

# Heron Fleet

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## [Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Coda](#)

## [Acknowledgements](#)

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The heron is a bird that has symbolism in many cultures around the world. Herons are often seen as being wise, going with the flow of life as they fly up and down waterways hunting for fish. In ancient Egypt herons were associated with Ra, the Sun God. They nested in high places from which

they swooped down, reflecting creative sunlight from their huge wings. To Native Americans they are good hunters with excellent skills of judgement, wisdom and patience. In Greek mythology, herons were often considered to be messengers of the gods – although the news they brought was difficult to interpret and could be good or bad. [Chapter 1](#) Made iridescent by the evening light, marching over the headland towards the sea, the chain of geodesic Glasshouses looked like giant puffballs. On the top surfaces of each dome, the petal-like triangular vents, that during the day had been open to keep the plants in the houses cool, were closing to shut out the frosty night. Francesca stood up with a groan, pushed back her straw hat and leant on her hoe. She pictured the activity in the domes. How the Gardeners would be running around, checking the temperatures, adjusting the sprinklers. How much she wanted to be with them, to share in this evening ritual, but at this time of year all the Apprentices who could be spared from other duties were directed into the fields. It was vital that seeds were sown and small plants weeded and nurtured in their early stages. If the crops did not make the most of the short growing season before the autumn storms came, the harvest might fail. But she hoped that by the time the growing season was over the Council would have made her a Gardener in her own right and she would be back with her beloved seedlings in the propagation chamber or among the squashes and zucchini in the curcubit house. She shouldered her hoe, picked up her canvas bag and wound her way down the rows of small millet plants she had spent all day weeding. She came out on the path and turned downhill towards home. Fellow workers emerged from other fields and joined her: Jonathan, Hamied, Mary, a dozen others. At the edge of a nearly fully-grown maize crop was Anya. She kissed Francesca and then fell into the quiet procession, taking Francesca's hand in hers. 'Good day?' whispered Anya. Francesca looked at her, smiled and nodded. Anya squeezed her hand and returned her smile. They reached the head of the combe where the path followed the beck. Dry field margins became scrub, scrub became bushes and then they were under the trees. It was cool and green in here, where the moss clung to the rocks and water trickled. Here and there, where pools of light reached the ground through the canopy, the last bluebells flowered. Old Gatherers were fond of saying that they could remember woods where there were carpets of bluebells but Francesca didn't really give credence to these tales. In her experience the only places that bluebells could be seen were in the dark, cool places like the combe, and so it must have been for generations. Too soon the trees thinned out and Francesca got her first view of the suspension bridge and beyond it the Gathering Hall. The sight of the Hall always gladdened her. It was the biggest building for miles around and as far as she knew the biggest building in all Albion. To the apex of the roof was about twenty metres. Its height was emphasised by the flat meadows that surrounded it. The squat shapes of roundhouses seemed to cuddle up to it. To Francesca it looked like a mother lapwing sheltering chicks, under her wings, from rain. There was nothing in the scene to disturb her, nothing to undermine the sense of security that seeing the Gathering Hall always gave her, nothing at all. Then she spotted the thin veil of high cloud that radiated from the evening sun. She let go of Anya's hand and shaded her eyes to get a better view. 'What's the matter?' said Anya. 'What have you spotted?' Francesca pointed in the direction of the cloud. 'Don't worry,' said Anya. She stroked Francesca's arm, 'It's not typhoon cloud. There hasn't been a typhoon in over ten years. We'll not starve this year.' Francesca smiled again and they started to pick their way down the steep steps cut into the river-cliff that led to the bridge. Once on the bridge the group had more room and fell into a swinging, happy gait. Jonathan crept up behind Anya and tried to trip her up with his hoe. Anya turned and grabbed it. Then there was a playful struggle as she tried to disarm him while he attempted to get away. Finally, he broke free and dashed away towards the Gathering Hall. But if he thought he was in the clear he had underestimated Anya's tenacity. She dropped her rake and bag, and pelted after him. When she caught up she jumped on his back and hung on. 'So you think you can get away with goading me that easily?' she said grappling with him again for control of the hoe. 'Sorry! Sorry! I give in!' he laughed. 'Giving in is just not good enough!' she shouted. 'A forfeit! A forfeit is what I want!' The bridge was swaying with their struggle. She had him backed up towards the rope rail. Deftly she twisted the hoe, broke his grasp and with one end tripped him. 'A quick swim will cool your cheek!' Off balance, Jonathan was at her mercy. One more push and over he went accompanied by the cheers of his fellow Apprentices. They rushed to

