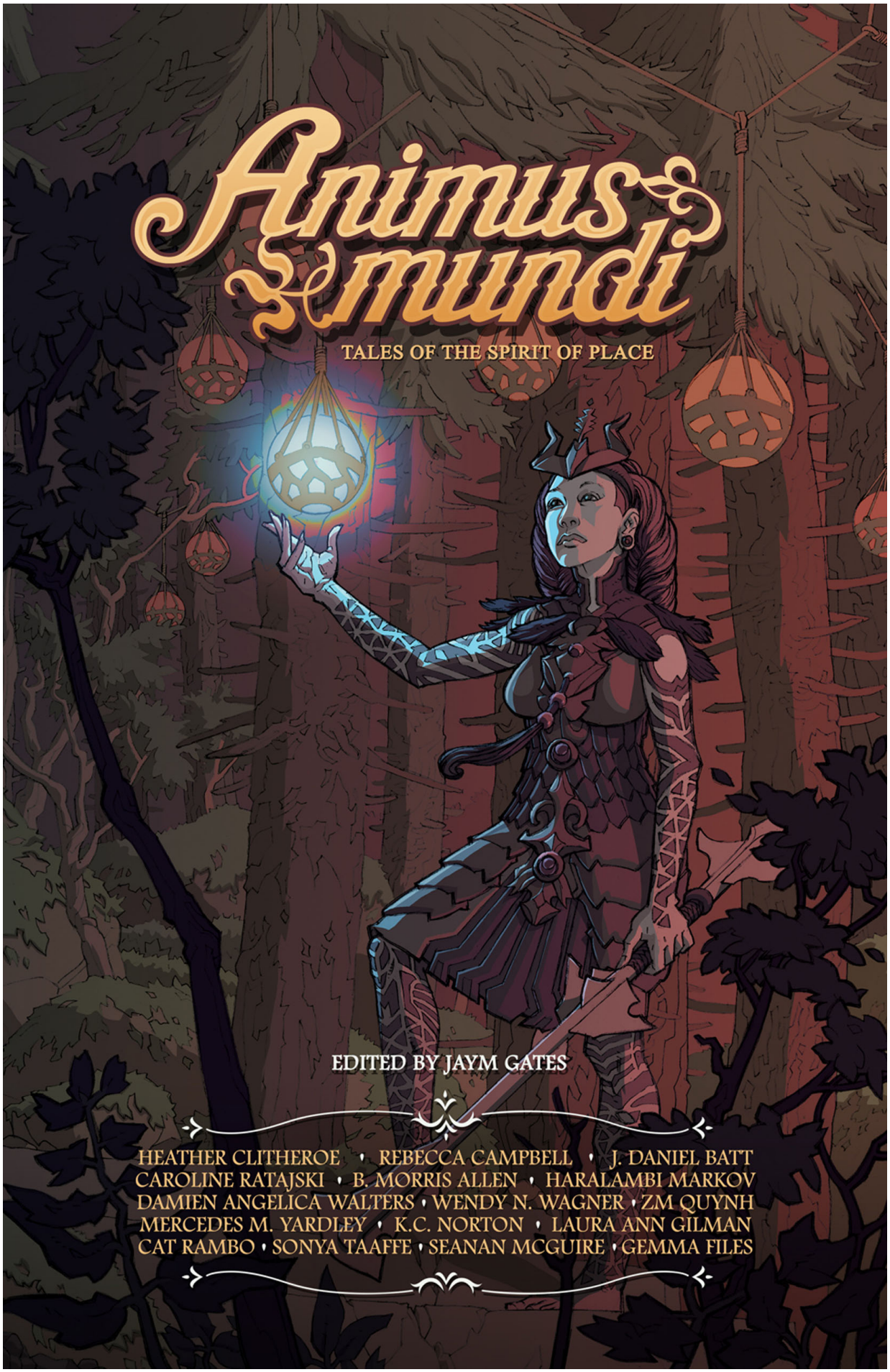
Animus Mundi
TALES OF THE SPIRIT OF PLACE
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Edited by
Jaym Gates

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— INTRODUCTION —
Alana Joli Abbott

There are places in the world that feel alive. The ancients--and plenty of moderns--were well aware that, while we humans may think ourselves separate from the natural world, we are shaped by it. In some cases, recognizing the spiritual power inherent in the land led to building structures to interpret that power: avenues of standing stones, tombs and cairns that prohibited straight lines to keep spirits from escaping, and holy buildings of all sorts.

