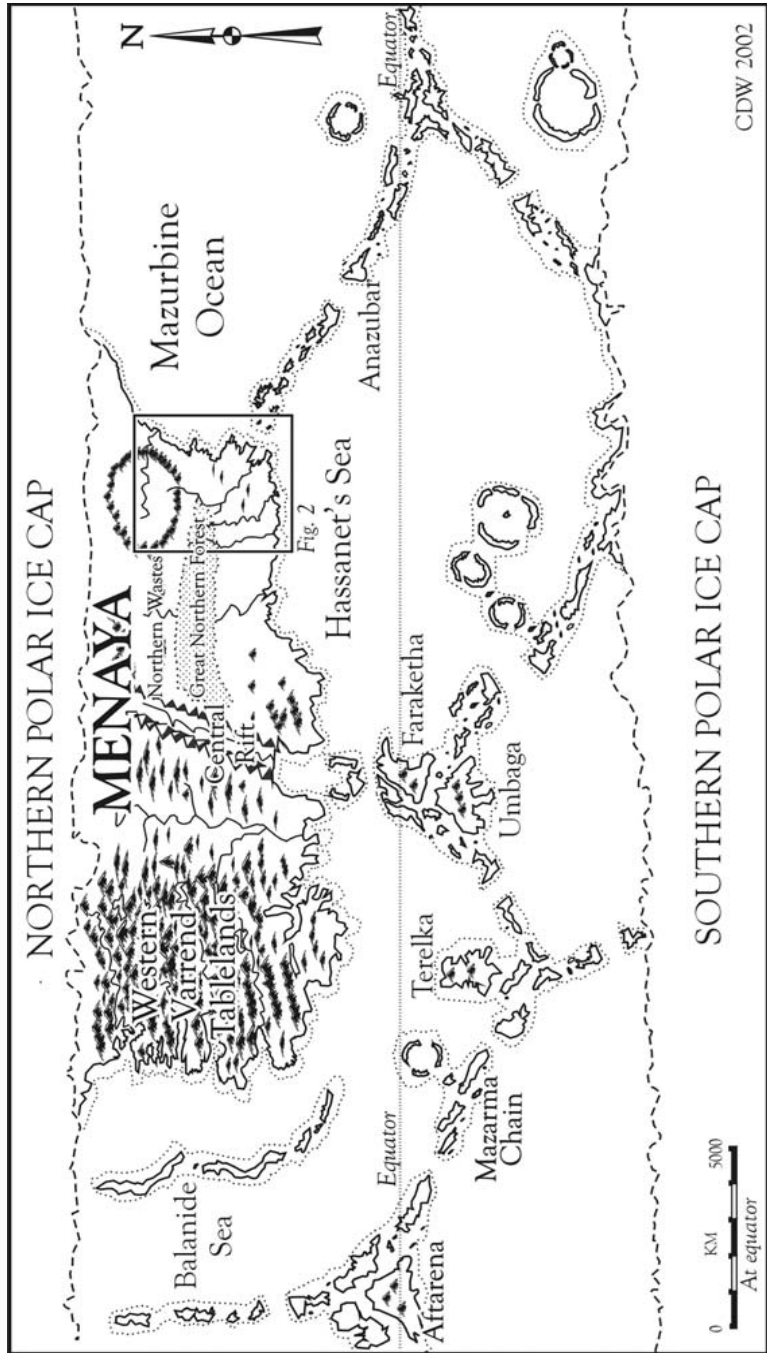
The Assembly of Worlds now occupies a zone of space exceeding a hundred million cubic light-years; its farthest inhabited system toward the galactic edge is still Alahir with its single Made World, Farholme. Farholme retains the status that it had at its Seeding of being the farthest world, so that its thirty million inhabitants sometimes refer to their home, with a mixture of affection and gentle pride, as “Worlds’ End.” With the exception of its extreme position and low population, if there is a typical Made World (and only Ancient Earth is not a Made World), it is Farholme. Here the ancient, crater-pitted landscape vigorously erodes under the new regimes of water and oxygen. On it infant seas gnaw away at old impact scars, lava fields bubble and smoke sulkily as they cool under the novelty of rainstorms, barren dusty plains are slowly buried under the timorous advance of greenery, and rivers and sea and air currents are reluctantly coerced into stable and predictable courses.