the side of the bridge and looked over. He was just surfacing and flailed around splashing and spluttering. 'You fool!' he shouted at Anya, between catching mouthfuls of river water, 'I can't swim!' 'Is that true, Hamied? Can he swim?' 'No,' said Hamied flatly. 'He never learned when we were in the crèche. He was always too frightened of the water.' 'Shit!' said Anya and dived in after him. Francesca watched as she curled her body over the rail, breaking her landing with outstretched arms, to make sure she didn't hit the bottom. Two strokes and she had her right arm across Jonathan's chest and his head well above the water. Almost immediately, he stopped struggling and allowed her to take control. Then she sculled him to the bank near to the end of the bridge. The group met them there and helped them out. By the time Francesca arrived, having collected up both Jonathan's and Anya's tools, Jonathan had his head down gasping and coughing, his hands on his knees. Hamied was patting him on the back and asking if he was alright. Anya looked balanced between fear at what she had nearly done and elation at her own audacity; she stood tall and there was a brightness in her blue eyes. Francesca dropped Jonathan's equipment near him and then took Anya's gear over to her. 'Are you OK?' 'I think so,' Anya replied. 'Let's go home. The excitement's over.' She picked up her bag and hoe and they walked up the bank towards the Gathering Hall. Gradually, the others followed. They passed through the Eastern Gate in the bank-and-ditch, and were counted in by the Gatekeeper. The evening meal bell had rung a little while earlier. Couples were emerging from the roundhouses and strolling towards the Gathering Hall. Occasionally a couple would stop and kiss. It was a blissful time in the sunset light with the prospect of high summer food to satisfy a day's hunger, worked up in the fields. Francesca spotted Jonathan and Hamied, hand in hand. There were Mary and Jo, Isaac and Nathan, all of whom had been in crèche with her. 'Hi, Francesca.' It was Ruth. 'Where's Anya?' 'She hadn't finished drying her smock before the bell sounded. She said she'd catch me up.' 'Oh, after her swim in the river. She always was too impetuous. Well, that's lucky for me.' Ruth took Francesca's arm. 'It's a long time since you and I went in for evening meal together.' They walked on. 'How's Carole getting on in the kitchens?' asked Francesca. 'She likes it. The work's a bit hot this time of year and there's the downside of never being around at evening meal but that's life.' 'Downside indeed, thought Francesca. Everyone knew that if one member of a partnership was assigned to the kitchens and the other not, then chances were that the partnership would split up. The cooks worked different hours to anyone else. They had to eat after everyone else had finished and were always in each other's company. Most cooks paired off with other cooks or those working the solar-ovens. That was one of the facts of community life. Ruth was likely to have a heartbreak coming in the future, to add to the disappointment Francesca had dealt her when she had broken their partnership to pair with Anya. Francesca still felt guilty about that. They had come to the wide east doorway of the Gathering Hall. The children were on both sides with the Crèche Mothers. They clapped as the couples came in. Francesca remembered the summer evenings when, as a child, she had clapped in the workers at the end of the day. She could still hear in her head the voice of Bryony, her Crèche Mother, 'Clap hard Francesca. Their work will feed us all in the coming winter.' And how she had clapped, as hard as she could, for even then the thought of there being no harvest had frightened her. Looking at the small children now, she tried to remember how it had been when she was small. One thing struck her, she couldn't remember as many couples then as there were this evening. *When you're little, places look bigger. Perhaps it's the same for numbers of people,* she thought. *But even so, I don't remember this many then.* She tried hard to count how many roundhouses there had been then on the Apprentice side of the Gathering Hall but try as she might she couldn't remember. All she was left with was an impression that when she was a girl there had been fewer. The Gathering Hall, for all its size, was simply built, nowhere near as complex as the greenhouses. Ten roof joists set into the ground at about forty-five degrees were joined in a simple tent shape at the top to a beam that ran down the length of the hall. Outer sidewalls were made of cob. If you looked closely, you could see pieces of straw poking out of the red-clay mixture. These walls were several feet thick and served to keep the weather out but had no windows. Light came from the two gable-ends. As Ruth and Francesca went in, the sunlight was streaming through the west window in front of them. Its mixture of coloured and clear glass drew the shape of a setting sun over the centre of the High Table. Patterns of colours from the window