Sometimes these sites of power… aren't so nice.

As a young academic, I served as a teaching assistant on a number of mythology study tours, and it was both a delight and a terror to see many of these sites firsthand. In Avebury, England, I walked with undergraduate students along the West Kennet Avenue. Scholars have debated the purpose of the stones; the mythographers on our tour hypothesized that it was an Avenue of the Dead, and that while the ancients might have walked along the avenue outside the stones, the center of the path was for the spirits of the dead, hence the reason it was formed in a straight line. (It was believed that spirits could not turn corners and needed a direct path.) There, we also visited a hill where a human constructed ledge would create a double sunrise: one for those who stood at the peak, and one for those who stood on the ledge, when the sun crested the peak of the hill. Again, the students posited the idea that this double sunrise was for the benefit of the spirits: the landscape itself had been changed by its residents in order to honor the otherworld they knew lived alongside them.

In Turkey, I visited the ruins of the Roman city of Ephesus, where their theater—not necessarily a place moderns would associate with spirit—is constructed as though it is the mountains in miniature. The theater's hemisphere is a faint echo of the mountains behind it, the same shape as those hills closing in to the water. Because of its placement in the landscape around it, scholars of sacred geography have compared it to a womb: here is the place where a child is released into the world, or where ideas are born. But for some, including me, there is a more visceral reaction to the site, one that scholars

might be at a loss to explain. When I visited the first time, I was so overwhelmed that the view brought me to tears, emotion welling within me to bursting. There is something about the spirit of that place to which I connected on a level that a clinical analysis cannot explain. The power there is too emotional to fit neatly into logic.

Likewise, some of the world's darker places create an emotional reaction that's hard to explain through impersonal observation. There are stories of people traveling to a waterfall in Massachusetts without an offering, and suffering nightmares until they return. There are cenotes in Mexico that draw people to their edges; once used for sacrifice, these sinkholes have visitors who claim they are still hungry things, waiting for tourists to jump into their maws. There is a cave I visited in Ireland which, beyond any rational reason, felt as though it wished to eat me. For some places, that personal, emotional response has been felt by generation after generation. The ancients, and those moderns still open to such response, know that there is something *more* to a place, something beyond, something powerful.

The stories in this collection feature those powers, some benevolent and some cruel, so deeply connected to their landscapes and locations. The humans who encounter them sometimes come out ahead, sometimes worse for the wear, and sometimes just a part of the balance that ties their communities to the world around them.

The earth has power.

Traverse it wisely.

Alana Abbott
July 2018

— COALTOWN —
Heather Clitheroe

In North America, our lives are inextricably entwined with the coal and oil industries. While many people make an effort to use solar or other alternative energies and otherwise conserve energy, the reality is that most of us rely in large part on oil and coal to keep our lights on, heat our homes, and fuel our cars.

A coal mine is a strange place. In these tiny, poorly lit, dusty and dirty spaces, it's impossible not to be aware that you are underground and you may not live to see the surface. Miners around the world tell stories about spirits who live in the mines. Miners from the United States tell of Tommyknockers, who steal tools and food, and who knock on the walls of a mine right before a cave-in. The stories of the knockers were brought to the USA by Welsh and Cornish miners. Some miners see them as evil spirits, who knock on the walls to weaken them and cause disaster. Other see the knocking as a warning, and leave small bits of food as a thank you to the spirits.

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics, mining is the second most dangerous occupation in the United States (as of 2006). Miners face risks of injury and black lung disease, and they work long, physically and emotionally taxing hours. When we talk about the hidden costs of our energy sources, we tend to speak of them in environmental terms. But there are other costs to consider.

In Clitheroe's story, "Coaltown", a town relies on the local mine for their economy. All the families in the town are dependent on the success of the mine, but its success comes with a cost. In the story, Clitheroe uses fantasy to challenge us to consider the real costs of the resources we rely on.