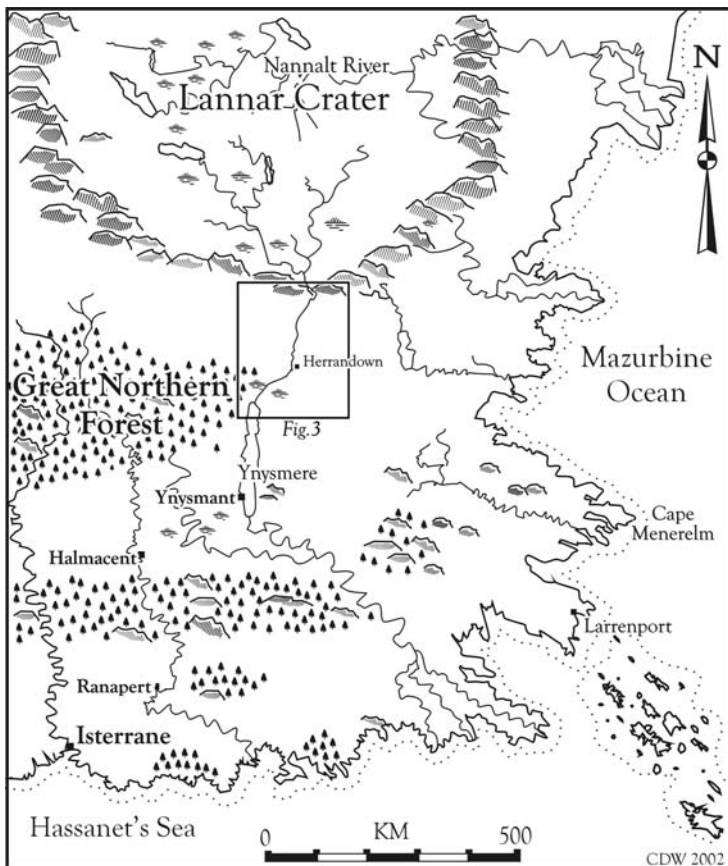
But if the landscapes of the Assembly worlds remain restless this eve of the festival, its peoples, with their mutual tongue of Communal and their many dialects and historic languages, know only peace. It is, though, a peace of activity rather than a peace of rest. The Assembly is as vigorous as ever. There are always new worlds to be subdued and older ones to be stewarded. Nevertheless, this day—as every other day in the Lord’s Peace that has lasted over eleven thousand years—sees no wars or strife within the Assembly worlds. And as the banners of the Assembly are brought out and checked in readiness for their grateful unfurling on the Day of the Nativity, there seems no reason why the emblem of the Lamb Triumphant on the Field of Stars may not fly at peace over an ever larger Assembly for another eleven—or eleven hundred—millennia.

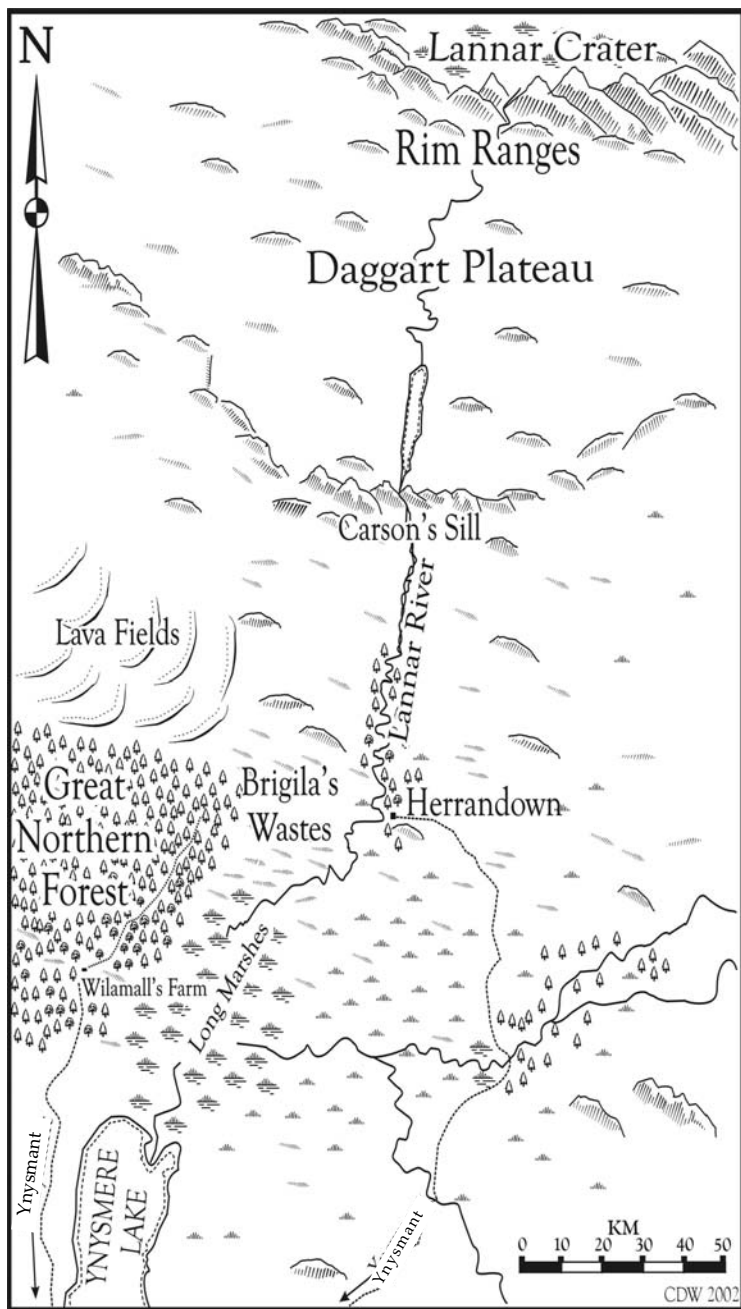
Hanging high over Farholme this day, as it has for three thousand years, is the gigantic, beacon-framed hexagon of the shielded Below-Space Gate, the only link to the other worlds of the Assembly. Two thousand kilometers away from it, a dozen shuttlecraft drift gently around the Gate Station as their cargo is unloaded from the latest inbound inter-system liner. And far below their activity, night sweeps