covered the floor and the tables. In the centre of the hall, where in winter the great fire would be, was a group of singers, accompanied by two lutes. They were a group of mixed ages: Gatherers, Apprentices and children. They were singing one of the Founding Songs. *Through blasted Albion they came, The first, the founding twenty souls, They found this vale where plants still grew, They gathered here and settled.* 'Won't you sing for us tonight, Francesca?' It was Mary from behind her. 'Yes, do,' said Ruth enthusiastically. 'You know you've got the best voice in the community.' Several other Apprentices backed up her request. 'Are you sure, Ruth?' 'Yes of course I am. It's a long time since I've heard you sing.' They unlinked arms and Ruth kissed Francesca gently on the cheek. 'There, go with my blessing. Coming in with you has been like old times.' Francesca smiled and strolled over to the singing group. Soon her rich voice could be heard above the others: *They ploughed and sowed and fished the bay, Survived the storms and winter's cold, They made a living year to year, On the bank of the Heron Fleet.* All the Apprentices had come in by now and the children were skipping in through the door, laughing and playing. But as soon as they came inside they stopped to listen. Francesca saw Anya a little way in front. She noted her stillness, the slight inclination of her head and the sparkle in her eyes. Most of all she saw the peace on Anya's face. Francesca's voice rang clear and true. *They raised the Hall, built bank and ditch, They set the Rule and made their Pact. We live their way and prosper still, In the way of the people who Gather.* Immediately a combination of emotion and relief grabbed her stomach. *She does love me,* she thought. As the song ended a bell rang at the western end of the hall. The Council were ready to enter. The Crèche Mothers shepherded the children to their tables and the singing group dispersed. Anya caught up with Francesca and together they went to their place with the other members of their roundhouse. The bell rang again. Anyone not already standing got to their feet as the Council filed in to High Table. There had been twenty Founders and so, in the Heron Fleet way, the Council always had twenty elected members. The present Head of the Council was Peter. He now stood at the centre of the table, holding The Redbook, which recorded the Rule of the community. He stood ready to incant: *Reaping and sowing, sowing and reaping, this is the world we have. All we know is the cycle of life. Power to the greenwood. Power to the field. Power to our gathered food.* When he had finished, he closed the book and passed it to the councillor on his right. Then he picked up a flattened brown loaf from a dish in front of him. He raised it and pulled it apart. That was the signal to sit. Hardbread, brown and dusty with flour, started to pass from hand to hand. Each broke off chunks as their neighbour held the loaf out to them. Francesca held out a loaf for Anya. 'Power to the bread,' she said solemnly. 'Power to the gathered food,' replied Anya. Then she touched her mouth and forehead with her right hand in one fluid gesture. Still hot from the solar ovens, an earthenware tagine was placed in front of them, along with two bowls, one of green and the other of black olives. Anya took the cloth that came with the tagine and carefully lifted its inverted cone top. A breath of steamy air was released bringing a smell of cracked wheat, fresh mint and lamb. Francesca always got a thrill out of evening meals in the growing season, for only in the long June and July days was there regular meat. This was indeed the high time of year, a compensation for the exhausting dawn-to-dusk toil in the fields, the desperate race to plant, grow and bring in the crops before the growing season ended in thunder, lightning and torrential rain. There would even be elderflower champagne on Founders' Days. 'Tuck in,' said Anya. 'You deserve this more than most, for all that beautiful singing.' The meal was almost over, the tagines empty and only a few of the olives and the remnants of the hardbread remained. Groups from individual roundhouses were clearing up, people were mingling. It would soon be time for sleep. But it was a glorious evening and Francesca had noticed that even the Council members had left High Table and were passing from group to group. 'Well, recovered from your dip in the river?' said Jeremy. He was the youngest of Francesca's and Anya's roundhouse, only two years out of the Crèche. He was not in a partnership yet, at least he and Caleb had not declared themselves to the Council, but judging from the soft sounds that came from Caleb's cubicle in the night, that was only a formality. Caleb made an exaggerated show of looking round. 'OK, Jerry. You're safe to remind her. No hoes she can prod you with, as far as I can see.' The others laughed. 'Very funny,' said Anya. She turned to Jeremy. 'Since you asked so kindly young man, I am fully recovered, thank you.' 'I wonder if the same is true for Jonathan?' said Susan, who, with her partner Christine, completed their group. 'As it happens,

I've checked,' said a voice from above their heads. 'He's none the worse for the experience, although he's a little crestfallen.' It was Peter and immediately they began to rise but he stopped them with a calm gesture. 'Don't get up. I don't want to disturb your conversation but I do need a word with Anya about this afternoon.' He nodded in the direction of a nearby empty table. 'Shall we go over there?' he said softly. Anya followed him. 'Wow, that looks like trouble. The Head of the Council doesn't talk to an Apprentice without a good reason,' said Susan. Francesca watched. They had sat down. Peter was speaking to Anya seriously, moving his hands for emphasis. Occasionally, Anya nodded in response. When the conversation was over, Peter laid his hand on her shoulder and then he left. Anya came back to the group. 'Well?' said Jeremy, impatient that Anya had not immediately told them what had been said. 'What did he say?' 'He said he'd been told what had happened by one of Gatekeepers. He'd found out that Jonathan couldn't swim. He told me off for being so foolish and said that I should make amends,' she sighed. 'Since I'm such a good swimmer he thinks I should teach Jonathan to swim as a way of saying sorry. He said it would be a service to the community as well, since we could not afford to have any of the Apprentices unable to swim if the river flooded.' 'And what did you say?' said Christine. 'What do you think I said? Yes, of course. After all, you don't refuse a direct request from the Head of the Council, do you?' 'Shame, though,' said Caleb. 'That will eat up any spare time you have after work. You'd better hope he's a quick learner.'