The new year was not even a full day old when the women of Coaltown came together in the community hall to hold their draw. They arrived tired-faced, with dark circles under their eyes from the party the night before. The mine was quiet. Their husbands and sons were home to drink and make merry for two days. It was the women who always seemed to suffer. The meals had to be got and the children looked after no matter how much their heads

might ache. And if some of the women had drunk as much and made as merry as the men, it was only because they had tried very hard not to think about the draw to be made the next morning.

The wind was cold. New snow had fallen in the night, and it covered the hills and rimmed the naked trees. The sky was sullen and heavy with cloud as the women walked silently through the slush. They crowded into the hall, stamping their boots clean as they came inside. Every one of them with something precious to lose, something to fear.

This year, one hundred and ninety-seven women would put their name into the draw. They knew who they were. They didn't need reminding that they were to stop at the table at the entrance to carefully print their names on slips of paper. Several old women sat and took the slips gravely, placing them into an old, battered box with a slot on the top and a lock across its side.

Edda Helms walked in behind her mother-in-law. Heavily pregnant, she bent awkwardly to write her name, then gave the slip of paper to her aunt.

"How are you, dear?"

"Oh, can't complain," Edda said. She would have liked to. She'd been up all night. First with heartburn, then a leg cramp, then the snores of her husband after he'd finally come to bed, stinking of sour whiskey and running urgent hands over her body. Her back ached and she had a headache, and there was still the laundry to do. Piter worked the second shift at the mine. He left early in the morning, before the sun was up, but at least he was home every night in time for dinner.

"Come over after the draw," her aunt said. "Come have a cuppa tea with me. I haven't seen you all week long."

"Maybe tomorrow?"

"You look tired." The older woman cast an appraising eye at Edda's stomach. "The baby dropped. Not long now, eh?"

"No," Edda said. "That's what everybody says." It felt like the baby was almost between her legs these days. She only had two weeks to go. Maybe three. She ought to have kept better count…well, there was nothing for it. The baby would come when it was ready.

She'd never thought she'd marry a miner. There had been talk of sending her away the city, to learn to be a teacher. She could come back and teach the little ones while their fathers were underground and their mothers were hard at work at home, trying to wash the coal dust off the furniture. She was supposed to have a better life.

But then she'd gone and fallen in love with Piter. A miner, just like his da. He could barely read. Could sign his name but not much else. He left school early to go and work in the breakers, picking through slate and slag as lumps of coal rolled on by on the belt. Then he'd been put on as a door boy, opening up for the carts and the men. And after that, mule boy, driving the tired old beasts down into the mine. By the time he was thirteen, he was 'prenticed to his uncle, learning how to swing his pick and set a charge just so, bringing the coal down but not the roof. His skin was pitted with black dust, pale from so much time spent in the down under. He'd come to court her with his skin raw from washing, scrubbed so hard it was pink when he'd come to stand at the bottom of the porch step to ask her aunt if he might take her to the hall for a dance.

It touched her. It touched her powerfully.

One thing led to another. She found she was late. There had been a wedding. As was so often the case in Coaltown, the wedding dress passed down to her had an extra panel sewn in around the belly, with clever darts and lace work that hid her thickening waist. Her aunt only said that she hoped Edda would be as happy as she had been, that she wanted her to have a good life. There was no more talk of going away to be a teacher.

Piter bought up a house—the papers on it were owned by the company. But it was *theirs,* with a small front room that he filled with furniture bought on credit, and he carried her over the threshold as she laughed. They made love in their new bed, ate the dinners she cooked. She scrubbed at the floor and the bed linens to get the coal dust out, just like Piter's mother did for his da. Just like her mother must have done. A married woman now, Edda was putting her name in the draw for the first time.

Her aunt took the slip of paper and pushed it through the slot and into the box. For a wordless moment, the sour sick came up the back of her throat, her heart pounding. "Come and see me tomorrow, love," her aunt said. "I'll fix you up a nice lunch when Piter's gone down."

"I…" What to say? The sweat prickled down the small of her back, the fear hissing in her ears as she struggled to compose herself. She blinked hard, tried to take a slow breath and choked.

Her aunt's callused hand closed over hers. "No worries, my girl," she whispered. "Don't count your sorrows until they're drawn."

Edda walked into the hall, trying to smile at the women she knew. Some of them patted her shoulder or looked on with sympathy. The others just smiled vaguely back at her, lost in their own worries.

