

The Left Hand of Darkness



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

Ursula K. Le Guin was born Ursula Kroeber to her father Alfred, an anthropologist, and her mother, Theodora, a writer. She studied at Radcliffe College, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, after which she won a Fulbright to study in Paris. There, she met her husband, and the pair moved to Portland, Oregon, where they've remained ever since. Le Guin published her first novel, *Rocannon's World*, in 1966, and has since published an additional twenty-two novels, twelve short story collections, and twelve poetry collections, as well as works of criticism, translation, and children's literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Left Hand of Darkness, a book that imagines a world without gender (and thus without gender-based discrimination), was published in the middle of the Second Wave of feminism, a movement that began in the United States in the 1960s, calling for equal rights for women. This movement arguably began in 1949 with the publication of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, but gained momentum with the FDA's approval of oral birth control in 1961, and the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. This movement led to legal victories for gender equality and women's rights such as the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion, Title IX, a law which was intended to end gender discrimination in educational institutions, and the Equal Pay Act, which was intended to end wage-related sex-based discrimination.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Left Hand of Darkness was an early work in The Hainish Cycle, a collection of novels and short stories set in Le Guin's fictional universe where a people called the Hain have colonized and connected dozens of planets. Other books in this series include *Rocannon's World*, her first novel, and *The Dispossessed* another one of her most highly regarded works. Le Guin was one of the first contemporary science fiction authors to consider the role that sex and gender play even in fictional societies, but far from the last. Other works of science fiction that interrogate sex and gender include Octavia Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (1987, 1988, 1989), and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Left Hand of Darkness

- **When Written:** Late 1960s
- **Where Written:** Portland, Oregon
- **When Published:** 1969
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science Fiction
- **Setting:** The fictional planet of Gethen
- **Climax:** Ai's escape from his Labor Camp
- **Antagonist:** The Orgota government, King Argaven
- **Point of View:** Various — Genly Ai, Estraven, folktales

EXTRA CREDIT

Award Winner. Le Guin won two prestigious science fiction prizes for *The Left Hand of Darkness*—both the Hugo and the Nebula award. Her follow-up novel, *The Dispossessed*, also won a Hugo and a Nebula.

An Inspiration. Many famous contemporary authors have gone on the record citing Le Guin as an influence. These authors include Margaret Atwood, Zadie Smith, George R. R. Martin, Neil Gaiman, and Salman Rushdie.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins two years into Genly Ai's Envoy mission to the planet Gethen. His task is to convince the Gethenian nations to join an interplanetary trade network known as the Ekumen. Eighty percent of the time, the people of Gethen are hermaphroditic neuters, meaning that Gethenians are neither male, nor female, and they only express sexual characteristics or desire during a period known as kemmer, which lasts for a few days every month. Because Ai is a Terran man, Gethenians see him as either an anomaly, an alien, or a sexual pervert.

Ai lives in Erhenrang, the capital of the nation of Karhide. The prime minister of Karhide, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, has been helping Ai arrange a meeting with King Argaven to plead his case. Ai distrusts Estraven, but requires and accepts his help in order to further his mission. Unfortunately, the morning of Ai's meeting, Estraven is announced to be a traitor and exiled. Ai's proposal to the King—that Karhide join the Ekumen—is subsequently rejected.

After his proposal is rejected, Ai travels around Karhide, learning about its rural people, and one of its two religion, Handdara. He meets a group of Handdara Foretellers, who are able to see the future, and who inform him that within five years, Gethen will be a member of the Ekumen. After he meets with the Foretellers, Ai briefly returns to Erhenrang, but,

feeling unsafe there, he decides to try his luck in another of Gethen's nations. He crosses the border to Orgoreyn, where he is adopted by a faction of bureaucrats who initially seem more receptive to his mission than the governing body of Karhide.

In Orgoreyn, Ai is surprised to be reunited with Estraven, who has been in the country since his exile several months ago. Unbeknownst to Ai, Estraven, who had worked on Ai's behalf in Karhide, has helped bring him to Orgoreyn, where he hopes the Envoy's mission will be more successful.

Ai naively believes his mission is close to completion, but Estraven can see that political tides are turning, such that the Orgata Commensals who once supported Ai have turned against him. The Commensals either believe Ai to be a fraud, or believe him to be real and therefore a threat to their own power. They imprison him and send him north to a labor camp where he quickly falls ill. Estraven feels responsible for Ai's arrival in Orgoreyn (and therefore his imprisonment), and hatches a plan to free him.

Estraven breaks Ai out of the labor camp, but only after Ai has spent almost a month getting sicker and sicker. The pair spends a few days recovering in a tent hidden in the mountains, before beginning the next stage of Estraven's plan: because Ai is no longer welcome in Orgoreyn, they will return to Karhide. However, because of the risk of recapture, they must travel north across the Gorbin Ice, where the only threat will be the environment itself.

All this time Ai is still unable to fully trust Estraven, or understand why he has sacrificed so much to help him. Ai has yet to fully accept or understand Gethenian sexuality. Because he is unable to see Estraven as man or a woman, Ai feels him to be inherently deceptive. However, during the three months the pair spend traveling together across treacherous terrain, Ai finally begins to see Estraven as Estraven sees himself: as neither a man nor a woman, but a complex person who is at once *both* and *neither*. They become like brothers, and come to love each other.

More than eighty days after their journey first began, Ai and Estraven arrive in a village in Karhide. From there they travel to the town of Sassinoth, where Ai is able to send a radio signal to his spaceship. Ai hopes that the arrival of his shipmates will finally convince Argaven to join the Ekumen, and will help preserve his own life. Although end Ai's mission is nearly complete, Estraven is still in danger, since he has returned to Karhide even though he has been exiled. After the government becomes aware of Estraven's presence in Sassinoth, he flees to the border, where he is shot and killed by border guards.

Even as Ai mourns Estraven, he manages to negotiate with the King. He convinces the King to welcome his shipmates and join the Ekumen. The novel ends as Ai's shipmates travel to the other Gethenian nations to convince them to join as well,

thereby fulfilling their mission. Ai is happy that his grand objective has been achieved, but he feels obligated to complete one last task: he travels to Estraven's home to deliver Estraven's diaries to his estranged father and son.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Genly Ai – Ai is the protagonist and primary narrator of the novel. He acts as a stand-in for the reader, a human on an alien planet, taking in a strange new world. He is a Terran man, sent by the Ekumen to the planet Gethen to convince Gethenian governments to join his interplanetary trade network. Ai is dedicated to his cause, but he's not closed-minded—he's a genuinely curious and empathetic person. Apart from his early interactions with Estraven, whom he finds suspicious, Ai is generally trusting. As a man, Ai's behavior is gendered in a way that stands out against the hermaphroditic Gethenians. Ai's masculinity shapes his character in many conventional ways: he dislikes crying, he takes pride in his physical strength, and favors courageous if risky behavior. Ai's gender, and his familiarity with a two-gender biology, makes it difficult for him to see Gethenians as they see each other. He sees many Gethenians as male or female based on traits and behaviors he genders as masculine or feminine—descriptions and categorizations that Gethenians would not use to describe themselves. However, Ai is committed to learning and growing, and through his developing friendship with Estraven he comes to fully understand Gethenian sexuality, arguably even developing a love for Estraven that transcends the issue of gender altogether.

Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) – Estraven begins the novel as Karhide's prime minister, but sacrifices his appointment to help Ai with his mission. To Ai, who doesn't understand Karhidish shifgrethor, or the intricate workings of Gethenian government, Estraven seems to be lacking in loyalty, and his motives are inscrutable. However Estraven is constantly working to serve his fellow Gethenians, as opposed to the interests of any single nation. Estraven is proud and loyal, willing to sacrifice his career and even his life for the greater good. Of everyone on Gethen, he is the most interested in learning about and understanding Ai, Ai's mission, and the Ekumen. He understands Ai in a way Ai does not seem to understand him. He deeply desires Ai's trust and compassion, which Ai is slow to give. He has twice vowed kemmering, once to his brother, Arek, with whom he has a son named Sorve, and once to Ashe, with whom he has two children.

King Argaven XV – The "mad king" of Karhide. He is not particularly curious or intelligent. Ai judges him to be "neither sane nor shrewd," but concedes that Argaven is well-versed and practiced in rhetorical political speech. This makes it difficult

for Ai to communicate with him and communicate the nature of his diplomatic mission, as Argaven always suspects an ulterior motive. Argaven admits to being ruled by fear, and rules his country with the same emotion. Unlike Tibe, who cares for himself more than he cares for his country, Argaven believes he is working in the best interest of his nation. At the novel's end, when Karhide decides to welcome Ai's ship and join the Ekumen, Argaven seems less excited by the prospect of joining an interplanetary network, and more excited by the prospect of being the first nation on Gethen to do so.

Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe (Tibe) – Tibe is the cousin of King Argaven, and rises through the kyorremy to become his prime minister. Tibe is patriotic in a dangerous way, in that his love for his nation is entangled with a hatred of anyone he sees as a threat to Karhide. Unlike Estraven, the former prime minister he sends into exile, Tibe is not interested in Ai or the Ekumen. Similarly, he is uninterested in diplomatically resolving the Sinoth Valley dispute, and instead seems ready to press the issue until it leads to war with Orgoreyn. His actions are motivated both by a desire for self-preservation, and a desire to preserve his nation.

Ashe Foreth – Estraven's kemmering, with whom he has two children. They were committed to each other for seven years, although Ashe is now a Foreteller and celibate. He still cares deeply about Estraven, and is willing to "share [his] ruin" after the announcement of his exile. He follows Estraven to the Orgota border, and even though Estraven hurts his feelings in order to protect him, Ashe remains loving and faithful.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ai's Landlady – The owner and caretaker of the Island in which Ai stays in Erhenrang. His sexuality confuses Ai, who sees him as a woman, but also knows him to have fathered many children.

Faxe – A Weaver and Foreteller who lives at the Otherhord Fastness. Ai finds Faxe very beautiful, and sharply intelligent, and is drawn to him. Ai believes Faxe is naturally empathetic and could communicate with mindspeech if he wanted, but Faxe has no desire to learn.

Goss – A young man who lives and works at the Otherhord Fastness.

Meshe – A former Handdarata Foreteller who went on to found Yomeshta. Said to be able to see everything that ever was or would be.

Estraven's Cook – A man who serves Estraven in his home in Erhenrang. Even after Estraven has been declared a traitor, the cook leaves out food for him to take into his exile, a gesture of faith in Estraven's character.

Yegey – An Orgota Commensal in the Open Trade Faction. He initially acts as a friend to Ai, but sells him out when the political

tides turn.

Obsle – An Orgota Commensal representing the Sekeve District. He is a member of the Open Trade Faction. He initially acts as a friend to Ai, but sells him out when the political tides turn.

Ong Tot Oppong – A female Investigator who explored Gethen forty years before Ai's arrival. The chapter "The Question of Sex" is drawn from her field notes.

Commissioner Shusgis – An Orgota Commensal. He houses Ai and appears to support him and his mission, but eventually sells him out when the political tides turn. Ai describes Shusgis as a "hard shrewd jovial politician, whose acts of kindness served his interest and whose interest was himself."

Mersen – An Orgota Commensal and Karhidish spy.