[Chapter 2](#) I watched the prow of the boat nose its way up the river on the late afternoon breeze. The sail was reefed to about a third of its capacity and despite the slow speed there was still enough way through the water to make her responsive to small movements of the tiller. The quiet was broken only by the warning cries of occasional water birds who flew off, disturbed by the boat's bow-wave. A few metres away a cormorant took to the wing and skimmed the surface of the river with its powerful stabbing wingbeat. Then it landed on a nearby quay. Once, a long time ago, the buildings, wharfs and jetties all along the bank would have constituted an extensive complex of docks. Thousands of people would have unloaded the goods brought by the boats that would have tied up here. Now the jetties were derelict and breaking up, the wharfs more rubble than safe anchorage and the buildings eyeless and empty shells. All that was left of the boats were occasional half-submerged ribs of metal or wood clawing clear of the mud. No serviceable craft were evident, nor were there any people to be seen. Ahead, the channel opened out into a rectangular basin, sealed at the far end by a set of leaking lock gates. These were spanned by a rusting, semi-circular metal bridge. But the dock walls were in better condition than many I had already passed coming upstream. The water in the basin was black and still, giving every indication of being deep and largely clear of obstructions. To the right of the lock gates a set of servicable stone steps came down into the water. I eased the boat forward and swung the tiller at the last moment so that she came parallel with them. As forward motion was lost, the tiller went light and I let it go to swing impotently. I dropped the rear anchor over the side and ran down to the prow to drop the second one. As I passed the mast I unhooked the rig draw-rope so that the sail collapsed in an orderly fashion. With no way of catching the wind, and anchors secured at each end, she was going nowhere. The next step was to put out some bait. Taking my time I pushed the gangplank out onto the steps and transferred some of my wares from the hold to the bank: bolts of coloured cloth, tinned food, woollen goods and salted meat. Then I collected wood from the nearest ruined warehouse and lit a fire. When it was going well I put on a kettle to boil and while it was heating erected a spit. Then I sat and waited. Any people there might be would eye me up from the cover of the buildings. Gradually it fell dark and the fire turned to a bed of hot, burning embers; time to put the spit to work. I brought a haunch of fresh venison up from the boat and mounted it over the fire. In a few minutes the skin of the meat began to brown and fat dripped sending up occasional flares of oily flames and jets of smoke. The meat smelled wonderfully appetising. Time was running out for the Scavenger Gangs. The last three I had found were starving and I suspected at least one of having gone cannibal. If there was still a group in this city, God knew when they could have last smelled fresh meat cooking. Just in case they got the impression that I might be easy to kill and rob, I brought my weapons from the boat and sat in the firelight to ensure that any watchers would be able to see them. I oiled the crossbow and fettled some new bolts, casting some new heads from my supplies of lead and feathering half a dozen prepared shafts. Most symbolic of all, I

cleaned my long spear, making sure the metal tip reflected the firelight. No one really knew how or when it had happened, probably soon after supplies of firearms had run out, but in practically every Scavenger Gang, the spear had become the symbol of power and authority. The moon rose. It was near midnight and I was beginning to believe I was on my own, when a single mother with a child in her arms came out from the shadows of a building on the other side of the dock and slowly made her way across the bridge. When she got to the firelight I could see that she was thin and the bones on her neck pushed painfully against stretched, pallid skin. Both she and the child had the listless, vacant expression of the starving. Wordlessly she held out her hand. I cut a slice of meat from the haunch and gave it to her. She shredded it with her teeth and the child grabbed at what it could get with flailing, bony hands. Then they were all around me. They all had the same thin skin and empty eyes. I fed them all, and when the haunch was consumed, gave them salted meat, hardbread and dried fruit. Finally, the guards arrived. They were well fed, though that did not stop them taking my food. When that was gone, they dispersed the crowd and issued the invitation I had been waiting for. 'Follow us Ostlander. Boss want see yen.' 'What about my boat?' 'We set sentry.' 'Can I bring my bow?' 'No weapons.' I locked the cabin and hold, putting inside most of the goods left on the bank. Then I followed them towards the city, taking only a few samples of my wares. The road from the basin soon joined a broader thoroughfare. Some of the buildings that lined this route had collapsed and we had to climb over or go round the wreckage. Some were still standing but their windows were empty, and in places metal bars stuck out of crumbling concrete pillars. In some places all that was left were piles of charred brick and half-burnt timbers, the result of fires left to run their course. After about a kilometre our path began to climb gently. Then we reached a high masonry wall dominated by the bulk of a large, elaborate structure. The sun was rising and I could catch reflections which suggested that at least some of its high windows still had glass. The path crossed the wall and climbed up to a courtyard in front of impressive main doors. There was a small latch-gate with a guard who stepped aside as we approached. The interior was gloomy, lit only by the occasional torch burning in a wall-mounted metal bracket. Despite this, as soon as my eyes adjusted, it was surprising how much detail I could make out. My impression from the outside had been correct. There was still glass in the upper parts of the windows, some of it coloured in intricate designs. Some had figures and scenes painted on it. In the lower parts of the windows, some attempts had been made to replace broken panes, once someone had had time for something more than crude, basic survival. My 'guard of honour' led me across the hall between twin lines of stone pillars that supported the roof. Set into the main wall opposite was an impressive doorway and stone steps that went up into a large, well-lit, circular room. This room had a tree-like central pillar whose branches became its roof-beams. The room had been designed as a meeting place and this chief, whoever he was, had the sense to use it as such. 'Bide here,' said one of the guards. 'He know yen coming.' I sat in one of the stone seats arranged around the edge of the room. Each had a niche behind it so that a person could sit back and get some shelter from any draught. I wrapped myself in my cloak and waited. I could remember what it had been like when I was a boy in a Scavenger Gang. How many desperate days had I spent picking through the rubble of a city not so different to this? I had been good at scavenging and seemed to have an instinct for finding food where others could not. But what I found was not confined to food. I turned up metal and plastic objects. When I broke them open some had mazes of metal lines inside, with small black and silver objects stuck to them. Others had cogs and things that appeared once to have revolved. In the end it was one of those things that changed everything for me. One day I came across a white plastic box with a silver rod in its top. I had pulled this rod out, shaken the box and then poked at the small plates set into its front. When I pressed a bright orange plate, a small red light had appeared and a hissing sound came from the box. It didn't last long, fading away slowly and finally disappearing. In frustration I smashed it against a stone and went on scavenging. But try as I might I couldn't get the picture of that box out of my head. I knew it had been made by the City builders but what was it? I began questioning the older scavengers to see if they knew anything about such things but what they told me sounded like fairy stories and made no sense. Then one day I found several sheets of paper held together with small metal clips so that you could turn the sheets over and go from one to the next. Paper was commonplace in the ruins,