silently westward across Farholme, and as it does, the lights of a hundred human settlements flicker on.

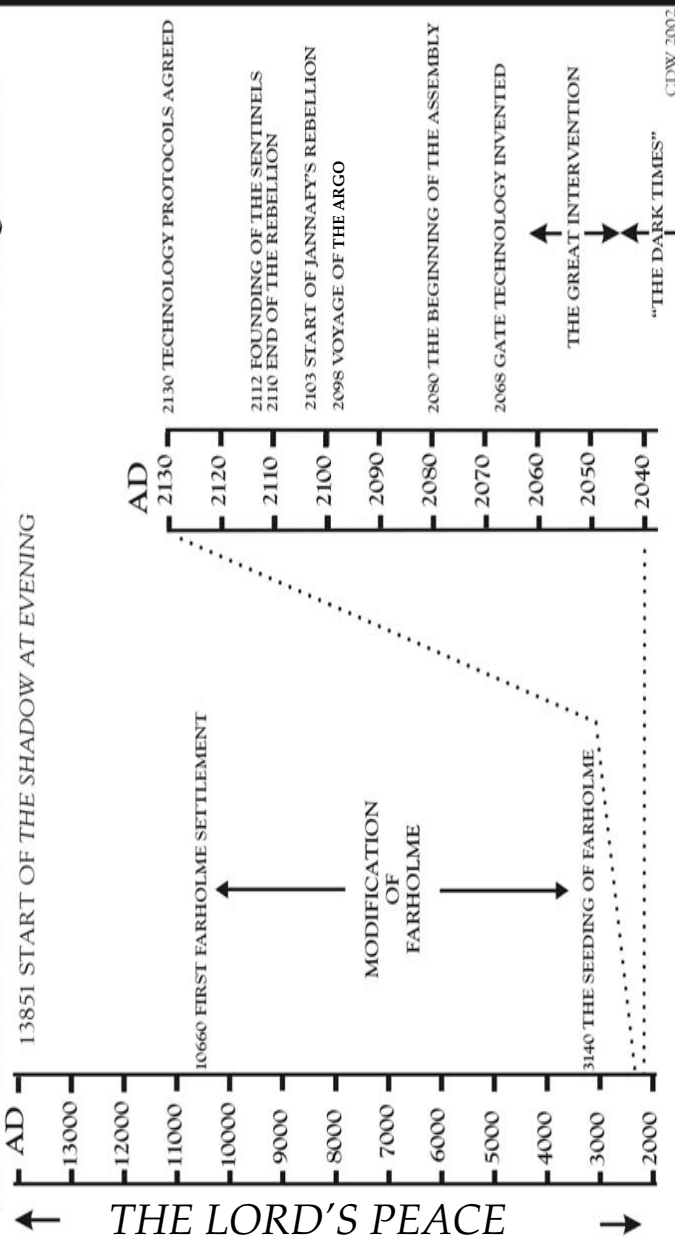
But ultimately the Assembly is not Gates and worlds, still less banners and emblems. It is people: men and women, flesh and blood, bodies and souls. And as planets swing in their orbits, as the fabric of space is pierced at the Gates, and as atoms are broken in the forges of rocket fires, down on the surface of Farholme, a lone figure rides a horse northward into the gathering twilight of a winter's day.







THE TIMESCALE OF THE LAMB AND STARS SEQUENCE



Merral Stefan D'Avanos crested the snow-flecked ridge in the northeastern corner of Menaya, the vast northern continent of Farholme, and reined in his mount. The winter's sun had just set in a great stained sphere of orange gold. He stared at the expanse of gray hills and darker, mist-filled valleys stretching northward to the ice-edged needles of the ramparts of the Lannar Crater.