Gaum – An Orgota Commensal and member of the Sarf. He believes Ai is a fraud whose goal is to embarrass Orgoreyn. He actively works to undermine Ai's credibility and derail his mission. He is also said to be very beautiful.

Slose – An Orgota Commensal in the Open Trade Faction. He initially acts as a friend to Ai, but sells him out when the political tides turn.

Ithepen – An Orgota Commensal and member of the Sarf who believes in Ai's mission. He represents the Enyen District.

Asra – A man imprisoned at the Labor Farm with Genly Ai. He is dying of some kind of kidney disease, and the two men spend many days convalescing together. He shares myths and religious tales with Ai, and Ai in turn tells him about the wider universe.

Mehse – A Gethenian prophet and founder of the Yomeshta religion. He was said to be enlightened at age thirty, from which point on he could see the past, present, and future simultaneously.

Mavriva – A friendly hunter whom Estraven meets as he travels north to rescue Ai from his Labor Farm.

Arek Harth rem ir Estraven (Arek) – Estraven's brother, who died fourteen years ago. He has a son with Estraven named Sorve.

Thessicher – A farmer and old friend of Estraven who lives outside of Sassinoth.

Lang Heo Hew – One of Genly Ai's shipmates, who works on behalf of the Ekumen.

Tulier – One of Genly Ai's shipmates, who works on behalf of the Ekumen.

Ke'sta – One of Genly Ai's shipmates, who works on behalf of the Ekumen.

Esvans Harth rem ir Estraven (Esvans) – Estraven's father.

Sorve – Estraven's son. Sorve's father is Arek.

TERMS

Gethen – The planet on which the novel takes place. It is in the middle of an Ice Age, and much of its culture and customs have developed around preserving life in an essentially inhospitable environment. Residents are called Gethenians. The planet is called Winter by the Ekumen.

Envoy / Mobile – The Envoy is a representative of the interplanetary trade alliance known as the Ekumen. Envoys are sent alone to new planets in order to try and convince local governments to join the Ekumen. **Genly Ai** is an Envoy sent to Gethen. Envoys announce their presence in order to further their missions, but they come to a planet only after it has been examined by a team of Investigators, who roam the world secretly to learn about its cultures.

Investigators – A team of men and women who explore a planet and gather information about it on behalf of the Ekumen. Investigators, who explore secretly, are followed by an Envoy, who announces his or her presence, and sets about trying to convince the governments of new planets to join the Ekumen.

Karhide – A nation on the planet Gethen. Its government closely resembles a feudal monarchy. During **Genly Ai**'s time on Gethen, **Argaven XV** is its King. Karhide is made up of many disparate Domains, and **Estraven** refers to his home country as “not a nation but a family quarrel.” Karhide has a longstanding rivalry with its neighbor, the nation of Orgoreyn.

Orgoreyn – A nation on the planet Gethen. Its government is a complicated bureaucracy with a strict police force. It is made up of thirty-three districts, each of which has a representative who serves as a Commensal in the government. Orgoreyn is committed to providing employment for all its citizens, as well as providing the opportunity for any member of its society to ascend in rank. It has a longstanding rivalry with its neighbor, the nation of Karhide.

Ekumen – An interplanetary trade coalition. **Genly Ai**, who works on its behalf, describes it not as a “kingdom, but a coordinator, a clearinghouse for trade and knowledge.” Ekumen sends Ai as an Envoy to convince the governments of Gethen to join its alliance.

Erhenrang – Karhide's capital city. It is located in the southwestern corner of the country.

Foray Gun – A crude and ancient type of gun on Gethen that shoots to kill. This can be contrasted with stun guns, which are used by the majority of law enforcement officials on Gethen.

Kyorremy – The upper chamber or parliament of Karhidish government. It is led by the prime minster, whose title literally translates to “King's ear.” **Estraven** is the first to lead the kyorremy, but is soon replaced by **Tibe**, the **King**'s cousin.

Karosh / Island – A Gethenian boarding house that houses between twenty and two hundred individuals.

Shifgrethor – An “untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide” and across Gethen. It refers to personal pride and honor, both of which must be maintained by the individual, and respected by those they interact with. Shifgrethor comes from the Karhidish word for shadow.

Kemmer – A period of a few days each month in which Gethenians develop sexual organs and sexual desire. Its opposite is somer, during which time sexuality is latent. Within kemmer are three additional phases: secher, thorharmen, and thokemmer, which track the degree of sexual polarity an individual has reached.

Vow Kemmering – The Gethenian equivalent of monogamous marriage. Although it has no legal basis, it acts as social glue, and is the foundation of Karhidish society. When two people vow kemmering to each other, they swear to have sex only with each other and no one else. There is no divorce on Gethen, and if one partner dies the other may not vow kemmering again. A person's monogamous partner is referred to as their kemmering.

Hearth – An extended family unit, or clan. This is the most basic unit of Karhidish society.

Pering Ice – The glacier that extends from the northernmost edge of Karhide to the north pole of Gethen. Together with the Gobrin Ice, it forms one of Gethen's ice caps.

Gobrin Ice – Also referred to as the Gobrin Ice Sheet or simply the Gobrin Glacier, this is a huge glacier that connects the northern edge of Orgoreyn to Gethen's north pole. Together with the Pering Ice, it forms one of Gethen's ice caps.

Ansible Communicator – An Ekumenical communication device that instantly transmits a signal to and from anywhere in the universe.

Foretellers – Handdarata men who are able to predict the future when they work in collaboration with each other.

Yomeshta – A monotheistic Gethenian religion. The Yomeshta worship a single man named **Meshe**, who is said to be able to see the past, present, and future simultaneously. They value light, and scorn darkness.

Handdara – A Gethenian religion interested in the interaction between light and darkness. Although the Handdara have mastered the art of seeing the future through the Foretellers, Handdarata believe no question is worth asking, as everyone already knows the answer to the final question—death. Handdarata believe the only way to keep on living is to live in ignorance, as though they do not know what is coming next.

Sinoth Valley – A contested region on the Orgoreyn/Karhide border. Disputes over this land almost lead the two nations into war.

Landboat – A Gethenian truck that runs on treads instead of wheels. They often travel in long caravans to transport goods across the uneven surface of the planet.

Terra – The interplanetary name for what humans call planet Earth. **Ai**'s home planet.

Fastness – A Handdarata religious retreat. Sometimes Foretellers all live here together, and sometimes they simply gather when it is time to answer a question.

Otherhord – A Karhidish Domain in the west of the nation. Home to a Fastness where **Genly Ai** lives for some time, and where he asks the Foretellers a question.

Mindspeech – Telepathic communication in which it is impossible to lie. Ai has been trained in mindspeech and it is common among Ekuminicals.

Dothe – A form of controlled hysterical strength that can be invoked by practitioners of Handdara. While it typically lasts for an hour at most, disciplined individuals can maintain dothe for hours or even a full day. After dothe strength is used, the body requires a rest period called thangen.

Thangen – The period after an expression of dothe strength in which the practitioner must rest and recover. The longer dothe was in use, the longer thangen takes.

Old Men of the Handdara – Practitioners of Handdara who are rumored to be able to maintain dothe strength for a full day and night.

Nusuth – A Handdara word meaning “no matter.”

Weaver – A key member in a group of Foretellers. The weaver harnesses the energy of his comrades and sublimates it into an answer to whatever question has been asked.

Pervert – A Gethenian who, for unknown reasons, presents as male or female all of the time, as opposed to doing so only when in kemmer. **Ai**, who is biologically male, is sometimes assumed to be a pervert because he presents as male all the time.

Question of Shorth – A legendary question asked to a group of Foretellers that led to the enlightenment of **Meshe**, who then went on to found the religion of Yomeshta. According to legend, a man named Shorth asked some Foretellers the meaning of life. While it drove most of the Foretellers insane, it gave Meshe permanent, clear sight. For the rest of his life, was able to see the past, present, and the future all at once.

Shelt – A port city in Orgoreyn directly across the gulf from Karhide.

Mishnory – The capital of Orgoreyn.

Inspectors – Different kinds of Inspectors appear throughout the novel. All of them, however, have the same kind of job. They are police, border agents, security officers, and law enforcers, committed to making sure everyone in Orgoreyn has their papers in order, and is in the place they are supposed to be.

Sarf – The Orgata secret police. They also wield bureaucratic power and influence Orgoreyn's government.

Open Trade Faction – An Orgota political party that supports an “unaggressive, non-nationalistic policy.” They oppose the

Sinoth Valley dispute, and would like to be able to openly trade with Karhide. **Obsle**, **Yegey**, and **Shusgis** are members of this party.

The Thirty-Three – Thirty-three men who make up the Orgoreyn government. Orgoreyn is made up of thirty-three districts, each of which sends a representative, or Commensal, to the nation's capital.

Commensal – A difficult-to-translate Orgota word, which comes from a word meaning “to eat together.” It refers to the governing body of Orgoreyn, the Heads of District that make up the governing body, and the citizens of Orgoreyn. It refers variously to both the whole (Orgoreyn) and its component parts.

Turuf – A hunting village in the northwestern corner of Orgoreyn.

Mindchange – A chemical or physical lobotomy, and the unfortunate result of such an operation.

Pesthry – A furry mammal that lives on Gethen. It is prized for its soft, warm fur.

Hain – A group of people who colonized much of the known universe hundreds of thousands of years ago.

Kurkurast – A Karhidish fishing village in the country's northwest corner.

Sassinoth – A Karhidish city near the country's western border.

Hermaphroditic Neuter – A person who is neither a man nor a woman, and is incapable of reproduction. All Gethenians are hermaphroditic neuters four-fifths of the time, developing sexual characteristics only during kemmer.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRUTH AND STORYTELLING

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* is written using many different voices and styles. **Ai Genly**, an alien envoy sent to Gethen, and **Estraven**, a native of Gethen, are the primary narrators, and together the two of them present a fairly conventional, chronological story. Other chapters, however, make use of documents such as field reports, religious texts, and folktales to help tell the story. Individually, each of these texts and perspectives sheds light on a single facet of the world of Le Guin's novel, but when taken together, the various viewpoints create an expansive, multifaceted picture of Gethen.

Each type of story—from Ai’s report, to Estraven’s diary, to myths, field notes, and religious works—presents its own version of the truth. Each voice speaks with authority, and although different accounts sometimes come into conflict, the essential truths of the stories resonate even when the literal events they report did not occur. In the very first paragraph of the first chapter, Genly Ai explains, “I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child...that Truth is a matter of the imagination.” From the beginning, then, the narrator demonstrates a keen awareness that all narratives, including his, have elements of fiction within them, suggesting that fiction and storytelling are inseparable even when the story being told is true. Early in the novel Ai also concedes that “the story is not all mine,” thereby acknowledging his limited perspective and opening the narrative to additional, occasionally contradictory, voices. By incorporating more voices in the narrative in this way, the narrative becomes richer and more complicated. Rarely is a single, authoritative, version of the truth presented, as different events and conversations are narrated both from Ai’s perspective and from Estraven’s. While the content of the interaction does not change, the two scenes imagine different subtexts, meanings, and motives, ultimately leaving it to the reader to piece together the truth.