we prized it for starting fires. Some of the paper we found had faded markings on it but these sheets were different. There were coloured pictures of men and women on them. I tucked the papers away in my coat before anyone could notice and take them from me. When I got back to the camp I went to see the oldest scavenger. The look in his eyes when I showed him the paper is engraved in my memory. 'What it?' 'Writin', Tobias, writin'. If you could read these marks they'd tell you about the people in the pictures.' 'Can you read?' 'No. Me only know letter-sounds. Yem small marks am letters. There an *ay*, there a *bee*, and there an *eff*,' he traced them with his finger. 'Each one has its own sound.' 'Why yen in groups?' 'Yem words. Speak letter-sounds in group, yen hear the word speak.' 'You teach me letter-sounds?' He looked dubious. 'I'll share my scavengin wi yen.' The old man had not needed any more inducement. 'Raise yen feet Ostlander!' shouted a harsh voice. I opened my eyes. It was a guard with a spear pointed at my throat. 'On yem feet,' he repeated. 'Nonuther chance.' I got up unsteadily. 'Sorry, I nodded off,' I said. 'Make it no habit,' said a much softer, more calculating, voice. On the other side of the room a group of four people had appeared. The speaker was a tall young man dressed in a leather jacket and boots. Around his neck there was a clean white scarf. He wore a blue shirt. Both caught the light from the torches. I'd never seen it before but knew they must be silk. A Scavenger Gang leader with a taste in silk was a novelty, a Scavenger Gang chief who recognised silk even more so. To the right of the man was a tall woman dressed similarly in good quality leathers. Her face was sharp, proud and beautiful, hair long and golden against the black of her jacket. Memory connects directly with the circulation and the nerves. The heart leaps and the guts churn before the mind has focused on why. Behind her were two guards. At first I dismissed them. No surprises there, I thought. They were of the same demeanour as the sullen lot that had brought me up from the boat. Even their clothes were of the identical rough fabric. But I was wrong. What they carried made them fascinating. Both had rifles on their shoulders and wore bullet-belts outside their coats. I had never come across serviceable firearms but these looked well-oiled and in good repair. The question was, were they for show or, impossibly, could they work? The young man spoke. 'Me Robert. Me men tell me yen have a ship at the quay. Yen trader?' 'Yes, my Lord.' The arcane title had always flattered these chiefs in the past so I stuck to the well-tried formula, remembering to move my accent into scavenger mode as I spoke. 'What trade-yen?' 'Meat, grain, tins, cloth. Anything me find or hunt.' 'Yen hunt the meat you cook on the quay?' 'Plenty more where it come from.' 'Why not me just kill yen and rob yen ship?' 'Then me never come back with more. Me happy to make bargain if you give me yat me want.' I saw Robert hesitate. *He knows they can't last much longer*, I thought. 'Yen eye state me people. What yen think we have that me possibly have to trade?' 'Perhaps more than you think. Me don't just trade food and cloth. Me interested in City builder stuff.' 'How be that?' On the surface the voice was mocking but behind it there was a keen interest. 'Yen heard a books?' As I said this I noticed that the woman, who had not paid much attention until now, raised her head slightly and started to concentrate on what was being said. 'Yat a book?' Immediately she touched his arm, leaned over and spoke in his ear. 'Me woman say she know.' I tested her. 'Yen what yey, me Lady?' 'They are the stories of the City builders, collections of writings, like this.' From inside her jacket she took out a small green volume. It was battered but the leather of its cover and the spine were embossed with a complex pattern to which gold leaf still clung. There was also gold on the edges of the pages. She handed it to me. I looked at the spine, *Bloomfield's Poetical Works*. Then opening the book I thumbed through the early pages, stopped at the first poem and read aloud the first stanza. *Though Winter's frowns had damped the beaming eye, Though twelve successive Summers heav'd the sigh, The unaccomplished wish was still the same; Till May in new and sudden glories came!* I closed the book and handed it back to her. As I did so I touched her fingers and from the deep, irrational side of my brain came the thought that I was touching fingers I had once loved. 'A fine volume, my Lady.' 'Yat you seek as trade?' said an incredulous Robert. 'Yes and other rare City builder stuff. In this once great city, me sure you have much to trade wi me.' The Lady had a small collection of books, two more volumes of poetry, though none as finely bound as the *Bloomfield*, and three novels of which only one was complete. She said she had found them when scavenging as a girl, and took me to the spot. It was the ruin of a big stone and brick building near to the city centre. All that was left of the building was one external wall, but from this and some clues in the