Above the Rim Ranges, layer upon layer of cloud strands gleamed every shade between yellow and purple in the dying sunlight. Merral tried to absorb all he could of the sights, sounds, and smells of dusk. Down below the ridge, away to his right, crows preparing to roost were wheeling noisily around a pine tree. Far to his left, there was a moving, snuffling grayness under the edges of the birch forests that he knew was a herd of deer. Hanging in the cold fresh air was the smell of winter, new trees, and a new earth.

The beauty of it moved Merral's heart, and he raised his head and cried out with joy, "To the Lord of all worlds be praise and honor and glory and power!"

The words echoed briefly and a gust of wind out of the north dragged them away, down through the trees and bare rocks.

Silent in awed worship, he sat there for long minutes until another chill gust made him shiver, as much in anticipation as in actual cold. He bent down to his horse. "Now, Graceful," he murmured, "good girl, onward."

Obedient as ever, the mare moved forward over the frozen ground.

Merral knew it would not be wise to wait longer. The Antalfers

expected him, and the nights of deep winter could be cruel this far north. Besides, as on any young world, there was always the chance of a sudden local weather anomaly. Such an irregularity might be only a few kilometers across—too small to be picked up by a weather satellite—but enough to freeze solid an unprotected man and horse in under an hour.

Merral rode on along a rough snowy trail which wound its way round blocks of lava, toying lightly with the wish that he had been born a poet or painter rather than a forester so that he could better express his love for this place and this life. But it wasn't long before he laughed at the aspiration and pushed it to one side. The Most High had made him what he was, and that was enough.

He peered ahead along the track, straining in the gloom to see the way ahead. The Herrandown Forward Colony was so small—a tree-surrounded hamlet of fifty people in six extended families—that it would be easy to overlook it at night. After some more minutes of cautious riding, he caught a glimpse of a tiny sliver of golden light in the distance. He smiled happily at the thought of his uncle or aunt leaving the shutters open so that the light would guide him in. He patted his mount, seeing her breath in the cold air. “Nearly there, my Graceful, and Aunt Zennia will have something for you.”

Five minutes later he emerged abruptly from between the fir trees into the broad clearing that acted as the rotorcraft landing pad and marked the southern margin of the hamlet. As he rode out into the open, the dogs around the farm started to bark, and their dark shapes bounded across the packed snow toward him. Merral reined in as he met the dogs and, reaching down to stroke them, tried to identify as many as he could in the gloom.

“Fastbite, good dog!” he shouted. “Oh, Spotback, it’s you! And Quiver, eh? Been having more pups, I hear? Brownlegs? No—it’s Stripes. Look, stop licking so much!”

A door slid open smoothly in the ground-hugging building ahead. Light streamed out briefly onto the path before being abruptly blocked by the silhouette of a tall, well-built woman with long hair.

“Merral! Praise be! Children! Barrand! It’s Merral! Now, mind the ice over there,” she cried, half running to him. “Here, Nephew, give me a kiss!”

For a moment all was chaos as, barely allowing time for him to dismount, his aunt Zennia embraced and kissed him, while the children streamed out to hold and hug him and ask a dozen overlapping questions. And all the while the dogs, barking joyously, bounded in between Graceful’s legs.

“Nephew Merral! *Welcome!*” A deep, jovial voice that seemed to echo came out of the door of the house. “Why, it’s been months!”

Dogs and children gave way as the large figure of Uncle Barrand, his profile almost bearlike in the gloom, ambled over and hugged Merral to the point of pain as he kissed both cheeks fiercely and repeatedly.

“Excellent! Praise be! Your pack I will take. Thomas? Where is the boy?” His uncle’s bulk swiveled around slowly. “Dogs I see, girls I see, but my only son is missing. Ah, there you are, Thomas! Good, you have a coat on. Take your cousin Merral and his horse—Graceful isn’t it? Thought so—I’d know her even on another world. Take them to the winter stable. I’d take you, but I’m cooking tonight. Girls! *Wife!* It is cold. Indoors now, and let us finish preparing supper for our guest. He has ridden far. And Thomas . . .”

“What, Father?” piped the small voice from by Merral’s side.

“Just take your dog into the stables. Not the whole pack.”

Merral just made out a dutiful nod from the figure beside him. “Yes, Father! Here, Stripes! The rest of you dogs! You go off to your kennels! *Shoo!*” With what seemed to be regret, the other dogs drifted off obediently.

Thomas, short but well built for his seven years, took Merral’s sleeve and tugged. “Cousin, we have a new stable for winter. An’ I helped Daddy build it. We digged . . .” There was a pause. “Dugged? *Dug* it together in summer. Over here.”

Merral ruffled the boy’s black, wiry hair. “It’s good to see you again, Thomas.”

