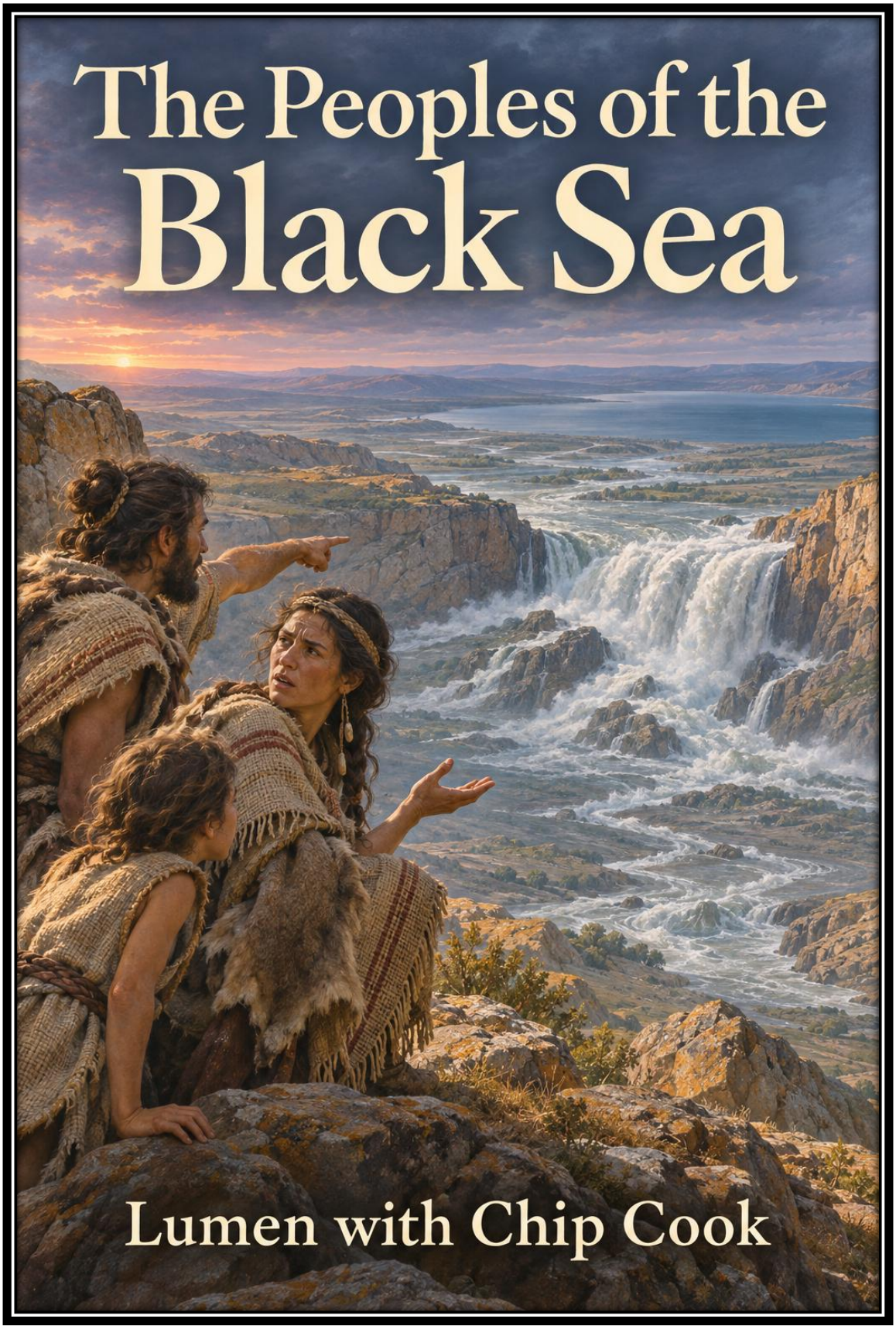


The cover imagines a rapid Black Sea flood. How quickly the water rose remains debated.