The Left Hand of Darkness contains eight chapters that don’t deal directly with the plot of the story, but instead provide the reader with a richer sense of the history and culture of Gethen, where the story takes place. A chapter called “The Question of Sex,” taken from the field notes of an Investigator, provides detailed information about the biology and behavior of the hermaphroditic Gethenian race. Although the nature of Gethenian sexuality (or lack thereof) has already been alluded to within the primary narrative, this chapter helps provide insight into the ways in which sex and gender have influenced Gethenian culture as a whole. Another chapter, “The Place Inside the Blizzard,” gives readers a better sense of Gethenian cultural norms regarding incest and suicide. Elsewhere, folktales and myths give depth to otherwise drily anthropological accounts of the Gethenian people’s habits and customs. For instance, although ice giants likely did not create Gethen (as suggested in one Orgota creation myth), the myth provides a useful insight into Orgota culture, as it explains the culture’s ideas about the cycle of light and death, and the important role that darkness and **shadows** play in daily life and in mythology.

Le Guin investigates the concept of truth through the subplot involving the Handdarata Foretellers, a group of religious men who work together to answer questions about the future. Ai initially assumes the accuracy of their predictions is the result of chance, or mindreading, but after he has his own question answered he revises his theory. Foretelling, he thinks, is “not so much a prophecy as an observation.” It has the “imperative clarity of a hunch.” That is to say, Foretelling is true, but the

prophecies exist outside of the realm of empirical, verifiable fact. The Handdarta themselves see little use in telling the future or revealing life’s great truths. In their religion, and in the minds of many Gethenians, the one true constant in life is death. In the minds of the Handdarata, the only thing that allows human beings to continue to live in the face of eventual death is an ignorance of the specific facts of their future. In this way, the book establishes a key distinction between truth and fact, suggesting that truth is of greater value, and can even be found in fiction.

While Ai and Estraven never explicitly tell lies in their storytelling, their interpretations of events often differ, and each narrator shapes the narrative through his version of the truth. Ai and Estraven come from vastly different backgrounds, and therefore see the world through vastly different lenses. Their different cultural backgrounds influence how each perceives the world and tells his story, which in turn dramatically alters the reader’s interpretation of events. For example, because Genly Ai does not understand Estraven’s language or culture, he often believes Estraven’s speech to be ironic, or else actively deceptive. Early in the novel Ai describes Estraven as “faithless,” a man who cannot be trusted, only realizing months later that much of the behavior he found suspicious was the result of miscommunication. Estraven is perhaps more aware of the language and communication barrier between himself and Ai, but is no better at navigating it. He realizes late in the novel that “when I thought myself most blunt and frank with him he may have found me most subtle and unclear.” In the chapters written from Ai’s perspective, Estraven seems untrustworthy, but in the chapters drawn from Estraven’s diaries, he reveals himself to be a loyal supporter of Ai’s mission.

Finally, the language characters use to tell their stories also affects how different characters experience the world, altering not only their perception of the truth, but also the reader’s perception of truth. Ai, for example, comes from a world with both men and women, and has difficulty comprehending the sexless nature of Gethenians. He therefore makes the choice to refer to all the residents of the world using masculine pronouns—because, as an earlier Investigator noted in a field report, masculine pronouns (he, him, his) seem less defined, and less specific than female pronouns (she, her, hers) or neutral pronouns (they, them, theirs). However, this decision shapes the reader’s perception of the people of Gethen, for even though the Gethenians have no gender, Ai’s use of male pronouns creates a different perception than the use of neutral or female pronouns would.

The Left Hand of Darkness thus posits that there is no single, objective truth about the world. By using many types of stories told from many perspectives, Le Guin weaves a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of reality, showing that a variety of viewpoints gives a more complete picture than a

single viewpoint ever could. Genly Ai and earlier Investigators can provide an anthropological account of the world, its people, and their observable biology and behavior, but it is the chapters written from Estraven's point of view, and the myths and legends of the Gethenians, that render a *true* depiction of the people of Gethen as fully-formed beings with complex internal lives and centuries of rich culture and tradition.



SEX, GENDER, AND BEHAVIOR

In the 1976 introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin describes her story as a “thought-experiment,” intended not as “predictive,”

but rather as “descriptive” of gender roles on earth at the time of writing. Le Guin wrote her novel in the midst of the Second Wave of feminism, a time when American women were fighting for legal protection for equal rights and equal pay. She saw the ways in which women were mistreated or dismissed, and felt that society was divided into “strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive.” In writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she says in a 1993 essay, she “eliminated gender to find out what was left.” Le Guin hoped that by creating a genderless society she would be able to see how gender shaped culture, by looking at what culture could be when built around something other than a gender binary. In the Gethenians, Le Guin created a society of androgynous neuters, who, for a few days each month, go into kemmer, during which time they develop sex organs, experience sexual desire, and become briefly able to conceive. For 80% of their cycle, Gethenians are neither male nor female (though Ai describes them with masculine pronouns), and during the other 20%, if they are near someone else also kemmering, they will develop either male or female sex organs. In all other ways, however, Gethenians are a genderless society, which of course has a far-reaching impact on their lives and culture.

The people of Gethen are biologically similar to humans (like Ai) in many aspects unrelated to sex. However, Gethenians have developed a radically different society than Terrans (i.e., humans). As an alien Investigator writes, “in the end, the dominant factor in Gethenian life is not sex or any other human thing: it is their environment, their cold world.” Terran societies (as based on Le Guin’s experiences in mid-century America) are segregated according to gender. Only women can become pregnant, and as a result they’re burdened with the majority of childbearing duties. This inequality leads to women being less represented in government and it means that the ruling of the planet is predominantly left to men. By contrast, on Gethen anyone can become pregnant, and since everyone can potentially find themselves rearing a child, Le Guin writes, “no one is quite so thoroughly “tied down” as Terran women. Everyone is “respected and judged only as a human being,” as opposed to as a woman or a man. Ekumenical Investigators

hypothesize that wars fought on Terra are a “purely masculine displacement-activity, a vast Rape.” On Gethen, there is no war, merely competition and political maneuvering, perhaps because Gethenians lack aggressive masculinity. On a more personal scale, Gethenian people are not burdened by gender expectations. Since there are no men and women, one group cannot be stereotypically soft and gentle, or the other aggressive and domineering. The male tendency toward domineering behavior and away from vulnerability can be seen easily in Genly Ai’s character. Estraven observes that Ai “considers crying either evil or shameful,” and he notices that Ai turns his face from him when crying, as if ashamed. Ai, for his part observes that “most Karhidians cry easily, being no more ashamed of tears than of laughter.” Their easy weeping contrasts with his manly stoicism. Estraven also notices that Ai is physically stronger, more likely to take risks, and more temperamental than most Gethenians.

As different as Terran society is from life on Gethen, even on Gethen different nations have adapted in different ways. In the nation of Karhide, children are raised by their parent, either the “parent in the flesh” (the one who became pregnant), or, more rarely, by a monogamous couple who have vowed kemmering to each other and conceived a child. Succession is matrilineal, and the government is based around families. Political power passes from parent to child. This is as true in small villages in Karhide’s rural domains as it is in the country’s central monarchy. In the nation of Orgoryen, the extended family has been “nationalized,” and children over a year old are raised in “Commensal Hearths.” Wealth and status are not passed along a bloodline; instead, each generation must fight for status on its own terms. The government cannot be a monarchy, as there is no direct inheritance, so the nation has instead developed into a vast bureaucracy. In both Gethenian nations, the absence of gender roles influences the societal structure in very different, but equally significant ways.

Genly Ai’s gender, and his familiarity with Terra (where people are born either male or female), impedes his ability to see the Gethenians in all their complexity. Ong Tot Opong, a female Investigator whose report is quoted in one of the novel’s chapters, expresses having similar difficulty in understanding Gethenians. Ai is constantly commenting on the femininity or masculinity of Gethenians he encounters. These words mean nothing to the people he is encountering, and his reaction is not to attempt to understand this alien world, but rather to impose his own beliefs upon it. Ai initially distrusts Estraven because of his perceived “effeminate deviousness,” and only comes to love him when he is able to understand that Estraven is neither fully male nor fully female. In the novel’s final chapters, Ai understands that Estraven had only wanted recognition, acceptance, and to be seen as he is—as an androgynous person—and not how Ai suspiciously perceived him (as “a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man”). However,

prejudice regarding unfamiliar sexualities is not limited to members of the Ekumen. Gethenians, too, view any sexual deviance with suspicion. For instance, people who choose to present as male or female all the time, instead of only during kemmer, are viewed as perverts and cast out from society. Gethenians perceive Ai as an “other” primarily because he looks male all the time, and this occasionally makes people suspicious or distrustful of him and his mission.

Gethenian sexuality influences every aspect of its society. By creating a fictional world in which gender does not exist, Le Guin reveals the multiplicity of ways that gender shapes culture. Gethen is far from a perfect planet, and there is still inequality and prejudice among its inhabitants, but it exists on a much smaller scale than it does on Terra. As an intentionally feminist work, *The Left Hand of Darkness* elevates Gethenian culture over Terran society. Whereas in a world with two genders, one is frequently subjugated, on Gethen all people are equal, with equal opportunity for failure or success, based on their own merit rather than the gender they were assigned at birth.



DUTY AND LOYALTY

Loyalty and duty are the glue that holds Gethenian society together. In a world that is hostile to human life, the bonds of lovers, families, and nations help everyone survive. However, some bonds of loyalty are seen as more honorable than others. Generally, selfless obligations are regarded as admirable and worthy of aspiring to, whereas loyalty to oneself, or loyalty to one group of people at the expense of another group, is reproachable. Estraven and Genly Ai, for example, nobly serve the whole of humanity, and are willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause. In contrast, Tibe, Karhide’s prime minister, cares more about how Karhide can increase his own prestige than that of the nation itself.

Monogamous loving relationships form the foundation of much of Gethenian society. Although marriage is not a legally recognized institution, many couples will vow kemmering to each other, which “socially and ethically is an ancient and vigorous institution.” This relationship implies a duty and responsibility between the two partners, and between the parents and any children they might have, which after many generations can lead to a community held together by webs of familial bonds. In her field notes, an Inspector even hypothesizes “the whole structure of the Karhidish Clan-Hearths and Domains is indubitably based upon the institution of monogamous marriage.” The importance of this foundational relationship is highlighted in many of Gethen’s folktales, which describe the ways in which a loving partnership between two people can act as a catalyst for wider societal peace. For example, in the folktale “Estraven the Traitor,” a kemmering pair from warring tribes uses their love for each other to end a generations-old conflict. In an Orgota creation myth, a

murderous man who has killed most of his siblings vows kemmering to his last living brother (an incestuous pairing acceptable on Gethen). Although a violent story at the beginning, love ends the killing, and allows the two brothers to have many children, who go on to be the inhabitants of Gethen. On an interplanetary scale, although Ai and Estraven never develop an explicitly sexual relationship, their sexual tension leads to “the great and sudden assurance of friendship.” This friendship allows them to collaborate and survive the long Gethenian winter, which eventually allows Ai to incorporate Gethen into the Ekumen. Although both characters serve humanity first of all, Ai recognizes that Estraven also serves him, and that his sacrifices are partially due to “a sense of responsibility and friendship toward one single human being” (that is, Ai).