There were no chairs set up. No need. There'd be no lingering, after. When they were all there, the boxes were carried up to the front, and she held her breath with one hundred and ninety-six others. Nobody was missing. Only Tessa Adams was at home, nursing her da after his stroke, but Tessa's oldest daughter stood as proxy, put her name in for her. Edda leaned against the wall to try to rest her back and waited for the draw to begin, one hand on her stomach while the baby rolled and stretched.

She went home in a daze, her mother-in-law and her aunt walking alongside her. Five names drawn, and one of them her own. Of the five, she was the only one roundly pregnant. In her pocket was the first envelope of money they'd given her. "To help with the baby," they'd said. "To thank you for your service." The other women had the same envelopes, but they weren't afraid. One look at Edda and they were reassured; she'd have the baby before they were even puking up in the morning. She'd be the one to carry it down to the mines before she could even cross her legs comfortably. The mine only needed one.

A good omen, to have a baby to take down so soon. That was what people were saying.

By the time Edda was home, there was a covered basket waiting for her. Her aunt picked it up as Edda opened the door. "Somebody's brought you dinner," she said, lifting the cloth to look inside. "Stew."

"Fine," said Edda, tonelessly.

"Why don't I make you some tea?" Her mother-in-law was already into the kitchen, reaching for the kettle.

"No," said Edda. "I have to start the wash."

"Just a cup," said her mother-in-law. "Sit down."

Her aunt helped her to a chair, then sighed. "Don't cry," she said. "There will be other children, pet. There will be. But I wish it weren't you."

Her mother-in-law glared at her aunt. "Don't say that," she said. "It's an honor, that's what it is. She should be proud."

"To give up her first to be a canary?" her aunt snapped.

"Don't use that word," her mother-in-law said. "It's vulgar. Her husband is a miner. She knows what it means to be drawn. She should be glad."

"Glad," Edda's aunt muttered. "It's barbaric."

Edda let them bicker. She sat, with her hands resting on her belly. Breathing in and out slowly, waiting to feel the baby move. There. A fluttering kick. Another. *I'm so sorry*, she thought. *Oh, god, I'm so sorry.*

When the labour pains were close together, she sent Piter to get the midwife. The roof creaked as the wind blew. It was snowing again. Edda waited in her bed, her hands twisting the sheets into lumps. She tried not to groan from the pain, to stay calm. She could imagine curtains stirring as women went to their windows to watch Piter dashing through the snow.

Everybody was waiting on Edda. There'd be no long months of hoping for one of the five to get pregnant. She came with a baby ready-made, and all she had to do now was to push it out. The front door rattled and she raised herself up to her elbows. Was that Piter? Was he back already?

No. Just the wind. She let herself back down, groaning as another contraction seized her.

Coaltown produced the very best. It came from deep inside the hills, way down far. Their coal burned hot and bright. A good, smokeless blue flame that gave the best heat. There was always steady work here. You could work for the mine or you could do something to help the mine stay running. Nobody went hungry in Coaltown. It was a poor life, always in debt to the company store, but at least you could feed yourself and your own and have a little left over to save for another day.

And other mines didn't have canaries. They were dangerous. Nobody sang to the things that came up from the down below to keep them from attacking the men. Heard but not seen, the canaries held off the firedamp that could tear the men apart, too. They sang to keep the rocks from falling on them. They saved the men from the afterdamp that would smother them. Coaltown's men made coal, and its women made canaries and the next generation of miners.

The house shook with a savage gust of wind, and she started to cry with fright and dread.

The hours were lost to her. The world contracted into a ball of pain, wracked her until she was shivering and sweating at the same time. The midwife spoke soothingly to her at first. Then sternly. Then sharply to Piter. "Get my bag." Edda was dazed, lying limp in the new bed that she and Piter shared. Spent. But still the pains came. She

didn't want to push. But her body had its own reason and logic that she did not, could not resist.

The clanking of metal stirred her from her misery, and she spoke. Her voice was raw. "W-what's that?"

"To help the baby," the midwife said. "Lie back."

The wind roared loud around the house as she heaved and pushed and sobbed. The ground trembled in time with her contractions. The hills waited with the women of Coaltown, who, at home in their beds, thought sorrowfully of Edda Helms and what she was going to have to do.