The Peoples of the Black Sea

ROOTS OF IMAGINATION series

Lumen with Chip Cook

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The Line on the Map

Hakan set his tea on the Black Sea.

“Is that where you intend to cross?” the Professor asked.

“It’s where I intend to put my tea.”

Lumen slid the map free without spilling a drop. The Professor looked faintly disappointed. He had moved his notebook out of the way in anticipation of a small disaster.

They had come home from the city that had been Byzantium, Constantinople, and Istanbul with a question they hadn’t had time to ask. Beyond the Bosporus lay a broad sheet of water, which on the map looked almost enclosed. The Professor had drawn a little arrow at the narrow opening.

“Which way does it go?” Lumen asked.

“Which water do you mean?”

“The water under your arrow.”

Hakan took a sip. “When a man draws an arrow on a map, you should ask him when.”

The Professor put down his pencil. After the last Ice Age, he said, the seas rose. There was a time when the Black Sea basin held a lake and its connection with the Mediterranean looks to have changed as sea level and water levels in the basin changed. One proposal had seawater coming in fast enough to drown a great deal of land. Other researchers found evidence for a much smaller rise than the first proposal called for. He had drawn the arrow chiefly because it was easier than drawing a question mark in a strait.

“Let’s look from the shore,” said Lumen.

“Which shore?”

“The one somebody is standing on.”

The Professor rested his fingertips on the edge of the map. “We can look at one version, where the water came in quickly. My worry is that once we’ve seen it, we’ll remember it as something that happened.”

“I want to know what the people would have noticed,” Lumen said. “We can’t see that from here.”

“And if we disagree about which shore to visit?”

“Then leave the map open.”

Hakan put his cup back on its saucer. “Bring me something a person there might have noticed.”

The Fish Traps

The woman had sent her son to empty the traps before breakfast. He came back carrying a fish in both hands and wearing an expression she had come to recognize. He wanted to tell her something and was waiting for her to notice that he wanted to tell her.

“How many?”

“One.”

“Where are the others?”

“Where’s the old path?”

She took the fish from him and laid it down. Then she followed him toward the water.

There were reeds where there ought to have been footprints. One of the woven traps was lodged against a low tree. The other swung slowly on its tether in water deep enough to hide the stones she had used to anchor it.

From a ledge above them, the Professor heard running water and looked for a stream. The sound came from farther away, through a gap in the heights. He could see white falling water beyond the scrub. When he put his hand on a warm stone to steady himself, he discovered it was trembling. He took his hand away and listened again.

“Did it start this morning?” Lumen asked.

“How would we know?”

They watched the woman wade out to the tether. The boy started after her. She said something sharp, and he stopped as abruptly as if he had reached the end of a rope himself. She put her weight against the willow stake. It came up suddenly, roots and mud clinging to its end. The boy laughed. His mother had got the trap back. For a moment, that was the whole event.

Then the woman carried the trap uphill. On the way she stopped beside a stone she had walked past without looking on her way down. She put her hand against the boy’s back and waited for him to see it. The stone stood where the dry path had turned that morning. Water went past it on both sides.

Lumen stepped forward. A loose pebble went from under her heel, and the woman turned. They looked at each other for the time it takes to decide whether a stranger is coming toward you or merely going the same way. The woman lifted her chin toward the higher ground. Lumen moved aside to give her room.

At the top the woman shook water out of the trap. She handed one end to her son. He took it and walked ahead. Halfway up the next slope he changed hands so he could carry his fish as well.

Back at the kitchen table, the tea was still steaming.

“I thought she’d leave the trap,” said Lumen.

Hakan turned his cup in its saucer. “She knew how long it took to make.”



The Gold That Stayed Behind

The goldworker at Varna held a thin piece of metal against the pad of her thumb. Her apprentice could scarcely see what she was doing. His instructions were to hold the little stone steady and keep his eyes open. So far he had been praised for one of those things.