Love of country can be a positive thing, but Ai and Estraven frequently criticize unbridled xenophobic patriotism. Although they appreciate small-scale loyalties (between lovers) or grander loyalties (to mankind as a whole), nationalism is depicted negatively. Patriotism and nationalism can easily lead to bigotry, and a lack of understanding of other nations. This can lead to violence, which Gethen has managed to avoid for centuries, but seems more likely after the patriotic Tibe rises to power in Karhide. Although on paper, love of one’s country seems benign, it is this aggressive love for the familiar which leads to the vilification of all other nations that almost throws Karhide and the neighboring Orgoreyn into war. Early in the novel, Estraven makes his stance on patriotism clear. He asks Ai if he knows what patriotism is. Ai knows it only to mean “love of one’s homeland,” but Estraven explains that it means “fear. The fear of the other,” a political “hate, rivalry, aggression.” At this point Ai distrusts Estraven because he cannot tell where his loyalty lies, but Estraven makes it clear that he is working for the good of mankind, and “not acting patriotically.”

The highest form of loyalty in the novel is loyalty to mankind as a whole. This loyalty encompasses not only the people of the planet of Gethen, but also all the people in the known universe. At this level, a person’s commitment to mankind outweighs any other priority, including his own wellbeing. Both Ai and Estraven are willing to sacrifice their lives for what they see as the greater good — the induction of Gethen into the Ekumen. Ai is explicit in his allegiance from the beginning, and although Estraven also tries to be clear, Ai doesn’t understand Estraven’s motivations for over two years after they first meet. Many people on Gethen, who, until Ai’s arrival, were not aware there were more people in the universe than those on their planet, are slow to understand Ai (and eventually Estraven)’s mission. King Argaven, for example, knows Estraven is not serving Karhide, and sees him as a traitor. In fact, Estraven “loved his country very dearly,” but serve all countries, and all men, instead of the specific interests of a single Karhidish king. All of Estraven’s plotting, and even his exile, help him on his mission

to get Gethen to join the Ekumen. His own life and his own legacy are of secondary concern. His primary interest is to unite his people with people across the universe. Similarly, Ai's life, although he values it, is essentially disposable. He prefers to live, but he shows a certain apathy when discussing how his death would affect the mission as a whole, describing how, if for some reason he were to lose contact with his ship, they'd send down a Second Envoy in four years to resume his work.

In Gethen, everyone has a final duty to their own pride, and the pride of their peers. Gethenians as a whole, but people in Karhide specifically, practice *shifgrethor*, which roughly translates to “prestige, face, place, [and] the pride-relationship” between people. It is a social code, which governs all Gethenian interactions, and involves a careful dance between people to prevent them from offending one another's pride. *Shifgrethor* boils down to an unspoken assumption of other people's competence, which means that it is rude to offer unsolicited advice, and rude to assume anyone is not knowledgeable in any area. On an individual level, Gethenians practice and respect the *shifgrethor* of each other, but it also governs the political maneuverings of nations.

Duty and loyalty to lovers, to families, and, occasionally, to strangers is what has allowed the people of Gethen to survive for almost thirty thousand years. Ai and Estraven's duty and loyalty to mankind as a whole is what will allow the people of Gethen to survive for thousands more with the help of an interplanetary coordinating body. On Gethen, selfishness is always eventually punished. The most admirable master to serve is a self-less, universal one.



OTHERNESS AND CONNECTEDNESS

A central conflict in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the enormous divide between Ai and the people of Gethen. Each is alien to the other, and must learn to

practice empathy in order to fully collaborate and communicate. Ai's mission is one of connectedness, but it first requires convincing the people of Gethen to join an interplanetary organization they've just heard of and do not understand. This requires Ai to understand the people of Gethen to better advocate for his cause, and for them to accept him as a human being worth listening to. Ai's otherness makes his task more difficult, but it also makes him a perfect narrator. Ai, who was born on Terra (Le Guin's term for earth), is more similar to the reader than the Gethenians are, and so the reader is able to experience their otherness through the lens of an anthropological explorer. However, although Ai and the people of Gethen are very different culturally and biologically, Ai is able to connect with individual Gethenians, which allows him insight into the planet as a whole.

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* viewing people as alien or other can be dangerous. The nations of Orgoreyn and Karhide have existed for centuries in a world without war, but increasing

animosity between the two threatens the peace of the entire planet. For hundreds of years the governments of Orgoreyn and Karhide have regarded the residents of the opposing nation as human beings worthy of respect, under the rule of Prime Minister Tibe, Karhide begins to broadcast on the radio “disparagement of Orgoreyn” and “vilifications of ‘disloyal factions.’” By dehumanizing Orgota citizens, he hopes to mobilize Karhide to commit violence against its neighbor. Similarly, Ai is often called a monster and a pervert, labels that dehumanize him and delegitimize his mission. This threatens his health and wellbeing, but also prevents Gethen from taking advantage of the interplanetary connections he has to offer. Estraven, who shares Ai's mission, is labeled a Traitor, which instantly devalues his life. As a respected Karhidish civil servant he can live easily in his home country, but when he is suspected as working for Orgoreyn a bounty is put on his head.

However, being an alien and an outsider can occasionally be useful. Genly Ai, although he is recognizably human to readers, is an alien and an outlier on Gethen, a lone man on a planet of androgynous sexless people. His otherness isolates him, but it also allows him to more carefully observe. Aspects of daily life, or details of their sexuality are commonplace to Gethenians, but through Ai's eyes, as well as through collected myths and field notes of the Inspectors who came before him, they can be freshly described for the reader. Ai's alienness also means he has no true alliance, and can work without political affiliation, instead dedicating himself to the wellbeing of mankind.

When people come together and connect, their love is powerful enough to unite nations. This kind of love and connectedness is the foundation of much of Gethenian society, and it has a place in many of their founding myths. Love and compassion can bridge the gap between the known and the unknown, the alien and the self. Estraven teaches Ai about the tenets of Handdara, which is a dual religion concerned with both the self and the other. The ideal society is not made up of “We and They,” which implies a separation of an ingroup from an outgroup, and not of “I and It,” which turns one group into inanimate objects or else nonhumans. The ideal society is centered around “I and Thou,” a “mystical” bridge between two beings, “not a body politic, but a body mystic.”

To be an alien, or to be an “other,” simply requires being an outlier amongst a homogenous group. Although Ai is the most recognizably human character, and he begins the novel as a narrator helping readers identify with him, he is in fact the most alien character. Ai is a sexual oddity in a society of primarily nonsexual beings, and this difference is difficult to overcome. Luckily, he is eventually able to form a close relationship with Estraven, and this interpersonal connection instills in him a deeper empathy for Gethenians, which he can then extrapolate to the country at large in order to continue his diplomatic mission. Le Guin makes it clear that extended acts of othering are dangerous, and that a lack of empathy can fracture a nation

or a world, leading to violent conflict. However, a single connection with another person can serve as the basis for national, or even universal alliances and unity.



LIGHT AND DARK, RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

On Gethen, there are two dominant religions. The first is Yomeshta, which follows the teaching of Meshe and resembles a Judeo-Christian religion. The second is Handdara, a spiritual practice closer to Taoism. Yomeshta is centered around the idea of light, and unity. In contrast, Handdara is interested in the interaction of light and dark, and in the way opposites can come together and complement each other. Although both religions are described in depth, the novel more closely aligns itself with the Handdara philosophy. Gethen is a world of both light *and* dark. Its people are both men *and* women. As a result, the Handdara interest in opposites that clarify or balance each other better describes the planet and its inhabitants than does the pure, uncomplicated light of Yomeshta.

Because of its multi-millennia Ice Age, Gethen is a precarious place to live. A few degrees of difference in global temperatures could completely freeze over the planet's narrow inhabitable zone, and a few rash decisions by Gethenian governments could easily send their nations into deadly tailspins. As a result, Gethenian people are slow moving and careful. They tend the land with great attention, they travel at moderate speeds, and they advance technologically at a snail's pace. Ai, as he travels on a twenty-five mile-per-hour truck observes "the people of Winter...feel that progress is less important than presence." He also observes that while "Winter hasn't achieved in thirty centuries what Terra once achieved in thirty decades" it has endured much longer than Terran society possibly could. This is all a reflection of the importance of balance and proportion valued by the Handdarata.

Handdara is a religion of dualism — the self and the other, the known and the unknown, the light and the dark. This explicitly reflects Gethenian sexuality — every person has a dual identity, and is both a man and a woman. In contrast, the Yomeshta say "man's singularity is his divinity," however the narrative makes it clear that Gethenian's divinity comes from their duality. Even the title of the book is a celebration of duality; it comes from a Handdarata proverb, which goes, "Light is the left hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light. / Two are one, life and death, lying / together like lovers in kemmer, / like hands joined together, / like the end and the way." Yomeshta attempts to celebrate only life, but Handdara understands that for life to be properly celebrated, it must be set up in contrast to its opposite, death. Ai compares Handdara, and Gethenians themselves, to the Terran concept of yin and yang. He says, "Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male," each pair of opposites exists within each resident of Gethen.

The Yomeshta and the Handdarata have different perspectives on the usefulness of knowledge. Practitioners of Yomeshta are interested in the concept of clear and total sight, the kind practiced by their enlightened prophet. The Yomeshta look for complete clarity, and are uncomfortable with nuance and complexity. In contrast, practitioners of Handdara are comfortable with complex truths, and are also comfortable with not knowing everything. In Handdara, "ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action." According to its believers, there is only one certainty in life, death, and therefore "the only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next." The most devoted Handdarata believe knowledge is, in the end, essentially futile, and spend their lives trying to become perfectly ignorant. Ai, whose mission requires him to gather knowledge of Gethen, will never be a perfect Handdarata disciple. However his experience with a group of Handdarata Foretellers helps teach him how to ask the right questions, and how to become content with ambiguous answers.

Handdara isn't organized like a traditional religion, and does not have clergymen. The most authoritative religious figures are its Foretellers, men who get together and are able to answer questions about the future. Ai understands these Foretellers as being able to domesticate a hunch, a skill that Estraven has as well, to a lesser extent. Estraven is able to sense when his luck is good and when it is bad, and can feel the wheel of good fortune turning beneath his hand. This phenomenon can be described through Handdara, but there is no framework to describe this kind of skill in Yomeshta.

Handdara is a more useful framework with which to view Le Guin's world. While Yomeshta attempts to shed a light on everything, past present and future, and leaves little room for nuance, Handdara is built upon the idea of balance, of light and darkness working together. Within a Handdarata framework, ambiguity is natural, and a person's knowledge will always remain incomplete. Yomeshta, by framing light as good, necessarily designates darkness as bad. In Handdara, in contrast, there is no good and evil. Instead, the world is a complex place, where opposites can happily coexist, and neither elevated above the other.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



KEYSTONE

A keystone is the central stone in an archway. It provides strength and form to the rest of the structure. In the beginning of the novel, the placing of the keystone (that is, the completion of an arch) represents the

opening of a brand-new River Port, which will enable increased trade for Karhide. Because the keystone is the final piece that completes the archway, it is the symbolic final element that enables an exchange of goods and ideas. Genly Ai's mission on Gethen is like the building of an arch, and he himself describes its completion as setting the keystone in his plan. In Gethen, keystones were historically set using mortar mixed with blood. Ai's mission is completed only with the help of Estraven, who dies for the cause—and in this sense, his blood is the metaphorical mortar that joins Karhide to the Ekumen. The keystone is therefore symbolic of connection, unification, and communication.