rest of the rubble, I was able to work out what I thought was its general ground plan. Vitally, there was no evidence that the building had been burned, rather it seemed to have collapsed from neglect and natural damage. 'If there's anything left it will be underground,' I told her. 'What are you hoping to find?' 'I think the building was where there was a store of books, what the Builders called a library. All the books above ground were destroyed years before you found your poetry book but I think libraries had storerooms below ground. If there's one here then there may be dozens of books preserved in it.' I saw her green eyes flash and her pale cheeks flush at the thought of the books. 'Have you ever found a library before?' 'Two or three times.' 'What was it like? How many books did you find?' 'About a hundred in total.' I was getting used to the confusion between the real woman and the woman of my memory but it could still catch me out. Objectively she was the most beautiful woman I had seen in years, full of life and vitality. Better still she could read. But that was not the real fascination of her. I imagined tracing the tip of my finger down her breast to a perfectly formed nipple, all the time reading Shakespeare to her. Would the body beneath the clothes resemble the memory as accurately as the face and the gestures? If I was to fall in love, would it be with the present or the past? Then I pulled my mind away, experience had shown that desire was dangerous where I was concerned. In the past I had got into trouble too easily. Too often forays had developed into frantic pursuits by cuckolded husbands or outraged mobs. Scavenger Gangs, though sexually promiscuous between themselves, could be very puritan when it came to seduction by Östlander. 'How did you learn to read?' I asked. 'My mother taught me. She was the old chief's mistress, as I am Robert's.' 'What happened to your father and mother?' 'Robert killed them when he took over,' she said calmly. 'He was the chief of a small gang on the outskirts of the city. They were not doing well, then Robert made his discovery. In desperation, they'd started scavenging out into the countryside and they came across a house with a securely locked cellar. It raised Robert's curiosity. After a bit they managed to open the door. Inside they found a case full of working hunting rifles and ammunition to match.' 'So those weapons his bodyguard have aren't just for show?' She shook her head. 'They work well enough. He used the rifles to attack us, killed my father's entire guard in an afternoon, captured my father and mother, made him watch as he raped her. Then he beheaded them both. He took me as his prize.' I knew such things happened. Changes of authority in the Gangs were usually violent but this was a particularly brutal story. 'And he made you watch?' She nodded her head. 'Don't fret for me Tobias. As a trader you know how it works among Scavengers. At least this way I don't starve. How do we find the books?' 'Well, I think we start over there by finding the wall that would have been the outside of the building.'

[Chapter 3](#) Francesca lay still. She could feel every contact point between her body and the cool sheets: heels, buttocks, shoulder blades, elbows. Anya's body curled around hers, her lover's head in the hollow between her shoulder and her neck, a bent leg hooked over her stomach. It was that point of perfect relaxation, of oneness after passion as breathing and heart rate slowed and companionship replaced placated lust. She stretched, arching her back like a cat waking in the grass of a summer's day. Anya moved a little in response and in return Francesca pulled her closer. 'There, that's a lot better than worrying isn't it?' said Anya. 'Of course it is.' 'I'm not going anywhere. After all where would I find as good a singer to serenade me in the winter's cold?' 'And where would I find as good a...?' Francesca tried to find the right word to sum to what she really felt but failed. All she managed was a wholly inadequate '...friend as you?' Anya sat up in feigned anger. 'Or as good a lover?' They kissed again and Francesca relaxed back into a peaceful mood. She began to hum gently to herself. 'Is that the beginning of a new song?' 'Perhaps. I've been working on the words for a while.' 'Can I hear them?' 'I don't see why not, it's about us,' and Francesca began to recite: *My love, let not my love be called idolatry, Nor you as friend be known for idol show, Since all as one my songs and passions be To one, of one they shall be ever so. Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind? She will be constant in her loving way. Therefore, my song lends constancy of mind Though modest, my response all others say. Fair, kind, and true, is all my argument, Fair, kind, and true is all her counter-spell, And in that bargain, love is truly met, And in our bed are all thoughts made up well. Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords, Fair, kind, and true may often live alone, But in my house the three keep seat in one.* 'That's marvellous and so flattering.' 'It's not quite right yet. I'll have to work on it, especially when I get a tune, but it's coming on.' 'I don't know