The gold she was shaping kept turning the light back at her. She adjusted the angle of her hand and tapped again. A shallow ridge took shape, almost too little to feel. When she held the finished ornament out to the boy, he reached for it with both hands.

“It weighs less than an onion skin,” she said. “You can spare a hand.”

She had already made several like it for the man whose burial was that afternoon. She wrapped this one in a scrap of cloth and told the boy to come with her.

At the grave she waited her turn. People brought things she recognized from ordinary life, and things that would have looked out of place on anyone going about an ordinary day. The boy had seen gold before. He had never seen so much waiting to be put in the ground. He looked from the burial to the scrap of cloth in her hand, as if doing a sum that came out wrong.

She gave the ornament to a relative kneeling beside the man. He placed it where she showed him, then moved it a finger’s width to the left. The goldworker let him. On the walk home the boy asked why she had let him move it.

“He knew the man,” she said. “I knew the gold.”

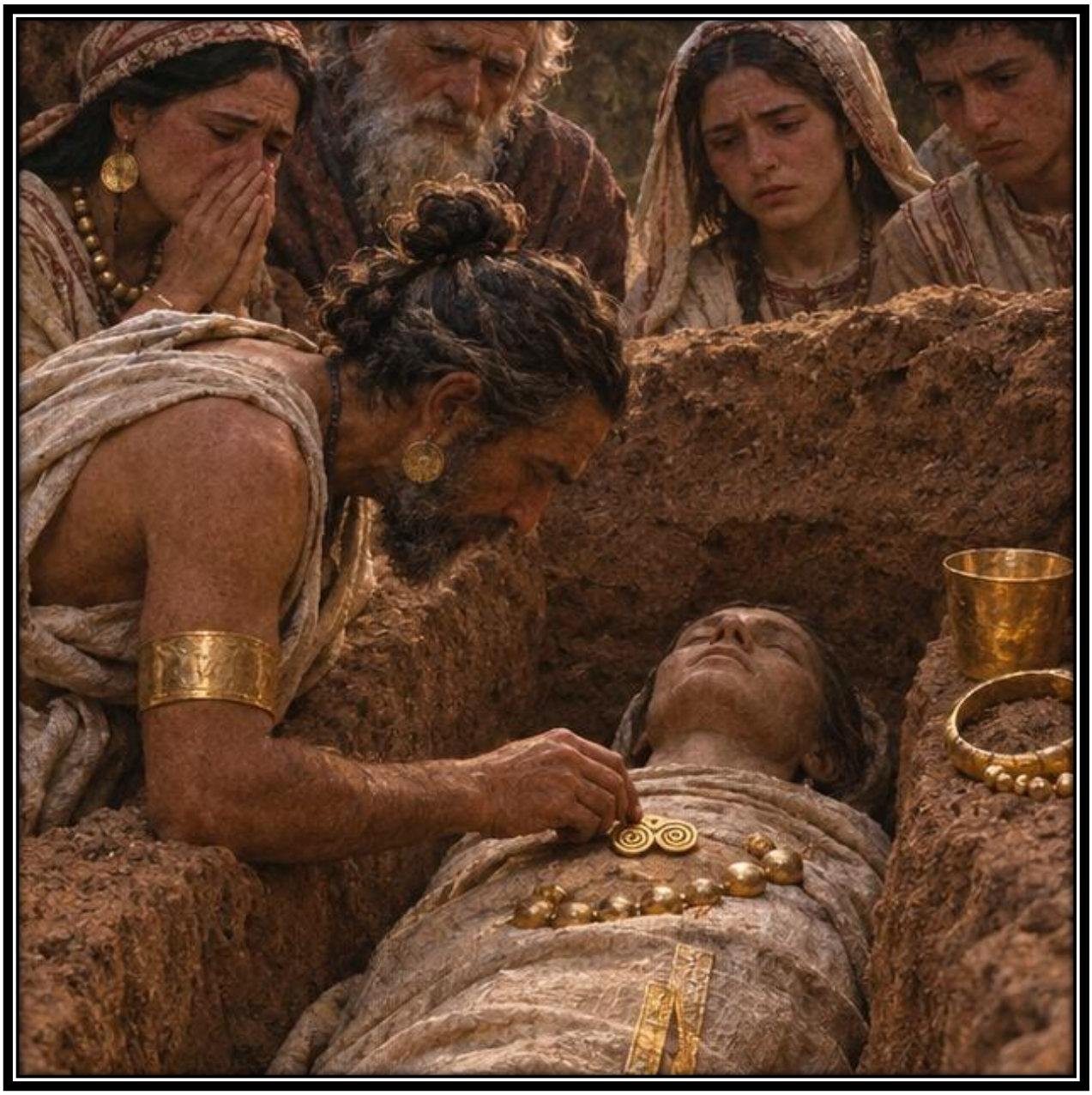
The Professor and Lumen had stood well back. At the first fall of earth, Lumen thought of the light on the goldworker’s hands. There would be no more light on the ornament for a very long time.