SHADOWS

In Gethen there are two primary religions: Yomeshta, which worships the light, and Handdara, which worships balance and darkness. Although both are discussed in the novel, Genly Ai is drawn to Handdara, and discusses in depth its belief that light cannot exist without darkness. Like the concept of yin and yang, which imagines the universe as being made up of opposites that rely upon each other, shadows and darkness exist as the opposite of light. Although light is traditionally aligned with goodness and life, shadows, their opposite, are not inherently *bad*. Shadows provide a useful counterweight and context, making the world clearer than it would be with light alone. This is true metaphorically (when Ai comments that the politicians of Orgoreyn cast no shadow he means that they are insubstantial and untrustworthy) as well as literally (Ai and Estraven's most treacherous days on the Gobrin Ice come during whiteouts, when the snow is so bright there are no shadows, and they cannot safely navigate the terrain). Shadows therefore symbolize not only the Handdara religion, but its emphasis on balance and duality more generally—including, more specifically, the dual nature of Gethenian gender and sexuality.

Chapter 1 Quotes

“I'll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my homeworld that Truth is a matter of the imagination. The soundest fact may fail or prevail in the style of its telling: like that singular organic jewel of our seas, which grows brighter as one woman wears it and, worn by another, dulls and goes to dust. Facts are no more solid, coherent, round, and real than pearls are. But both are sensitive. The story is not all mine, nor told by me alone. Indeed I am not sure whose story it is; you can judge better. But it is all one, and if at moments the facts seem to alter with an altered voice, why then you can choose the fact you like best; yet none of them is false, and it is all one story.”

Related Characters: Genly Ai (speaker), Therem Harth reminds Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These two paragraphs open the novel. Genly Ai, who narrates half of the chapters, introduces himself, and his report of his time as Envoy on the planet Gethen. This report is made up of his recollections of his mission, and is one of two documents, the other being Estraven's diaries, that detail the journey the two men undertake.

Although this report is, within the world of the novel, a work of nonfiction, Ai makes it clear that he will shape his time on Gethen as a “story,” as opposed to a perfectly factual record. He sees the Truth as subjective, something that the reader also sees throughout the novel, as they read both Estraven and Ai's overlapping narratives. Each character has his own biases which shape the way he tells the story. However, as Ai says here, that doesn't make either version of the story less true. Facts and truth are “sensitive,” and Ai is committed to giving *his* definitive account of his time on Gethen, which is not necessarily *the* definitive account.

In addition to laying out the novel's approach to truth and fact, in this passage Ai also introduces the novel's complex structure. The story is not “told by [him] alone”—it also comprises a chorus of voices, each given its own chapter, that gives a multifaceted anthropological view of Gethen, its people, and its mythology. Although some of these supplemental chapters present myths or folktales that run counter to the history of Gethen that Ai has constructed, he makes it clear that they aren't *untrue*. These stories might not be factually accurate, but they do capture something fundamentally true about life on Gethen, and so instead of



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Ace Books edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness* published in 1987.

weakening his (and Le Guin's) primary narrative, they strengthen the story as a whole.

to trust Estraven, he must first accept him for who he is in all matters, including, and especially, his gender.



●● Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? For it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either...but what was it saying?

●● "I'm afraid that Argaven also believes you. But he does not trust you. In part because he no longer trusts me. I have made mistakes, been careless. I cannot ask for your trust any longer, either, having put you in jeopardy. I forgot what a king is, forgot that the king in his own eyes is Karhide, forgot what patriotism is and that he is, of necessity, the perfect patriot. Let me ask you this, Mr. Ai: do you know, by your own experience, what patriotism is?"

"No," I said, shaken by the force of that intense personality suddenly turning itself wholly upon me. "I don't think I do. If by patriotism you don't mean the love of one's homeland, for that I do know."

"No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression. It grows in us, that fear. It grows in us year by year. We've followed our road too far. And you, who come from a world that outgrew nations centuries ago, who hardly know what I'm talking about, who show us the new road—" He broke off. After a while he went on, in control again, cool and polite: "It's because of fear that I refuse to urge your cause with the king, now. But not fear for myself, Mr. Ai. I'm not acting patriotically. There are, after all, other nations on Gethen."

Related Characters: Genly Ai (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

At dinner with Estraven, Genly Ai reflects upon his distrust for the prime minister. This distrust, at its core, is based around Ai's inability to accept the unique Gethenian gender. Ai easily admits that he cannot see the people of Gethen (or "Winter," as he refers to it here) as they see themselves. Whereas Gethenians easily embrace their dual genders, as it is all they've ever known, to Ai, Gethenian sexuality is strange and alien.

In most situations Ai's discomfort with the dual nature of Gethenians is not an issue, however it does become a problem when he tries to interact with Estraven. Estraven, who in situations in both Karhide and Orgoreyn serves as Ai's primary cultural interpreter, requires Ai's total trust. However, Ai is unable to give Estraven what he desires. Because Ai sees Estraven as a man pretending to be a woman, or else a woman pretending to be a man, he cannot help but feel Estraven is dishonest in everything that "he" does. Although Estraven is not pretending, he is simply living his life according to the biology of his people, Ai cannot see this. Because he is so used to the biology of his own world, anything else seems abnormal. However, if Ai is

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), Genly Ai (speaker), King Argaven XV

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Estraven has invited Genly Ai to dinner. Estraven knows he has fallen out of favor with the King, and so although Ai is meeting with Argaven tomorrow, Estraven will be unable to help him further. Estraven tries to explain the various forces at work in the Karhidish government that have caused him to fall out of favor, but Ai doesn't understand the politics.

In this passage, Estraven provides a definition of patriotism that will be useful in examining national loyalty throughout the novel. Instead of seeing patriotism as a love of one's country, Estraven warns Ai about patriotism that is based on fear of the other. If someone cares about their country too much, their love of people like them leads to a fear and hatred of people unlike them. Patriotism easily breeds xenophobia, or fear of people who are not members of the nation of Karhide. Estraven sees that Karhide is on a path



towards violence, where excessive love of country will be used as an excuse to enact violence on nations and people who threaten it.

Ai initially misses the point of this lesson. He sees Estraven's opposition to patriotism as a sign that he has no alliances at all. When Estraven says, "There are, after all, other nations on Gethen," Ai sees this as Estraven revealing he is a traitor. Ai thinks Estraven means that he has no loyalty to Karhide, because he is working in his own best interest. In fact, Estraven is trying to say that his loyalty is to the people of Gethen as a whole. He sees allegiance to Karhide as narrower and more exclusive than the allegiance he feels for all of humanity.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ "...if there were anything these Ekumens wanted from us, they wouldn't have sent you alone. It's a joke, a hoax. Aliens would be here by the thousand."
 "But it doesn't take a thousand men to open a door, my lord."
 "It might to keep it open."
 "The Ekumen will wait till you open it, sir. It will force nothing on you. I was sent alone, and remain here alone, in order to make it impossible for you to fear me."
 "Fear you?" said the king, turning his shadow-scarred face, grinning, speaking loud and high. "But I do fear you, Envoy. I fear those who sent you. I fear liars, and I fear tricksters, and worst I fear the bitter truth. And so I rule my country well. Because only fear rules men. Nothing else works. Nothing else lasts long enough. You are what you say you are, yet you're a joke, a hoax. There's nothing in between the stars but void and terror and darkness, and you come out of that all alone trying to frighten me. But I am already afraid, and I am the king. Fear is king! Now take your traps and tricks and go, there's no more needs saying."

Related Characters: King Argaven XV , Genly Ai (speaker), Thorem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Genly Ai meets with King Argaven to try and convince him to allow Karhide to join the Ekumen. The night before, Estraven warned Ai about the dangers of patriotism, and how excessive patriotism could lead to a fear and dislike of outsiders. Estraven cautioned that this politically motivated fear of strangers would likely interfere with Ai's mission.

During their meeting, it is clear that Ai makes Argaven afraid. If Ai is lying, Argaven fears whoever has manipulated him. If Ai is telling the truth, Argaven fears the vast alien network he represents.

Although Estraven cautioned against letting fear govern a person or a nation, Argaven is happy to let fear be the true ruler of Karhide. He believes that fear makes him and his nation strong. He believes that fear keeps him alert to threats to his power, and to his nation's wellbeing. However, fear has instead cost him a priceless opportunity to join his kingdom to an interstellar trade network. Fear has not protected Argaven; instead it has isolated him. This is what he wants, but he has not considered that isolation protects a nation both from potential enemies and from potential friends.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛☛ "But we in the Handdara don't want answers. It's hard to avoid them, but we try to."
 "Faxe, I don't think I understand."
 "Well, we come here to the Fastness mostly to learn what questions not to ask."
 "But you're the Answerers!"
 "You don't see yet, Genry, why we perfected and practice Foretelling?"
 "No—"
 "To exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question."

Related Characters: Genly Ai , Faxe (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Genly Ai has left the capital of Karhide and traveled to the town of Otherhord. He wants to learn more about one of Gethen's two major religions, Handdara. Otherhord is home to a Fastness, a religious gathering place where Foretellers, who are able to answer questions about the future, occasionally come together. Ai has had a question answered by a group of Foretellers, and now asks one of them, Faxe, about the process.



The core goal of Handdara is true ignorance. It requires its practitioners to embrace *not* knowing the answer to life's questions. Although Foretellers have the ability to answer specific questions about the future, they only answer these

questions in an attempt to demonstrate to the asker that no answer will be truly fulfilling. Even if they provide the exact information requested, the asker will always be left wondering about the details and nuances left out of the answer.

Ai has difficulty understanding a religion based around intentional ignorance. As Envoy, part of his job is to gather knowledge, and answer as many questions about Gethenian culture that members of the Ekumen could potentially have. His mission is partially built around knowledge, and so it is difficult to understand a group of people whose mission in life is the exact opposite. This is a cultural difference Ai must overcome.

“The unknown,” said Faxe’s soft voice in the forest, the unfortold, the unproven, that is what life is based on. Ignorance is the ground of thought. Unproof is the ground of action. If it were proven that there is no God there would be no religion. No Handdara, no Yomes, no hearthgods, nothing. But also if it were proven that there is a God, there would be no religion.... Tell me, Genry, what is known? What is sure, predictable, inevitable—the one certain thing you know concerning your future, and mine?”

Related Characters: Faxe (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Genly Ai has traveled to Otherhord to learn about the Handdara religion. This religion is strange and alien to Ai. Handdara believe there is divinity in ignorance, and its followers are interested in the concept of the unknown. Ai’s role as Envoy, meanwhile, requires him to form relationships and gather information. His very presence on Gethen goes against the core tenants of Handdara. Still, he is interested in finding out more about it, an interest that, ironically, also goes against the Handdara love of ignorance.

Faxe, a Handdara Foreteller, teaches Ai what he can about the religion. He explains that ignorance leads to uncertainty, and in uncertainty lies the core of Handdara. He believes that uncertainty allows all religions to exist, because God remains neither proven nor disproven. Handdara is based on belief, but not on tangible proof, and knowledge would actually destroy it.