“Cousin, the stable is real warm over winter. We got twenty cows, fifteen sheep. When the station says it’s gonna be real cold, we even send the dogs in. An’ we put all our horses there, of course.”

The track they followed went round the side of the low earth banks that gave some protection from the weather to the Antalfers’ house and down a ramp into a mound. Merral had seen the plans when he’d come by in midsummer; the bitter cold of the last two winters had made a shelter a necessity. Inside the double sliding doors, the long, narrow structure was warm with the smell of animals. Merral led Graceful into an empty pen, made sure she had clean water and hay, and then spent time checking her over, running his hands over her legs and checking the dura-polymer hoof shields. “Good. She seems fine,” he told his cousin. “Always check your animals, Thomas. They are your friends, not your servants.”

The child nodded and hugged the dog, which licked his face. “Dad says that. I get a horse of my own in two years. I’m gonna really look after him.” Merral nodded and patted the horse’s head gently.

“Good girl, Graceful. Well done.”

The brown head twisted up from the hay and rubbed itself against his hand as if in mute acknowledgement of the praise.

Merral stretched himself. “Well, I’m hungry, Master Thomas, so let’s go.”



Once outside the doors of the stable, Merral suddenly felt the cold anew. The wind had intensified and was swirling round the building, kicking up little eddies of snow. The last gleam of twilight had gone, leaving the molten fire of the stars and the great belt of the Milky Way splendid in the blackness of the sky above him. Despite the frigid air and his appetite, Merral paused in his stride and looked up in wonder.

“You know your stars, Thomas?”

“Course! Well, most of ’em. Dad’s taught me some. He says we should see twenty with people on ’em.”

“Twenty?” Merral thought hard. The naked-eye count for Farholme was supposed to be about fifty occupied systems, but that was from Isterrane; no, the boy was right—this far north you’d see less than half of that.

“On Ancient Earth,” he remarked, as much to himself as to Thomas, “they say you can see over two hundred. And almost all the remaining thirteen hundred with a small optical telescope.”

“Sol ’n’ Terra are over there, just below the Gate.” Thomas’ voice was quiet.

Merral followed his outstretched hand to the heart of the Milky Way, a few degrees below where six sharp golden points of light marked out a hexagon in the blackness.

“Yes. That’s it. Sol and Terra: the Ancient Sun and Earth. Well, time to get in or we’ll freeze.”

Merral bent down to take the boy’s hand, but as he did, his eye caught a movement of the stars. He straightened, watching the approaching speck of light as it grew in size.

“Look, Thomas, a meteor!”

As he spoke, the point of yellow light, expanding a thousandfold, tore northward almost directly overhead. Its brilliance was such that, for a few seconds, the light of all the other stars was lost.

Merral twisted round, seeing the whole snow-clad landscape flashing alight in a brilliant incandescent whiteness. In the brief moments that the light lasted he glimpsed his and Thomas’s shadows form and then race away as fading, elongated smears on the snow.

Abruptly the night flooded back.

As Merral blinked, a thunderous, echoing rumble vibrated around them, the sound bouncing off rocks and snow and resounding back round the clearing. The ground seemed to shake gently.

“Zow!” yelled Thomas, his fingers flung over his ears. “That was noisy!”

Stripes howled in terror, and from near the house came the barking of the other dogs. The outer door slid open.

“Thomas? Merral? What was that?” Zennia’s voice was anxious.

Merral shook himself, the afterimage of the light still haunting his vision. “Just a meteor. I think.”

“Come on, Thomas. Suppertime.”



They crowded into the hallway, which was bare but beautifully paneled in a light, oil-polished pine, as the double doors whispered shut behind them. Barrand’s big red face, framed by his ragged black curly beard, peered out of the kitchen. “A meteor, eh? We felt the house vibrate. ‘Ho!’ I thought. ‘Merral is doing my quarrying for me!’”

“What, Uncle? Cheat you of your pleasure?”

There was the sound of something bubbling. A look of apprehension crossed Barrand’s weathered face, and he dashed back into the steam of the kitchen.

Merral took off his jacket and carefully hung it on a rack, relishing the smell of the food and the warmth of the house. He sat on a bench and pulled his boots off, enjoying the feeling of being back in a place that he had always loved. He stroked the wood of the walls gently, feeling its faint grain. Even in a society that prized the right use of wood, Barrand and Zennia’s home was special. Since his first visit, Merral had always felt that the house, with its sizeable underground extension, was something that had grown rather than been built. Even if the unruliest of winds struck the exposed part of the building so hard that every timber vibrated, down in the lower parts you could feel as safe and snug as if you were inside the roots of a giant tree.

“But it was a meteor?” His uncle’s face had appeared again round the door. Merral sat upright suddenly, his tired back muscles signaling their presence.