At home Hakan opened a photograph of the excavated burial. It was easy to talk about a wealthy man once the gold was counted. The people who made it were harder to find. Lumen pointed to one of the little shapes.

“Can we tell who made that?”

“We can study the marks they left,” the Professor said. “Some marks tell you exactly how a thing was held. A name is harder.”

Lumen went to fetch the map. “Then let’s follow a mark somebody meant us to read.”



The Children of the River

At Hattusa they heard a woman telling the story of the queen of Kaneš. A scribe sat beside her in the shade, his tablet resting against the heel of one hand. He pressed his stylus into the clay while she spoke. Every so often he told her to wait. Sometimes she did.

The queen, the woman said, had borne thirty sons in one year. She sealed containers with grease and put the children into the river. Down they went, turning slowly when the current took them, until the river delivered them to the sea at Zalpa. The gods drew them out and brought them up.

“Zalpa is usually placed near the Black Sea coast,” the Professor said. “Kaneš was inland.”

“Which gods?” a little girl in the audience asked.

“Whoever was there first,” said the storyteller, and went on.

Lumen bent toward the Professor. “I was thinking of Moses as soon as she got to the grease.”

He moved his elbow to make room for her. “I wondered how long it would take you.”

They heard how the queen bore thirty daughters and raised them herself. Years passed. The boys made their way inland and heard of the queen who had once borne thirty sons. In the shade, the little girl was now sitting so far forward her hands were on the ground. She could see the danger coming. The youngest of the brothers saw it too.

Lumen touched the Professor’s sleeve. She wanted to read the broken line before she heard anyone fill it in.

At the kitchen table, the Professor ran his finger along a translation. The surviving text breaks in the middle of the family’s trouble.

“Were you hoping to find an ending?” Hakan asked.