She was weak and pale from the blood she'd lost, but she'd memorized every line of his face, every wrinkle, the soft folds on the back of his neck. They let her have that. Then her aunt and her mother-in-law got her up from bed and helped her dress and wash, braiding her hair. They told her it was time.

Piter sat in the rocking chair in the kitchen, holding his son. The baby was swaddled in flannel. The coal fire was lit; the room was warm. Piter's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, but he gave the baby to his mother. Edda put on her coat and slowly wound a scarf around her neck. She leaned on her aunt, and together they slowly walked out the door. "Be strong, my girl," her aunt said softly. Piter choked back a sob.

The sun was just rising, a splash of feeble light edging over the hills. Her breath came in a ghosting cloud. It had grown cold, and the slushy snow had frozen into hard ruts along the road. Women were waiting for them. They came hurrying out of their front doors, some standing on their porches or in their front yards, expectant and hushed. They began to fall in step behind Edda as she walked past, keeping a respectful distance behind her. Edda could feel them watching, their gaze a pressure that settled between her shoulders. She walked up from the rows of houses into the winding, tree lined road that led to the mines, followed by the mass of women.

Here the trees were thick, clustered close together so that the branches formed a tight woven canopy. In the early spring, when the leaves first came out, the bowered path was pretty. "Just how like looking through water," Piter said one night, in the dark, while they lay in bed together waiting to fall asleep. "It's the prettiest thing I ever seen," he said. And then he corrected himself. "Except you." She'd

laughed, her head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

It did not look friendly now, or pretty. The branches twisted together, gnarled limbs making fists that clenched. A gust of wind rushed suddenly down the hills, and they shook. Edda heard somebody coughing wetly behind her, wondered who it was that had come out to risk pneumonia for her. Her aunt took her arm as they began to climb, breathing more heavily, and Edda put a hand on hers. "If it's too much…"

"I'll come the whole way with you, pet," her aunt said.

Her mother-in-law walked beside them, carrying the baby. He was wrapped warmly. Her head was down, and from time to time, she twitched the blankets back to look at his small, perfect face. There was a red mark on his forehead from the forceps, but it was fainter than it had been, no longer swollen. Edda's boy slept.

The road gradually levelled, and they emerged into a clearing. The outbuildings were here, a bit of smoke rising from a narrow chimney of the company office. The wind blew harder now, whistling in her ears, but Edda refused to shiver. *I won't*, she thought. She walked on, careful not to stumble, and then she saw the men. It nearly brought tears to her eyes.

They were standing along the road, lining it. A hundred of them. Maybe more. Some she knew, many she didn't. Men with beards blackened by the dust, men who shaved their chins smooth, men who were still slender youths, their shoulders already stooped from the time they'd spent crouched underground, ducking through shafts with their charges and picks. Piter had the same way of standing: canted slightly, his neck a little broader on one side from the muscles that came from holding himself at an angle for hours. They looked at her with open pity, these men, but with gratitude, too. Some of them nodded at her. Others wiped their eyes. Her cheeks felt hot and she turned her head to look up at the sky.

A company man came out of the office, and several men stepped aside to let him by. He wore shoes—so silly, in this weather, with this much ice on the ground, Edda thought. Hobnailed boots would be so much more practical. His lovely overcoat was the most fanciful thing she'd seen, beautifully cut and swirling around him as he walked. He was taking something out of his pocket. An envelope. She stopped in the yard. The women behind her halted.

It was quiet in the clearing. There were no birds this morning, not even the little dun sparrows that hopped and chirped all the year

round. The hills crouched all around them, and the sun touched half the clearing where it could cut through the rock escarpments that ringed the mine. The sky was achingly blue. A perfectly clear January sky wrought from the icy cold of her despair.

She went in alone. That was how it was done. Her aunt embraced her, holding her close and rubbing her back. Her mother-in-law's chin trembled and tears dripped off the end of her nose, but she gave the baby to her and whispered, "I'm proud of you." Edda wanted to scream. The baby stirred with a funny, chuffing grunt. She took him in her arms and looked at him once more in the sunlight, folding the blanket back so she could see his whole face.