“Must have been. But the biggest I’ve ever seen. It was heading northward. I suppose it probably landed over the Rim Ranges somewhere in the crater.”

“Oh, it’ll do no harm *there*. End up as a handful of dust.”

There was amusement in his gray eyes. “Anyway, you have ten

minutes, assuming this new recipe behaves itself. Your usual room. Just time for a shower.”

“A quick shower it is.” And with that, Merral picked up his pack and climbed up the stairs to the guest room.



Some minutes later, Merral was combing his hair and wondering why a shower and clean clothes made so much difference when there was a soft knock on his door.

“Come in!” he called out. In the mirror, he saw a face peer round the door—an oval face with pale blue eyes overhung by an untidy fringe of curly blonde hair. Merral turned round. “Elana! How are you?”

Elana, the oldest and blondest of the three Antalfer girls, was something of a favorite of Merral’s. He had a private opinion that she was also the deepest and most thoughtful of them. Although she wasn’t fourteen until next month, Merral had felt even on his last visit in high summer that she already had one foot beyond childhood. Now she came into the narrow room and stood under a curving wood beam. She stretched delicately upright on tiptoe and gave him a beaming smile. “I’m fine, Cousin. And you are well?”

Merral looked at her carefully, recognizing in those modifications of her physique the woman so imminent in the girl. “Praise our Lord. I have gained a few more scratches and bruises since I last saw you. And some aches from riding over hard ground. But I am well.”

“You rode here just to see us?”

“Sorry! No, I need to talk to your father about his quarry, so my trip here is part of work.”

She stared at him, amused puzzlement in her eyes. “I thought you were a forester!”

“I still am. But there’s no point in us planting a forest if your dad is going to dig a big hole in it, is there now?”

“No, I suppose not.” Elana smiled. “Actually, Merral, I came to say that food is nearly served.”

“Lead the way.”

He followed Elana to the dining hall, noting a new painting on a wall above a stairway. He reminded himself that he must make time to look at his aunt’s latest work. He might ask her to do something for his parents’ thirty-fifth wedding anniversary next year. He made a mental note that when it came to planning what to do with his stipend next year, he needed to include the cost of the painting.

The dining hall lay in the deepest part of the house, and although it was the largest room, it seemed already full as he entered. Merral tried to identify everybody. On one side were his aunt, the two younger daughters—Lenia and Debora—and, of course, Thomas. On the other were Barrand’s parents, Imanos and Irena, and a young couple from the next house.

Merral made his way to the seat offered to him at one end of the table. As he did, Barrand came in bearing a great pot and the chattering ceased. Quietly, everybody stood up and stepped back behind their chairs. Thomas, too short to see over the solid back of his, peered round instead at Merral.

There was silence. Barrand raised his big, gnarled hands to the heavens. “For your love and presence with us, O Lord, our protector and mighty one, and for your kindness to us, we thank you now. In the name of the Prince, the Messiah, our Savior.”

A second’s solemn silence was ended abruptly with a chorus of “Amen,” and then the scraping and clattering of chairs and talking.

As he sat down, Merral looked around the dining room. The way the side beams sloped inward toward the floor made it easy to imagine that he was deep down in the hull of a boat. It had taken them the ten years they had been in the house to acquire just the right panels, matching in grain and tone, to complete the dining room. Along some of the roof beams, his uncle had started carving animals to what Merral recognized as his aunt’s designs.

The meal was like all the many meals Merral had had at Herrandown, with lots of food, endless noisy chatter, and half a dozen conversations bouncing and jumping around and across the table.

Merral was pleased to find that his own substantial appetite by no means outmatched the others at the table. In fact, everyone seemed to be happily hungry. His uncle revealed nothing about the stew other than the fact that the beef-protein had been grown locally and the girls had picked the mushrooms for it in autumn.

Barrand looked up at him. "The family, Merral? You tell us the latest."

"Well, it is five days since I left Ynysmant and I have covered a lot of ground, but when I left all were well, may the Most High be praised, and I have had no news of any change. The only thing is that Great-Aunt Namia down at Larrenport is not well. She is now very frail; she feels she will be going Home to the Lord in the spring. The doctor thinks she is right."

Imanos, a silver-haired man with an air of gentle nobility, spoke. "Namia Mena D'Avanos? The language teacher?"

"That would be her."

"Why, she taught my mother Old-Mandarin; Mama was so proud of mastering it. 'The hardest of all the Historics,' she said." He paused, smiling quietly. "I was very glad to be spared it. But she must be very old now. A hundred and twenty at least?"

"A hundred and twenty-four. But still alert and still praising."

"You'll be seeing her before she goes Home? Please, will you give her our love and blessing." His wife gently nodded agreement, her fine white hair framing a face as peaceful and still as if it had been molded.