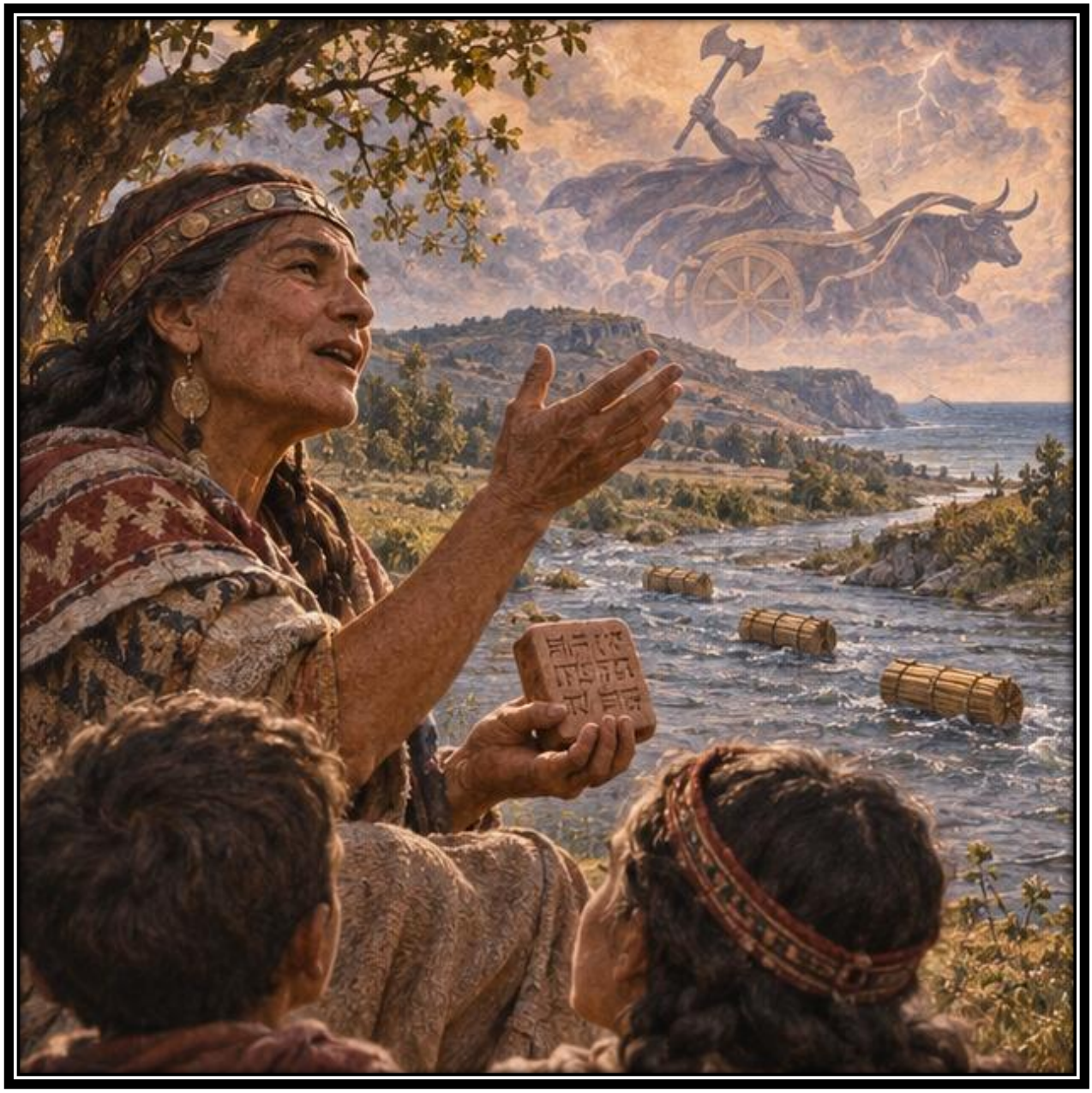
“Yes,” said Lumen. “I wanted to know whether they listened to the youngest.”

The Professor shut the book. “In my experience, the youngest has to say things twice.”

“My experience too,” said Lumen. “And occasionally put them in writing.”

She took his pencil and drew the course of a river from the interior to the coast. The Hittite country no longer looked inland in quite the same way. People could follow the river toward the sea. A story could come back with them. Hakan put a finger down before her pencil got to the mouth.

“There's somewhere else I want you to stop.”



The storyteller's world. An imagined scene from the Hittite tale of the thirty sons.

Bread for the Storm God

It was cloudy at Nerik. The Professor remarked on this. Hakan, who had come with them this time, asked him what sort of weather he had been expecting at a storm god's temple.

"Something more ambiguous."