where your ideas come from."It may not seem it but mostly it's everyday things that set me off, a bird, a flower, something one of the Crèche children says. Though not in this case. This time the words wrote themselves."Well wherever they came from I shall be very proud when you first sing them in the Gathering Hall. I'll go round, nudge everyone and say "That's my Francesca that is". "What, even the Council?"Yes, even the Council, especially that misery Peter. Just because he has the Red-book to read it doesn't mean he can be snooty about people like you, who have to learn their songs by heart.' Francesca frowned. 'You know that's always puzzled me. Why is it only a few of the Senior Gatherers who ever learn to read? If I could read and even better write, I could write down my poems and songs. Then when I die they'd still be there to be sung, even if no one remembers them by heart.' They never said we couldn't learn to read or write in the Crèche."No but if you asked, though the nurses always said you could learn, somehow it never happened. There was always something more important to do."Did you ask?"Yes, lots of times."Why don't you learn now?"Who would have the time to teach me? As far as I know there are only ten Gatherers in the whole community who can read. Besides, I'm too old to learn now."Can't be. Not all the leaders of the Council could read before election. They say Peter was the first one in years. The leader has to know how to read from the Red-book, so others must have had to learn when they were much older than you. Go on, ask again."Maybe. But not until after they've made me a Gardener. I wouldn't want to look like a troublemaker until that happens."How can asking make trouble? Promise me you'll ask when you're a Gardener?"Well, alright. I suppose it can't do any harm. I promise.' They kissed again. 'Now I don't know about you but I'm still feeling energetic.' Anya moved round to straddle her. 'Well then I'll have to make sure you get the exercise you need,' said Francesca. The bell rang as the signal for the Council to enter. In front of High Table, exactly opposite where Peter would sit, stood Jeremy and Caleb, traditional coronets of wild flowers in their hair. A pace behind them stood their supporters Francesca and Anya, Susan and Christine. Peter smiled at the two young men as he stopped in front of them. The Community fell quiet, disturbed only by one insistent voice from the Crèche tables that carried right across the hall. 'I'm hungry,' followed by a sharp 'Shsh' from a Crèche Nurse. This was the first Declaration for some time. 'I see that we have two who wish to declare their partnership,' said Peter. 'Who stands for them?' 'I do,' replied Francesca. 'As oldest in our house I stand for them and recommend them. Here are their sisters of the house who also stand for them.' This was the third Declaration she had stood for but she still felt as nervous as a child when she had to speak in front of the Community. Peter spoke again. 'That is good. Jeremy and Caleb, do you petition the Council to recognise your partnership?' 'We do.' Francesca felt a pang of envy at the confidence in Jeremy and Caleb's voices. 'Have you considered carefully the purposes of such partnerships?' 'We have.' How much she wished she could have such assurance. 'And what are those purposes?' 'Comforting each other, in loving harmony. Working together to gather and grow. Providing an example of stability to all.' 'Well said.' Peter raised his hands. 'Does anyone oppose this partnership?' There was a nervous silence. As far as anyone could remember no one had ever objected but there was always a first time for everything. Peter ended the suspense. 'In that case do we consent?' A great shout of 'Yes, we do' came back from everyone in the hall followed by clapping and stamping. Peter shook hands with Jeremy and Caleb and handed them the evening hardbread. 'Be the first this night to divide the bread.' Caleb took it, broke it and handed a piece to Jeremy. 'Power to the bread,' he said solemnly. 'Power to the gathered food,' replied Jeremy delivering the sign of blessing. Then he took the hardbread and did the same for Caleb. 'May your partnership be long and happy,' concluded Peter to more clapping and cheering. Then as custom demanded the couple were clapped round all the tables, starting with the Council, shaking hands with as many people as they could manage. Finally, order was restored, Jeremy and Caleb were back at their normal table and food was arriving from the kitchens. 'Congratulations you two,' said an enthusiastic Anya, hugging both of them. 'A long and happy partnership.' 'And so say all of us,' added Susan. 'Jeremy and Caleb,' they all saluted. 'So,' said Anya to Jeremy, 'how do you feel?' 'Well, a bit stunned to tell the truth. After all I'm the youngest of you all, well, you know, I'm only...' 'Seventeen,' they all chorused at him and then laughed. 'Yes, we know,' said Christine, 'and less than two years out of the Crèche.' 'And catching Caleb, who barring our patriarch Francesca...' choruses of *may she live forever* '... is the