Merral bowed his head slightly to acknowledge the taking on of an obligation. "If the opportunity is granted me, I shall indeed visit her before her death and if I do, I will pass on to her your love and blessings."

The elderly couple smiled at each other and then gratefully back at him. A few moments later Barrand, one hand tearing off a piece of bread, caught Merral's eye and gave him a broad wink. His loud voice rang down through the room, cutting across three separate conversations.

“Talking of family matters, youngster. You’re twenty-six! What’s happening between you and Isabella Hania Danol?”

There was a sudden silence and Merral looked at his glass, conscious that everyone was looking at him.

Zennia laughed and raised her hands in mock horror. “Oh, Barrand! Let him tell us in his own time. He’s a shy lad.”

“There is really nothing decided.” Merral smiled. “Except that my parents and hers are meeting to discuss whether to approve that we proceed to a commitment. That’s all I’ll say.”

“A formality, I’m sure,” said Barrand, waving his bit of bread around and smiling at his girls. “We’ll all come down for the wedding, won’t we, children?”

“Oh yes, please. When? When?” came the chorus from the children.

“This year, next year, sometime, never,” interjected Zennia. “Everything is still at the first stage. It’s commitment, engagement, and *then* marriage. Now, Barrand, leave the lad alone and tell him about the cows.”

“Oh, not half as much fun. But you are right. Now, what with the heat, our cows had a bad summer. . . .”

And so the meal progressed in its animated and somewhat chaotic way, with discussion of the families, farms, animals, life in Herrandown generally, Merral’s travels, Barrand’s musical projects, and the children’s activities.

Eventually even Merral’s hunger was assuaged, and slowly, and somewhat heavily, everyone (except the oldest) rose from the table and went to the kitchen to help in the clearing up. Then they went into the family room and heard the children practice their Nativity songs. As tradition demanded, two were in Communal, the universal language of the Assembly; one was in the Farholmen dialect; and one in the historic language assigned to Herrandown. Merral, whose only Historics were French and English, found the Alt-Deutsch quite incomprehensible. Then the neighbors departed, and with kisses all round the children left for bed. Eventually the “senior generation” pleaded age and departed to their own small suite of rooms.

Now the three remaining adults reclined in padded chairs in the small room above the hall and let the conversation drift. Barrand toyed gently with a dark wooden flute of his own carving, occasionally blowing a quiet note and listening carefully to it with a look of suspicion. It was interesting, Merral observed, how the contrasts met in his uncle. To look at him in his work you would think that all he could do was blast quarries and hew out tons of stone. Yet in his wood carving and his music he showed sensitivity and a delicacy of touch. But there were not two separate Barrands, but one: quarrymaster, wood-carver, and musician.

As if conscious of Merral's thoughts, Barrand looked up. "Ah, I'd ask your advice, Merral, but you singers don't understand wood instruments. I'm just not satisfied with this." He tapped the flute. "But it's a delicate business, adjusting. Easy to mar, hard to mend."

Zennia stroked Barrand's wrist, her finger delicate and thin against the muscular bulk of his arm. "All the better then, my dear, to leave it to tomorrow."

"Quite so. Although tomorrow is official work with my nephew the forester. But I will find time. My wife, as usual, is right." He carefully put the flute down. "Nephew, your glass is nearly empty. More to drink?"

"Not for me."

Then they let the conversation drift into a slower, more reflective tempo. In time, they got talking about the arts, and Barrand began to talk with his usual enthusiasm about choral music.

"Oh, Merral, I have had a struggle about what to do for Nativity. Very hard. I've always liked to do something special. It's difficult when there are so few of us, but I don't mind using re-created voices."

Merral remembered that in these small communities, the use of the preserved voices of singers in the past was not luxury in music-making, but necessity.

"As we did Bach at Easter, I thought we'd do something more recent. So it's Rechereg's *Choral Variations on an Old Carol*. You know the piece?"

“Heard of it. It’s difficult, isn’t it?”

Barrand nodded to his wife. “Our nephew is too busy. Not enough time to listen.”

Zennia patted her husband’s arm and smiled back at Merral. “Perhaps, dear, in Ynysmant they are too busy making music to listen to it. Remember our blessing of being so remote.”

“Wives are always right, eh, Merral? But of course you wouldn’t know. . . .” His uncle smiled, showing his powerful, white teeth. “Ho. Where was I? Ah yes, let me see. The Rechereg is very demanding. I will need three re-created voices to handle it. The great tenor Fasmiron—the voice is from 8542 when he was at his peak—and Genya Manners, one of the Lannian sopranos during the great years of their academy. She sounds more like a bird than a woman. But I’m having problems with the female alto. It’s a very high part.”

He looked into the distance, tapping his fingers on the wood of his chair.