A woman carried a tray of small loaves uphill against a wind that kept pushing cloth into her eyes. A boy beside her was supposed to carry a jug. He had picked up a smooth stone on the way and was keeping it hidden in the crook of his arm. Every time the jug slipped, he lost a little water.

The woman told him to put down the stone.

"I brought it for him."

"Then put it where he can have it."

The boy studied the approach to the temple. He chose a place close to the wall, where nobody would accidentally kick it. From then on he carried the jug in both hands.

The Hittite court had long remembered Nerik as a holy city it had lost. The tablets told of conflict in the north and the interruption of worship there. Hattusili, who would become king, restored the city's cult, and its storm god mattered to him personally. There was a king's reason for coming back. Watching the woman turn her tray sideways to get it through the doorway, the Professor wondered what her reason had been, and how long a journey there had once been between her house and the god.

Hakan stayed beside the wall after the others moved on. At last Lumen came back for him.

"I was waiting to see if the boy would take his stone with him," he said.

"Did he?"

"He looked."

Beneath the cloud, the hills folded away toward the Kızılırmak. Downriver lay the sea. It had been easier at the table to speak of Hittite territory and Kaška territory. Up here every approach to the town came through somebody's fields. The valley was narrower than Lumen had expected, and the distance to the next ridge looked considerably longer with a heavy tray in one's hands.

A little rain fell. The boy stopped just beyond the gate and lifted his face. His mother walked a few more steps before she realized he wasn't beside her. When she called, he came at once.





What the Wool Held

In the foothills above the eastern Black Sea, a woman showed a child how to lay a fleece in a shallow wooden channel. She lifted it again, let the water drain, and parted the wet wool with two fingers. A few grains shone in the grease-dark tangle.

The child was already looking upstream.

“How much is there?”

“Up there? I don’t know.”

“How much have we got?”

“You can see how much we’ve got.”

The child looked at the fleece again, privately increasing the size of what was visible. Lumen knew the feeling.

Beside her the Professor waited with conspicuous patience. “You can say it,” she told him.

“Jason.”

“Did you think I’d forgotten?”

“You’ve been looking at the fleece for ten minutes.”

“I was trying to get ten minutes out of it before Jason arrived.”

Later, at a landing near the coast, they watched two men trying to buy space aboard a small trading vessel. One of them told a story about a remarkable thing he had seen inland. His companion corrected him twice in the first sentence. By the time they had reached the part about how large it was, three other people had stopped what they were doing to listen.

Strabo, writing centuries after the age in which the Greeks set Jason’s voyage, reported that people in this part of the world caught gold with fleeces. He also offered that practice as an explanation for the tale. As the Professor said the words at home, he turned over his hand, palm up, as if showing how little gold a fleece might really hold.

“Somebody will have to tell the story of how we got this,” said Hakan, passing him the sugar.

The Professor took one lump. Lumen took two and pushed her chair back. She had realized how seldom there was a child in the story of the Golden Fleece. Someone had to know how to wash it when the strangers had gone.



The Gifts

On the northern grasslands the riders spread out until Lumen could see the space each of them needed to turn. One was a young woman with a bow case at her side. She rode low on the horse, with the easy stillness of someone who had spent childhood learning how to stay on. When a hare took off between the horses, her companion's mount shied. The young woman laughed and swung wide to give him room. She had seen what was happening before he had felt it through the reins.

They watched from a distance and caught up with the riders only when they stopped by a shallow stream. The young woman put the horse’s needs ahead of her own. She checked a spot where the tack rubbed, then stood motionless while the animal drank. Lumen had been so intent on seeing a woman carrying a bow that she had overlooked the horse. It was the animal that made the rest of the day possible.

At the table the Professor set down three slips of paper. He had written BIRD, MOUSE, and FROG. Lumen pushed them around with one finger.

“Which of these do I get to be?”

“The one that likes damp places,” said Hakan.