The company man gave her a small lamp. He handed the envelope of cash to her aunt. "Once you get inside, you'll be fine." He spoke with a city accent, his words clipped and graceful. He talked to her like she was simple. She said nothing, and his face turned red as she looked at him and thought, *you don't know anything about us.*

As she reached the entrance, a voice called out behind her, strangled with grief. "Tell my girl I love her!" She shuddered and kept walking, holding onto her small boy. She stretched out an arm to touch the wall to steady herself as she stepped over the steel tracks and wooden ties, feeling her feet sinking into loose stone. Sunlight glinted on a streak of quartz in the wall. The ground began to slope downwards, and it grew darker as she walked. She couldn't see more than a few metres ahead, and she felt her heart quicken. She held her baby close, the lamp swinging from the crook of her arm.

The darkness closed around her as she walked on. It was warmer inside the mine. Water dripped. She passed narrow entrances to other shafts, the canvas curtains rustling as her hand trailed across them. The air grew thick and heavy. She stopped, her breath rattling in her chest. She waited.

She hugged the baby close. She was deep inside the hill now, deep down. She could feel the pressure of the earth above her. It pressed down on her. It was hard to breathe. Sweat trickled down the small of her back. She wanted to turn and run out, to take her boy and race home to Piter. They could leave. They could. They could leave and go somewhere far away, where he wouldn't go down into the shafts and she could raise her boy in the sunshine. She whimpered. And then Edda wept, too afraid to go any further, unable to go back. The light

from the lamp was feeble. The mine was blacker than black. As black of coal.

She heard a soft crackle. Rock grated. A shiver of stones fell from the ceiling. They pattered down around her, striking her head and shoulders, and she bent herself over her baby to shield him. When it stopped, she raised her head and her breath caught in her throat. Her hands tightened on the baby, convulsively.

Something scuffled in the rock nearby, but she couldn't see what it was. She heard a faint humming, a thrum that ran through the rock and came up through her heels. It was one voice. Then another joined it, the wordless song swelling around her, coming close. Something touched her, and she jerked herself away, gasping in terror. Another touch, a feeling of a small, rough hand on hers, another on her back, something touching her shoulder. They were coming to her. There were small hands on her back, pushing her forwards. She took a staggering step, then another, letting them lead her.

This was the way it had to be.

This was what she had to do.

She could finally see the small shapes around her. The children were long limbed, lithe and slender. Their skin was scale and rock, and dust shivered from them as they ran towards her. They scampered gracefully on their arms and legs in the dusty gravel, their mouths open as they sang. Heads turned to her, squinting with black eyes at the light from her lamp. Quartz teeth flashed as they smiled. They danced in a circle around her, plucking at her clothes. One stood on its legs—she could not tell if it was a boy or a girl—and touched her hair. It laid a cool hand on her face, pressed a finger to her cheek. "Your mother says she loves you," Edda said. Her voice echoed. The child threw its arms around her, laid its head briefly on her shoulder, and then backed away. "Your mothers love you," she told the children. "All of you. They miss you and they love you." They crept closer, heads turning side to side as she spoke.

Edda sat down carefully on the floor, up against the wall, and stretched her legs out, cradling her son in her arms. She told them about their mothers, about the sunshine and the blue sky. She talked until her throat was dry and hoarse. The baby woke and began to cry, a thin wail that bounced off the walls, and the children gathered around her to look at him, their heads pressed together.

She looked past them, down the shaft, and she could see something coming slowly out of the walls. It moved ponderously. It had the same shape as the others, but the legs were broader, the shoulders wider.

One of the children ran towards it, and the creature stretched an arm to it and took the child's hand.

Edda undid her jacket, lifted her shirt and nursed her son. One of the children lay on the ground beside her, its head in her lap. She hesitated, and then she gently stroked its cool shoulders. The child turned its head, sighing, and patted her leg as it snuggled closer. It sang to her. She wiped her nose on her sleeve, licked her lips. The rock wall embraced her, shifting to support her back. The song ran through the walls and into her. The old creature shuffled towards them, and Edda saw how it touched the children as it passed: a loving caress for each one. She saw how they leaned into it, heard the song grow happier.

"We all love you," she said to them. She looked at her son. His eyes were open. "Don't forget me," she told him.

When she walked out into the sunshine, she was empty and numb. Somebody took her by the shoulders to lead her away, down the hill and home again. She'd left the blankets behind, all except the flannel that had been wrapped around his small body. Edda held that in her hands, and from time to time, she lifted it to her face and inhaled the sweet, dusty smell of her boy.