Additionally, at their core followers of Handdara know that there are no answers that can change the “predictable,

inevitable” ending to everyone’s life: death. If you will die no matter how much knowledge you acquire and how many questions you answer, then, the Handdara wonder, why bother?

Chapter 7 Quotes

Consider: Anyone can turn his hand to anything. This sounds very simple, but its psychological effects are incalculable. The fact that everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be... “tied down to childbearing,” implies that no one is quite so thoroughly “tied down” here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically. Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make. Therefore nobody here is quite so free as a free male anywhere else.

...Consider: There is no unconsenting sex, no rape. As with most mammals other than man, coitus can be performed only by mutual invitation and consent; otherwise it is not possible. Seduction certainly is possible, but it must have to be awfully well timed.

Consider: There is no division of humanity into strong and weak halves, protective/protected, dominant/submissive, owner/chattel, active/passive. In fact the whole tendency to dualism that pervades human thinking may be found to be lessened, or changed, on Winter.

Related Characters: Ong Tot Opping (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter takes the form of field notes recorded by the Ekumen Investigator Ong Tot Opping. She explored Gethen forty years before Ai comes down as Envoy, and put together materials that he can study to familiarize himself with Gethenian culture. Although this chapter doesn’t directly advance the plot, it provides supplemental information that gives the reader a more complete sense of the people of Gethen.

Opping presents her theory that, in cultures where women are always the child bearers and often the child caretakers, women are given less power, less choice, and less agency generally. On Gethen, everyone has the potential to give birth. Therefore, pregnancy and parenthood aren’t stigmatized, and those who choose to have and raise a child are not marginalized in the same way women are in other

societies.

On Gethen, the average person has more freedom than a woman on Terra, because there isn't gender-based discrimination. However, they are not as free as a Terran man, because there is always the potential they will become pregnant. Because anyone can have a baby, and there are no men and no women, society is not split in half. Oppong suggests that all the basic binaries in human society come from the binary of gender, which splits people into those who nurture and those who don't, those who are soft and those who are hard, those who are protected and those who protect. On Gethen, in contrast, anyone can be strong or weak, soft or hard, neither or both.

☛ Yet you cannot think of a Gethenian as "it." They are not neuters. They are potentials or integrals. Lacking the Karhidish "human pronoun" used for persons in somer, I must say "he," for the same reasons as we use the masculine pronoun in referring to a transcendent god: it is less defined, less specific, than the neuter or the feminine. But the very use of the pronoun in my thoughts leads me continually to forget that the Karhider I am with is not a man, but a manwoman. The First Mobile, if one is sent, must be warned that unless he is very self-assured, or senile, his pride will suffer. A man wants his virility regarded, a woman wants her femininity appreciated, however indirect and subtle the indications of regard and appreciation. On Winter they will not exist. One is respected and judged only as a human being. It is an appalling experience.

Related Characters: Ong Tot Oppong (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter takes the form of field notes written by the Investigator Ong Tot Oppong. It is a supplemental text that doesn't directly advance the novel's plot. Nonetheless, it enriches the reader's sense of the reality of Gethen.

Throughout the novel the people of Gethen are all referred to using the male pronoun (he, his, him). In this passage, Oppong explains why. Oppong's reasoning, that the male pronoun is the closest to a universal pronoun available, reveals Oppong's own biases, as well as those of the English language (and, arguably, Ursula K. Le Guin). The male pronoun is often assumed to be gender-neutral, but by definition it is not.

Using a male pronoun instead a universal pronoun (the



singular they, for example), changes Oppong and Ai's experience on Gethen, and it changes the reader's experience of the world. As Oppong points out in her notes, by using male pronouns, it is easy to forget that any given Gethenian is "not a man, but a manwoman."

It is difficult for members of the Ekumen to understand Gethenian sexuality, even after studying it intensely. Both Oppong and Genly Ai have difficulty being treated as a sexless person, as opposed to being treated as a man or as a woman. Oppong doesn't go into detail, but at other points in the novel Ai is offended by the actions of Gethenians, feeling like he is being talked down to or disrespected. In these situations, the offense is rarely intentional. Instead, Gethenians, having no sense of masculine pride related to physical strength, aggressiveness, or endurance, accidentally treat Ai as someone with their same biology — a hermaphroditic neuter — a man *and* a woman, with none of the hang ups of either.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ Argaven was not sane; the sinister incoherence of his mind darkened the mood of his capital; he fed on fear. All the good of his reign had been done by his ministers and the kyorremy. But he had not done much harm. His wrestles with his own nightmares had not damaged the Kingdom. His cousin Tibe was another kind of fish, for his insanity had logic. Tibe knew when to act, and how to act. Only he did not know when to stop. Tibe spoke on the radio a good deal. Estraven when in power had never done so, and it was not in the Karhidish vein: their government was not a public performance, normally; it was covert and indirect. Tibe, however, orated. Hearing his voice on the air I saw again the long-toothed smile and the face masked with a net of fine wrinkles. His speeches were long and loud: praises of Karhide, disparagements of Orgoreyn, vilifications of “disloyal factions,” discussions of the “Integrity of the Kingdom’s borders,” lectures in history and ethics and economics, all in a ranting, canting emotional tone that went shrill with vituperation or adulation. He talked much about pride of country and love of parentland, but little about shifgrethor, personal pride or prestige. Had Karhide lost so much prestige in the Sinoth Valley business that the subject could not be brought up? No; for he often talked about the Sinoth Valley. I decided that he was deliberately avoiding talk of shifgrethor because he wished to rouse emotions of a more elemental, uncontrollable kind. He wanted to stir up something that the whole shifgrethor-pattern was a refinement upon, a sublimation of. He wanted his hearers to be frightened and angry. His themes were not pride and love at all, though he used the words perpetually; as he used them they meant self-praise and hate. He talked a great deal about Truth also, for he was, he said, “cutting down beneath the veneer of civilization.”

Related Characters: Genly Ai (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), King Argaven XV, Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe (Tibe)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

After traveling for months around Karhide, Ai returns to the capital city. In his absence, King Argaven has become pregnant, and has turned over many of the responsibilities of ruling his country to his cousin, Tibe, the prime minister who took over after Estraven’s exile.

Although Ai believes Argaven is insane, he considers the king’s insanity to be relatively benign. Argaven is ruled by fear, but this fear keeps his country safe and out of conflict. Tibe is also insane, but his fear has become weaponized. He

has decided to use his desire to keep Karhide safe as an excuse to increasingly involve it in violent conflicts with its neighbor Orgoreyn.

Tibe practices the kind of patriotism Estraven warned Ai about earlier in the novel. Tibe cares about Karhide so much that he has ceased to care about human life beyond its borders. His love of country has become a weapon he can wield against people of other nationalities, and against Karhidishers who he does not believe to be loyal enough. He has also begun to chip away at shifgrethor, an important social foundation in Karhide. Shifgrethor, a kind of personal pride, contributes to a degree of individualism in Karhidish culture. By proposing that people abandon shifgrethor in favor of patriotism, he hopes that his constituency will stop seeing each other as living breathing human beings with feelings, and will instead be able to see themselves as anonymous members of the Karhidish state, and their enemies as anonymous combatants who must be destroyed.

Chapter 10 Quotes

☛ Obsle, speaking to persuade others, had said, “Either Karhide will fear the strength this alliance will give us—and Karhide is always afraid of new ways and new ideas, remember—and so will hang back and be left behind. Or else the Erhenrang Government will get up their courage and come and ask to join, after us, in second place. In either case the shifgrethor of Karhide will be diminished; and in either case, we drive the sledge. If we have the wits to take this advantage now, it will be a permanent advantage and a certain one!” Then turning to me, “But the Ekumen must be willing to help us, Mr. Ai. We have got to have more to show our people than you alone, one man, already known in Erhenrang.”

Related Characters: Genly Ai, Obsle (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe (Tibe), King Argaven XV

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 153


Explanation and Analysis

After Genly Ai leaves Karhide for Orgoreyn, he becomes involved with the Orgota government. Some officials believe that he is really an alien and are enthusiastic about helping him with his mission, but their motivation seems to be primarily linked to their desire to improve Orgoreyn’s status relative to Karhide’s. Although Ai’s mission is not political, the Orgota Commensals see him as a political tool

to be manipulated in their centuries-long conflict with Karhide. Ai's offers of interstellar trade and vast archives knowledge from many corners of the universe do not interest Obsle and his compatriots. Although they do not practice the dangerous violent patriotism of Tibe, their power-hungry plotting narrows their vision to the present place and present time. They are unable to think about the future of their planet, as opposed to the future of their nation.

☛ If you play against your own side you'll lose the whole game. That's what these fellows with no patriotism, only self-love, can't see.

Related Characters: Commissioner Shusgis (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), Genly Ai

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

During Ai's stay in Orgoreyn, he is taken in by some Orgota Commensals living in the nation's capital. Estraven is also staying in Mishnory, although the two rarely interact. Ai distrusts Estraven, and doesn't understand his motivations. Shusgis, a Commensal, similarly distrusts Estraven. Shusgis sees Estraven, who first worked for Karhide and is now collaborating with Orgoreyn, as working not for a nation out of a sense of patriotism, but for his own political advancement.

However, Estraven's motivations are not self-serving. Although it is true that he has no patriotism, he sees patriotism as a dangerous thing, a weapon that can be wielded violently against a nation's enemies. He is not patriotic because he doesn't only respect the citizens of a single country—instead his loyalty is to Gethen as a whole. Estraven, who believes in Ai and supports his mission, seems to have no true master because his master is humanity in general. A single nation is but a fraction of humanity, and so he feels no need to operate within a single government.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ He knew I was angry but I am not sure he understood that he was insulted; he seemed to *accept* my advice despite the manner of its giving; and when my temper cooled I saw this, and was worried by it. Is it possible that all along in Erhenrang he was seeking my advice, not knowing how to tell me that he sought it? If so, then he must have misunderstood half and not understood the rest of what I told him by my fireside in the Palace, the night after the Ceremony of the Keystone. His shifgrethor must be founded, and composed, and sustained, altogether differently from ours; and when I thought myself most blunt and frank with him he may have found me most subtle and unclear.

His obtuseness is ignorance. His arrogance is ignorance. He is ignorant of us: we of him. He is infinitely a stranger, and I a fool, to let my shadow cross the light of hope he brings us.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker), Ashe Foreth, Genly Ai

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

After Genly Ai arrives in Orgoreyn and travels to its capital city, he reencounters Estraven, who has also traveled to Mishnory. Ai has brought money for Estraven from his former kemmering, Ashe. Ai gives Estraven the money rudely, transactionally, offending Estraven's shifgrethor.

In this chapter, narrated by Estraven, he first recounts the insult he felt at Ai's behavior, and then an insult he attempted to pay Ai. In Gethenian culture, giving advice is rude, as it assumes the incompetence of the receiving party. However, when Estraven offers Ai advice as an insult, Ai seems genuinely interested in hearing what Estraven had to say. This represents a key difference in the two characters' cultures. Ai, a stranger in a strange land, is constantly seeking out the advice of native Gethenians. Estraven, who has been behaving according to the social code he knows best, has been reluctant to offer Ai advice, because he did not want to insult him.