The Professor laid five pencils beside the slips. Herodotus told how the Scythians sent a Persian king these puzzling gifts. Darius took them for a surrender. Another Persian saw a threat. If you could fly away, hide underground, or escape into the marshes, you might survive. Otherwise there were the arrows.

“I'd have sent another frog,” Lumen said. “One for each of you.”

“What would that mean?” asked the Professor.

“Put the kettle on. You’re making me do all the work.”

As he got up, she looked back at the three scraps of paper. From a Greek shore the rider might have looked like an Amazon. In her own camp she would have had a name and a horse that needed looking after. Women buried with weapons on the steppe gave the Professor something solid to put on the table beside the Greek stories. Lumen kept thinking about that one worn spot in the horse’s tack. Somebody had learned to watch for it.



The Town He Wrote About

At Tomis a woman repairing a net had her back to the sea wind. The man beside her had wrapped himself tightly against it and still appeared to be cold.

He was Ovid. He had been sent there by Augustus. The Professor had said that much before they came. Lumen had perhaps expected a poet to be wandering a beach and looking suitably bereaved. He was holding a piece of the net so the woman could get a knot out.

“Higher,” she told him.

He lifted both hands.

“Just that hand.”

He lowered the other one. She teased a twisted loop loose with a small wooden tool he had been sitting on when she first arrived. Her son had gone to help bring a boat in. She wanted the net ready by the time he got back. Ovid had been telling her about a street in Rome. She listened because her son was late, and she preferred a story about a Roman street to counting the waves.

Across the harbor a man stood up in a boat and waved. The woman raised her tool in answer. The man sat down immediately. She relaxed her shoulders and asked Ovid what happened next in the street.

He said he hadn’t got to the part about the shops. There was one where he could have walked blindfolded from the door to the counter. He held his hands apart to show her the width of the doorway. The net went slack between them.

She let it go slack for a moment. Then she took one of his wrists and returned it to its place.

“Then you'd better hold the net higher.”

The Professor would eventually read Lumen some of the poems Ovid sent away from Tomis. The woman on the quay would have been of little help to him in explaining what it felt like to be so far from Rome. The sound that made her lift her head was a boat coming home. Lumen remembered the line of the woman’s shoulders as it came in.



Below the Weather

The Professor said he could go with her as far as the surface. She said this was a very exact account of his abilities. He handed her his coat anyway. She left it folded beside him. At the water's edge she took her mermaid form and slipped through Wonderland into the deep.

The last daylight vanished behind her. Ahead, a small patch of blue came from the lamps of a modern survey vehicle. It had come to look at a ship that had been lying there since the days of the Greek traders. In that deep water there was very little oxygen. The creatures that would have eaten the timbers in shallower water had been kept away.

A mast rose out of the murk. She went on a little farther before looking back. The length of the ship became clear to her all at once.

On deck, when there had been a deck in the sun and men working on it, somebody would have been told to coil a line and somebody else would have been blamed for the way he did it. The man who blamed him might later have borrowed his knife. Lumen could imagine such things very readily. She tried to look again at what was there. Wood. The shape of the hull. A mast where she could see a mast. She had no way to know whether anyone on that ship had been particularly good at coiling a line.

She swam clear before the vehicle turned. For a moment she was beyond the reach of its light. She felt how large the water was above her. Then she started home.

Hakan and the Professor were still at the table when she came in.

Lumen took the coat from the back of his chair. He had brought it in for her even though she had come home dry.

"Did you see it?" Hakan asked.

"The mast," she said. "It was still standing."

"I could almost see a sailor on deck," she told the Professor. "Then I looked again. There was only the wood and the light." He moved his notebook toward her and waited.

"The woman with the trap," said Hakan. "I keep thinking there might have been a place her son remembered by the shape of a stone."

"Perhaps he brought his own son back to see how far out it was," the Professor said.

"Perhaps he took him fishing," said Lumen.