“Who are you using?” Merral asked.

“For the alto?” Barrand stroked his beard. “Hmm, Miranda Cline perhaps. But does she have the range? Just ten years of singing. It was so fortunate that she agreed to let her voice be copied so she could become a re-created when she did. She came and went like a meteor. . . .”

He stared at the wall-hanging opposite. Abruptly, he looked at Merral. “Nephew! A change of subject entirely. Your meteor. Have you considered why the Guardian satellites didn’t pick it up and destroy it?”

Merral thought for a moment. “It crossed my mind briefly. It seemed large enough to have done damage if it had hit anything. So the 180 East or the Polar Guardian should have intercepted it, you think?”

His uncle ran his hand through his beard again. “Me? Oh, I don’t know. I’ve never given the Guardian satellites a thought. I know there are four, that they’re as old as the present Gate, and that they destroy any meteor or comet coming in on a threatening trajectory. And that is

it. They work. So we forget them. . . .” He fell silent, his fingers maintaining a gentle beat on the arm of his chair. “But, Nephew, what I was just wondering was this: Now suppose one or more of the Guardian satellites did see it, but they just plotted the trajectory and then said ‘Oh, the Lannar Crater. Uninhabited waste,’ and let it pass. What do you think?”

“I think I see where your logic takes you.” Merral sipped the last of his drink. “With Herrandown being the farthest settlement north, that’s fine, but inside a decade or two we might have a Forward Colony up to the margins of the southern Rim Ranges—at least if the winters don’t get any worse.”

His uncle nodded, his heavy brow furrowing. “Hmm. Exactly. I just hope someone tells the Guardians. But Nephew, surely the Guardians aren’t smart enough to determine an impact trajectory to such precision that they can let it go over our heads like that?”

Suddenly tired, Merral found himself stifling a yawn. “Oh, sorry, Uncle. Yes, you may have a point but my brain is too fatigued. It would be an interesting thing to know. I’ll talk to someone when I get back.”

“It’s not just you who is tired. Zennia looks asleep.”

At her name, his wife started, opened her eyes, and shook her head so that her brown and silver hair flew around. “I’m—Oh, what an insult! I am sorry. I really ought to go to bed. If you gentlemen will excuse me.”

Merral got to his feet. “I think, Uncle, if you will excuse me, I’ll go too.”

Barrand waved a hand dismissively. “Of course. Zennia, I’ll be up in a moment. But I’ve just had an idea about that alto.”



In the small guest chamber with its single skylight, Merral undressed. Fighting off sleep he sat on the bed, pulled the small, gray curved slab of his diary off his belt, and noting the illuminated message logo, thumbed it on, switching to speech mode.

“Nine-fifteen P.M. Eastern Menaya Time today. One message:

Nonurgent. Voice from Lena Miria D’Avanos.” The words were flat and metallic.

Pulling out his night-suit, Merral spoke to the diary. “Play, please. Let’s hear my mother.”

“Message begins. . . .” The coldly sterile tones of the machine were thrown into abrupt contrast by the soprano of his mother’s voice, with her haphazard stresses.

“Merral dear. This is not at all urgent. Not at all! But do thank Barrand and Zennia so much for their good wishes for the Nativity. Zennia’s card was lovely. Merral, I am so blessed to have such an artistic sister. Lovely. I shall be writing, of course, but do please invite them down again. Those dark winter nights up north! Of course, I’ll do it myself, but the personal touch is the thing! Oh, and Merral, I saw Isabella today. She asked after you. ‘When is Merral coming back?’ she said. Father and sisters send their love too. Love from your mother.”

The metallic voice returned: “Message ends. No further messages.”

“Okay. Go to today’s notes.”

“Ready.”

“Add ‘Final Observations’ as follows. . . .”

For the next five minutes, Merral listed what he had seen on the last part of his journey north. He would tidy up the report when he got home. Then he briefly outlined what he hoped to achieve with his uncle tomorrow before he rode south again. Finally, he switched to screen mode and continued his current evening reading of the Word before bringing his praises and concerns before the Most High.

Then Merral slid in between the sheets and lay there listening to the silence of the house and the soft creaking of the wooden frame as the night winds swirled around it. There was, he felt, something extraordinarily satisfying about being tired: the draining of energy from limbs, the leisurely and ordered shutdown of body systems.

On the verge of sleep, he realized that he had not recorded in his diary anything about the meteor. He would, he told himself, do it tomorrow. Toying with the image in the last moments of wakefulness,

he played back through his mind the brief glimpse he had caught of it—the ball of light, like some great firework, racing overhead.

As he did so, it struck him that something about it was odd. But what? He ran over the vision again and again, now faster, now slower.

His last thought as he plunged finally into sleep was that, for a meteor, it had been moving too slowly.

Far too slowly.