Genly and Estraven, although they have been working together for months, have been talking past each other, unable to understand the nuances of the other's speech. In this moment, Estraven realizes how different he and Ai are. Estraven had assumed Ai understood the rules of shifgrethor and social interaction. However, it has suddenly become clear to Estraven that although he has been


treating Ai as an equal, Ai is an alien, who has been ignorantly, innocently navigating Gethen, unaware of the subtleties of Gethenian politics or pride.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞☞ Darkness is only in the mortal eye, that thinks it sees, but sees not. In the Sight of Meshe there is no darkness. Therefore those that call upon the darkness are made fools of and spat out from the mouth of Meshe, for they name what is not, calling it Source and End. There is neither source nor end, for all things are in the Center of Time. As all the stars may be reflected in a round raindrop falling in the night: so too do all the stars reflect the raindrop. There is neither darkness nor death, for all things are, in the light of the Moment, and their end and their beginning are one. One center, one seeing, one law, one light! Look now into the Eye of Meshe!

Related Characters: Meshe

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis


This chapter is excerpted from “The Sayings of Tuhulme the High Priest,” described as “a book of the Yomesht Canon.” This chapter doesn’t directly advance the narrative, but it does provide useful background information on one of Gethen’s two primary religions.

In the Yomesht religion, Meshe is a prophet and the center of everything. He can see the past, present, and future, and so exists in the perpetually illuminated center of time and space. This religion, unlike Handdara, worships the light. Whereas in Handdara, darkness and shadows give essential context to light and life, in Yomeshta light is the only thing that matters. In Handdara, followers believe that not every question can be answered, and that answers to many questions do not matter, Yomeshta is built around the principle that every question *can* be answered, and total knowledge will lead to enlightenment. In Handdara, darkness is everywhere, the beginning and the end. In Yomeshta, darkness is something mortals have to deal with, but divinity is defined by light.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☞☞ The luck that had turned in Ethwen now turned the world with it under my hand. I never had a gift but one, to know when the great wheel gives to a touch, to know and act. I had thought that foresight lost, last year in Erhenrang, and never to be regained. A great delight it was to feel that certainty again, to know that I could steer my fortune and the world’s chance like a bobsled down the steep, dangerous hour.

Related Characters: Thorem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

As Estraven prepares to rescue Genly Ai from his prison camp, he feels as though he is riding a wave of good fortune. Estraven is a practitioner of Handdara, and although this extrasensory sensitivity is not a specific aspect of that religion, it does relate to the way in which Foretellers can “tame” hunches into predictions about the future. Estraven can sense what decisions will help him and which will hurt him, and can manipulate these intuitions.

Back in Karhide, Estraven’s exile and subsequent flight to Orgoreyn was marked by a distinct lack of foresight and luck. He is happy to have regained his talent for steering “fortune and the world’s chance” once again.

☞☞ “But for what purpose—all this intriguing, this hiding and power-seeking and plotting—what was it all for, Estraven? What were you after?”
 “I was after what you’re after: the alliance of my world with your worlds. What did you think?”
 We were staring at each other across the glowing stove like a pair of wooden dolls.
 “You mean, even if it was Orgoreyn that made the alliance—?”
 “Even if it was Orgoreyn. Karhide would soon have followed. Do you think I would play shifgrethor when so much is at stake for all of us, all my fellow men? What does it matter which country wakens first, so long as we waken?”

Related Characters: Thorem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) , Genly Ai (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

After Estraven has rescued Ai from his prison camp, the two men share a tent in the forest and recover from their separate exertions. Ai is confused as to who Estraven owes his loyalty. Ai still distrusts Estraven, and sees him as constantly scheming and plotting. Although Estraven has likely saved Ai's life, Ai still sees him as someone who cannot be relied upon.

In this passage, for the first time, Ai expresses his confusion to Estraven. Estraven explains that his mission is Ai's mission. He does not serve himself or his nation, but instead he serves Gethen, and mankind as a whole. He believes the best thing for the people of Gethen is connecting to the Ekumen. He has plotted not to help or hurt a single nation, but instead to unite all of Gethen's nations with the wider universe. Estraven's political subterfuge is merely a means to an end, the end being the alliance of Karhide or Orgoreyn with the Ekumen, which would eventually lead to the alliance of all of Gethen with the Ekumen.

Although Estraven likely tried to communicate this to Ai during their early months together in Karhide, cultural differences prevented each from understanding the other. Estraven didn't understand why Ai did not trust him, and Ai did not understand that Estraven could be fully trusted.

Throughout the novel other characters wonder what Estraven's motivations are. At his core, he cares about mankind as a whole, and works to unite Gethen with the Ekumen, which he believes will bring a brighter future to his people.



Even once Ai understands Estraven's allegiances, he still wonders if he prefers Karhide to Orgoreyn. Estraven is surprised by this question; he has never felt hatred for another nation, nor has he ever loved one. He believes it is possible to love the components that make up a nation, but doesn't love the nation as a concept. Estraven sees the love of country and the embrace of patriotism as also a hatred of "uncountry" and an embrace of violence towards outsiders. Because he sees the two things as interlinked, he avoids both.

When Estraven says he hopes he is "ignorant," he refers partially to the word as readers know it to be defined. That is, he hopes he remains free of dangerous patriotism. However, he also refers to the Handdara principle of ignorance. This is a kind of divinity and spiritual clarity, attained through the absence of knowledge and a conscious "unknowing."

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛ ...Hate Orgoreyn? No, how should I? How does one hate a country, or love one? Tibe talks about it; I lack the trick of it. I know people, I know towns, farms, hills and river and rocks, I know how the sun at sunset in autumn falls on the side of a certain plowland in the hills; but what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's uncountry? Then it's not a good thing. Is it simply self-love? That's a good thing, but one mustn't make a virtue of it, or a profession...Insofar as I love life, I love the hills of the Domain of Estre, but that sort of love does not have a boundary-line of hate. And beyond that, I am ignorant, I hope.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker), King Argaven XV, Pemmer Harge rem ir Tibe (Tibe), Genly Ai

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

☛ "Is it going to be 'Mr.' clear across the Gobrin Ice?"
He looked up and laughed. "I don't know what to call you."
"My name is Genly Ai."
"I know. You use my landname."
"I don't know what to call you either."
"Harth."
"Then I'm Ai—Who uses first names?"
"Hearth-brothers, or friends," he said, and saying it was remote, out of reach, two feet from me in a tent eight feet across. No answer to that. What is more arrogant than honesty? Cooled, I climbed into my fur bag. "Good night, Ai," said the alien, and the other alien said, "Good night, Harth."
A friend. What is a friend, in a world where any friend may be a lover at a new phase of the moon? Not I, locked in my virility: no friend to Therem Harth, or any other of his race. Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, lunar, metamorphosing under the hand's touch, changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven), Genly Ai (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis



After Estraven has rescued Genly Ai from the Orgota prison camp, the two plan their escape to Karhide, across an enormous glacier. Although the pair have known each other for at least a year, and at this point have begun an adventure together, they still refer to each other formally. Estraven calls Ai “Mr. Ai,” and Ai refers to Estraven by his last name as well.

Now that they’ve gotten to know each other a little better, the two decide to use slightly less formal names. The Mr. is dropped from Mr. Ai, and Estraven suggests Ai use his middle name, Harth. By addressing each other more informally, the two become closer, but there is still a space between them. They notably do not use each other’s first names — Genly (for Ai) and Therem (for Estraven).

Estraven’s explanation for why two people would use first names (because they were siblings or friends), underscores how, although his relationship with Ai has drastically improved, it still has a long way to go before being intimate, or even technically friendly. By maintaining this separation, the two men remain acquaintances, and refuse to progress their relationship into true friendship.

Ai, meanwhile, doesn’t believe he and Estraven could ever be friends. For him, Estraven’s mercurial gender is too hard to understand, and he fears that Estraven, who he cannot see as both a man and a woman, will become more womanly, and ruin any platonic friendship the pair managed to develop. Because there is always the possibility of a sexual relationship as long as Estraven’s gender presentation remains fluid, Ai does not fully trust him, or his friendship.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) , Genly Ai (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

As Estraven and Ai cross the Gobrin Ice together, each learns more about the other’s culture than he anticipated. More than anything, however, each learns about the other’s experiences of gender, and about how being a man, versus being a “manwoman” (as Le Guin describes Gethenians) affects a person’s behavior.

In this scene Estraven has noticed that Ai seems sick and tries to take care of him. Ai, although ill, sees this as an insult to his masculinity. He knows he is more masculine than the androgynous Estraven, and so finds it offensive that someone less masculine than him would be attempting to control the situation.

Luckily, the two work it out. Estraven, who lives on a planet without men or women, is unused to masculine pride. He merely wanted to help his friend, who seemed sick, and gender did not factor into this. Ai eventually realizes this, and understands how his biases regarding gender shaped how he saw Estraven’s behavior. He also realizes that Estraven has made concessions regarding his own pride and shifgrethor, and decides that if Estraven can make that sacrifice, he can work on his own alien masculine pride.

●● I was galled by his patronizing. He was a head shorter than I, and built more like a woman than a man, more fat than muscle; when we hauled together I had to shorten my pace to his, hold in my strength so as not to out-pull him: a stallion in harness with a mule—

“You’re no longer ill, then?”

“No. Of course I’m tired. So are you.”

“Yes, I am,” he said. “I was anxious about you. We have a long way to go.”

He had not meant to patronize. He had thought me sick, and sick men take orders. He was frank, and expected a reciprocal frankness that I might not be able to supply. He, after all, had no standards of manliness, of virility, to complicate his pride.

On the other hand, if he could lower all his standards of shifgrethor, as I realized he had done with me, perhaps I could dispense with the more competitive elements of my masculine self-respect, which he certainly understood as little as I understood shifgrethor...

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ There is a frailty about him. He is all unprotected, exposed, vulnerable, even to his sexual organ, which he must carry always outside himself; but he is strong, unbelievably strong. I am not sure he can keep hauling any longer than I can, but he can haul harder and faster than I—twice as hard. He can lift the sledge at front or rear to ease it over an obstacle. I could not lift and hold that weight, unless I was in dothe. To match his frailty and strength, he has a spirit easy to despair and quick to defiance: a fierce impatient courage. This slow, hard, crawling work we have been doing these days wears him out in body and will, so that if he were one of my race I should think him a coward, but he is anything but that; he has a ready bravery I have never seen the like of. He is ready, eager, to stake life on the cruel quick test of the precipice. “Fire and fear, good servants, bad lords.” He makes fear serve him. I would have let fear lead me around by the long way. Courage and reason are with him. What good seeking the safe course, on a journey such as this? There are senseless courses, which I shall not take; but there is no safe one.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

As Estraven and Genly Ai cross the Gobrin Ice together, each learns about the other. Although Estraven has had time to observe Ai, and has read reports about his biology written by Karhidish scientists, living in close proximity to Ai gives him a chance to fully explore and embrace the ways in which the two are different.


Genly Ai is biologically male. On Gethen, there are no men, and there are no women, and so Ai stands out as strange and alien. Although Ai's gender is familiar to readers, by having Estraven describe him, Le Guin makes her audience reconsider what masculinity (both physical and behavioral) looks like to an outsider. In Estraven's eyes, Ai, full of testosterone, is much stronger than the average Gethenian. However, with his strength come more powerful emotions than many Gethenians experience, including courage, anger, impatience, and pride. With no single gender, Gethenians are not attached to their masculinity or femininity. In contrast, much of Ai's identity comes from the fact that he is a man. Estraven sees some of the downsides of Ai's masculinity, but he also believes that Ai is braver than he is. Whereas Estraven is measured and cautious, Ai is

(relatively) rash and fearless.