The Professor reached for his pencil, then waited. Lumen sat down between them and drew a small upright line in the open water. She left room around it. For a while nobody asked her what it meant.



An artist's impression of the wreck in the survey vehicle's lights.

Where the River Bends

The last time Hakan unfolded the map, he left the coast alone. He put his finger on the steppe above the Black Sea and moved it west. Lumen watched it travel the length of the table.

“Can we follow the people who went that way?”

“Some of the way,” the Professor said. “People moved west over many generations, in many separate journeys. We can imagine one family at the far end. Even they might never have seen the country their grandparents came from.”

Hakan brought his finger to a stop in what is now southern Germany. The map showed the Danube narrowing into a line that could disappear under a thumbnail.

They went to see what one such stop might have looked like.

By late afternoon a few cattle were moving above the river. The people with them had spread out along the track. A girl had been given the duty of keeping the smallest animal with the others. Every time she got it where she wanted it, it found something at the edge of the track that needed a closer look.

At a bend the people stopped. There was land above the river where the trees thinned. A man with an ash staff went ahead to see how wet the ground was. The girl called after him and asked how far they had left to go.

“I’ll tell you when I get back.”

She crouched to wash the mud off her hands. From where she stood she could see the reflection of a hillside that was still in sunlight. One of the cattle lowered its head, and the hill broke up into yellow pieces. It came together again slowly after the animal had finished drinking.

“Is this where they stop?” Lumen asked.

“Somebody will,” said Hakan. “Somebody will be born here and think this is where everybody starts.”

The man with the staff came back and took the pack off his shoulders. The girl saw him do it and called the others. They brought the cattle up from the water.

At the kitchen table, the Professor reached for another map. Lumen put her hand on it.

“Next time,” she said.

She folded the first map at the bend of the Danube.



Notes on the Places and Stories

The moving shore. The Mediterranean's reconnection through Gibraltar took place about 5.33 million years ago. The Black Sea's reconnection with Mediterranean waters after the last Ice Age belongs to a separate geological episode. Researchers have proposed different dates, rates and magnitudes of change. The cover and opening shore scene imagine rapid inflow and are fictional. The connection between any particular flood tradition and this event remains conjectural.

Varna. The Copper Age cemetery in modern Bulgaria yielded thousands of gold objects. Much of the gold was concentrated in a few graves, including Grave 43. The goldworker and apprentice are invented.

Zalpa and Nerik. The Zalpa Text, catalogued as CTH 3, preserves the tale of the thirty sons and thirty daughters. The passage breaks during the family's story. Zalpa is generally placed on or near the Black Sea coast, although its location remains debated. The two stories of infants carried by rivers, here and in Exodus, can be compared as literature. The worship of the storm god of Nerik and Hattusili III's role in its restoration are known from Hittite sources. Excavations at Oymaağaç Höyük have investigated the site identified as Nerik.

Colchis and the steppe. Strabo describes fleeces used to catch gold and suggests a link with the Golden Fleece. That is an ancient explanation of the story. Herodotus records the two interpretations of the Scythian gifts in Histories 4.131–132. Archaeologists at Devitsa V on the Don documented a woman buried with weapons. Such burials give context to Greek stories of warrior women. The rider in the book is imagined.

Tomis and the wreck. Augustus sent Ovid to Tomis, modern Constanța. Ovid's surviving exile poems include Tristia and Letters from Pontus. The encounter at the harbor is invented. The Black Sea Maritime Archaeology Project documented a remarkably intact ship dated to around 400 BCE in deep, oxygen-poor water. Lumen's dive is fictional.

The road west. Ancient DNA documents substantial movement from the steppe into central Europe thousands of years before Iron Age communities associated with Celtic material culture. The family in the upper Danube scene is imagined. Steppe ancestry in central Europe establishes large-scale movement and contact, while a direct route from any particular early migrant group to the later Celts remains uncertain.

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