oldest. Carry on like this young man you'll be the heart throb of the Community.' Choruses of *Ooooooo!* 'That's enough of that,' chipped in Caleb. 'This is no three-year romance. We intend it to last as long as we live,' and he bent over and kissed Jeremy. 'And that's how it should be,' said Susan. 'Let's hear it one more time, Jeremy and Caleb.' Choruses of *Hurrah!* 'So I wonder what the next big event will be for us?' Susan continued. All eyes looked at Francesca. 'You know I heard the Council are going to send the next new Gatherer to herd the sheep,' said Christine. 'Or fish from the boats,' added Jeremy. 'Poor Anya, all those poeey fish scales.' Caleb held his nose and pulled a nasty-smell-face like a small child. 'Whatever it's going to be for Francesca the Gatherer, it's not going to be anything to do with plants,' said Susan and they all laughed as Francesca blushed. They were right. She had tried out herding the sheep, which she liked, and fishing, which she loathed. But they all knew that she wanted to be a Gardener and hoped with her that the Council would see it the same way. Whilst the Council tried to put people into the jobs they wanted, any jobs that Gatherers did were essential for the survival and wellbeing of the Community. Everyone had to work for the good of all. It was the bargain of being a Gatherer and having a full voting say in how the Community was run, that you did the task given to you without complaining and as well as you could. As the promises Jeremy and Caleb had just taken made clear, everyone needed to find their role. That was how the Community had survived in the past and that was how it would survive in the future. It gave its members identity and stability, it was mother and father to them all. She knew she would serve it as well as she could even if it was not as a Gardener. The alternative was to starve. A few days later Francesca got a message from Joseph, the Gatherer who organised the field-work details. Please would Francesca report to Sylvia in the Glasshouses. Dutifully she walked over there, wondering what to expect. The Glasshouses were really a single chainlike structure. The core of this chain was the domes. Varying in height from ten to twenty metres, linked by simple tent-shaped tunnels, they were the most complicated buildings in Heron Fleet. Through the whole chain ran an open stone trough which channelled water from a reservoir near the entrance. Each glasshouse took what it needed for its plants from this stream. Plants grown at the top of the chain required the most water, the most drought-tolerant were in the lower houses. The Glasshouses had two essential purposes: to provide seedlings for planting in the fields during the growing season and to supplement the winter stores of potatoes, corn, millet and wheat, with fresh vegetables, zucchini, marrows, celeriac, onions, and herbs. In short to add variety to what would otherwise be a boring winter diet. At this time of year, near to the midpoint of the growing season, the houses were at their emptiest. Most of the seedlings had gone to the fields and the beds were being prepared for next year, with mulches made from different materials. As she followed the flow of the water, Francesca could identify the smell of each of these materials: the fruity smell of sheep and goat manure, the warm mottled smell of the leaf-mould and finally the salt and metallic taste of sea-weed. As she passed through the domes, groups of Gardeners stopped work to wave at her. Perhaps, she thought, they watched her a bit longer and smiled more intensely at her than normal, but she might be wrong. Though, whatever was the reason for her being summoned, it was out of the ordinary and they knew it.

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Not far in the future, Francesca is an apprentice in the idyllic, agrarian community of Heron Fleet. She loves her impetuous partner Anya and the community acts as mother and father to her, as its founders intended.

But outside Heron Fleet, the world is violent. Only a remnant of city populations, organised into violent despotic scavenger gangs, cling on by combing through rubble in search of food. They are the survivors of an ecological disaster. The causes have been forgotten, but the climate suffers with harsh, cold winters and short, hot summers.

Between these two worlds, Tobias trades food gathered from agrarian communities for raw materials from the cities. But most of all he seeks books that might help him understand what happened to the climate; he believes that if humans are to have a long-term future, the agrarian communities must expand. Francesca rescues Tobias when his boat is wrecked by a storm and his arrival coincides with a crisis in Francesca and Anya's relationship. This pushes Heron Fleet into a turmoil, which threatens the community's cohesion and brings the ethical basis on which the community was originally formed into doubt.

Heron Fleet asks many questions. To what extent is necessity an excuse for the suppression of basic human rights? How easy would it be for our comfortable society to become poor, nasty and brutish? Is there a natural urge to be literate? What is the proper duty of the individual to the community? The book, which has been inspired by a number of authors, including Margaret Atwood, John Christopher and Russell Hoban, will appeal to fans of speculative literature. Author Paul weaves gripping dystopian fiction with an underlying theme of global warming, posing questions about human nature and needs; both for today's society and for the future.

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