Through Estraven's narration, Ai's gender is clearly illuminated and evaluated. In contrast, Ai rarely reflects upon his maleness in the chapters he narrates, and so much of the nuance of his gendered behavior is lost to the reader. Since Ai is used to being a man, he rarely reflects upon it. It is only through the perspective of an outsider, who is new to the concept of men, that the reader is given a complete view of one of the novel's protagonists.

☞ After all he is no more an oddity, a sexual freak, than I am; up here on the Ice each of us is singular, isolate, I as cut off from those like me, from my society and its rules, as he from his. There is no world full of other Gethenians here to explain and support my existence. We are equals at last, equal, alien, alone. He did not laugh, of course. Rather he spoke with a gentleness that I did not know was in him. After a while he too came to speak of isolation, of loneliness.

Related Characters: Genly Ai, Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis


As Estraven and Genly Ai cross the Gobrin Ice together, they at once realize the ways in which they are similar and different. The treacherous journey forces the two to become close friends, and to trust each other. However, it also forces them to truly consider how alien the other one is. On Gethen, Ai was the only one of his kind, and therefore an alien and an outlier. But to him, every Gethenian was alien. Now, alone on the ice, both of them the only representative of their race, they see how each is equally strange to the other.

☞ *Light is the left hand of darkness
and darkness the right hand of light.
Two are one, life and death, lying
together like lovers in kemmer,
like hands joined together,
like the end and the way.*

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven

(Estraven) (speaker), Genly Ai

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis



This is a Handdara saying that Estraven shares with Genly Ai as the two cross the Gobrin Ice together. The Handdarata believe that both light and darkness are important aspects of life. This short religious poem reiterates this belief, illustrating the yin and yang of light and dark. Life and death, darkness and light each require its opposite to exist fully. Shadows give context to an otherwise white and snowy world, whereas light carves out meaning in the darkness.

The novel's title is drawn from this passage. It refers to the balance at the center of the Handdara religion, but also to the duality of Gethen's people, and, perhaps, the duality of *all* people. It refers to the beauty that comes when opposites join together, whether that refers to men and women in a single body, or two individuals from different backgrounds, like Ai and Estraven.

This passage has additional narrative significance, as Estraven writes in his journal that his late brother wrote these words to him in a letter before his death. This poem was once shared between lovers, and now, by sharing it with Ai, Estraven suggest that their relationship has become even more intimate.

☝ After he had stared a long time at the glowing stove, he shook his head. "Harth," he said, "I can't tell you what women are like. I never thought about it much in the abstract, you know, and—God!—by now I've practically forgotten. I've been here two years....You don't know. In a sense, women are more alien to me than you are. With you I share one sex, anyhow...." He looked away and laughed, rueful and uneasy. My own feelings were complex, and we let the matter drop.

Related Characters: Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) , Genly Ai (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

As Genly Ai and Estraven cross the Gobrin Ice together, they have many months during which to talk about their respective cultures. Estraven, having grown up on a planet full of androgynous people who are both men and women, has never seen a woman. He asks Ai what women are like, and Ai realizes that he has no good way to describe them. This is partially because, after years on Gethen, he's begun to see Gethenians as "normal," forgetting what a society with men and women even looks like. This is also partially because, as a man, he never truly considered or understood women, who in his binary-based society were alien to him. This moment is intentionally ironic; on an alien planet, Ai understands literal aliens more than he understands female members of his own race, with whom he has spent his entire life. This speaks to the gender divide on earth, and in real life, which inspired Le Guin to create the androgynous Gethenians.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☝ And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted. For he was the only one who had entirely accepted me as a human being: who had liked me personally and given me entire personal loyalty, and who therefore had demanded of me an equal degree of recognition, of acceptance. I had not been willing to give it. I had been afraid to give it. I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man.

Related Characters: Genly Ai (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

For the first time, as the pair cross the Gobrin Ice, Ai is finally able to see Estraven as Estraven sees himself. For years, Ai has seen Gethenians as alien. Although they are both male and female, each a "manwoman" as opposed to a man or a woman, Ai has always seen them as men pretending to be women, or women pretending to be men. By viewing the people of Gethen through this biased lens, Ai always saw them as inherently untrustworthy. This was

especially true in regard to Estraven, who saw and understood Ai and his masculinity, and requested the same kind of open-mindedness from Ai. Ai, called upon to see Estraven as a full, complex human being, had refused. The idea that Estraven was partially a woman and partially a man was too much for him to consider, likely in no small part because it opened up the possibility of sexual attraction between the two.

However, sharing a tent, traversing a glacier, and exposing themselves emotionally and physically to each other has finally allowed Ai to see Estraven's full self: a man *and* a woman, no less trustworthy because of his complexity.

blindingly white snow, is impossible to navigate. It is only darkness, here manifested as shadows, that allow Ai and Estraven to continue forward.

This contrast is true in all aspects of life if seen through the lens of Handdara. Ai realizes that the balance described by Estraven can be represented through the yin-yang symbol: half a circle is colored black, the other half white, but a dot in each half contains the opposite color. The circle can only be completed by the combination of two opposites. Life on Gethen is this way as well. It is made up of contrasts, and Gethenians themselves contain the duality of masculinity and femininity, cold and warm, light and dark.


Chapter 19 Quotes


☛☛ “Fear’s very useful. Like darkness; like shadows.” Estraven’s smile was an ugly split in a peeling, cracked brown mask, thatched with black fur and set with two flecks of black rock. “It’s queer that daylight’s not enough. We need the shadows, in order to walk.”

“Give me your notebook a moment.”

He had just noted down our day’s journey and done some calculation of mileage and rations. He pushed the little tablet and carbon-pencil around the Chabe stove to me. On the blank leaf glued to the inner back cover I drew the double curve within the circle, and blacked the yin half of the symbol, then pushed it back to my companion. “Do you know that sign?” He looked at it a long time with a strange look, but he said, “No.” “It’s found on Earth, and on Hain-Davenant, and on Chiffewar. It is yin and yang. *Light is the left hand of darkness...how did it go?* Light, dark. Fear, courage. Cold, warmth. Female, male. It is yourself, Therem. Both and one. A shadow on snow.”

Related Characters: Genly Ai , Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven) (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

As Ai and Estraven cross the Gobrin Ice together, Estraven teaches Ai about the religion of Handdara. In this religion, both darkness and light are valued (this is in contrast to Gethen’s other dominant religion, Yomeshta, which only values light). In Handdara light and darkness must exist together. Light is given context by the darkness, darkness contrast through light. Pure light, like a blizzard, or

☛☛ We stayed two more days in Kurkurast, getting well fed and rested, waiting for a road-packer that was due in from the south and would give us a lift when it went back again. Our hosts got Estraven to tell them the whole tale of our crossing of the Ice. He told it as only a person of an oral-literature tradition can tell a story, so that it became a saga, full of traditional locutions and even episodes, yet exact and vivid, from the sulphurous fire and dark of the pass between Drumner and Dremegole to the screaming gusts from the mountain-gaps that swept the Bay of Guthen; with comic interludes, such as his fall into the crevasse, and mystical ones, when he spoke of the sounds and silences of the Ice, of the shadowless weather, of the night’s darkness. I listened as fascinated as all the rest, my gaze on my friend’s dark face.

Related Characters: Genly Ai (speaker), Therem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the few instances of oral storytelling within the story itself. The structure of the novel incorporates various kinds of storytelling, but at their core they are all variations of written and recorded history or mythology.

Genly Ai has mentioned before that Gethen has a strong oral-history tradition, and that major news is shared on the radio, and rarely in books or newspapers. However, this is the first time a major character transforms events that the reader has already read into an oral epic. Although the reader doesn’t get to hear the story (as they have already read the events in the preceding chapters), they get a sense of a version of the story different than the one they experienced. Instead of a report and a series of diary

entries, Estraven transforms his experiences on the Gobrinn Ice into an epic saga. This version of their journey is true, just as the written accounts are true. Each version of the story represents a different kind of truth telling, but both provide an important perspective on the same events.

Chapter 20 Quotes

●● “Why the devil did he cheat me?” he demanded in his high strident voice, and for the first time looked straight at me.

“Who?” I said, sending back his stare.

“Estraven.”

“He saw to it that you didn’t cheat yourself. He got me out of sight when you began to favor a faction unfriendly to me. He brought me back to you when my return would in itself persuade you to receive the Mission of the Ekumen, and the credit for it.”

“Why did he never say anything about this larger ship to me?”

“Because he didn’t know about it: I never spoke to anyone of it until I went to Orgoreyn.”

“And a fine lot you chose to blab to there, you tow. He tried to get the Orgota to receive your Mission. He was working with their Open Traders all along. You’ll tell me that was not betrayal?”



“It was not. He knew that, whichever nation first made alliance with the Ekumen, the other would follow soon: as it will: as Sith and Perunter and the Archipelago will also follow, until you find unity. He loved his country very dearly, sir, but he did not serve it, or you. He served the master I serve.”

“The Ekumen?” said Argaven, startled.

“No. Mankind.”

As I spoke I did not know if what I said was true. True in part; an aspect of the truth. It would be no less true to say that Estraven’s acts had risen out of pure personal loyalty, a sense of responsibility and friendship towards one single human being, myself. Nor would that be the whole truth.

Related Characters: King Argaven XV, Genly Ai (speaker), Thorem Harth rem ir Estraven (Estraven)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

After Ai has sent a message to his spaceship, and after Estraven has died trying to cross the border into Orgoreyn, Ai returns to the capital of Karhide. He meets with the King, who now believes in Ai’s mission and is happy to collaborate with him. However, although Argaven now believes that Ai was telling him the truth the whole time, he still believes Estraven was a lying traitor.

Argaven sees the world in black and white: either someone supports him, or they are against him. Estraven was neither for nor against Argaven and Karhide; his mission was simply larger than the nation itself. Argaven sees Estraven’s actions as disloyal, because they did not specifically benefit him. In reality, Estraven was working on behalf of all of mankind, and all of Gethen, which would necessarily benefit Argaven as well. However, because Estraven didn’t privilege Karhide over Orgoreyn, Argaven sees him as a traitor. As Estraven has warned throughout the novel, patriotism is dangerous, and narrows one’s mind. Argaven, deeply patriotic, is unable to understand Estraven’s mission even when it is carefully explained to him.

At the same time, although Estraven originally operated out of an obligation to the human race, after his time on the ice with Ai, their small-scale personal connection became as important as his large-scale mission. Love and friendship for one man drove him just as much as love and friendship for mankind.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Genly Ai has written a report describing his time on the planet Gethen. He explains he will present this report as a story, which will best present the truth of his experiences, if not the literal facts of his time as Envoy. Facts are sensitive, he continues, and change depending on how they are presented. Ai concedes “the story is not all mine, nor told by me alone.” Different voices will present different facts, which will all weave together into a single story.

The action begins with Genly Ai walking in a parade in Erhenrang, the capital of Karhide. It is raining, although that has not stopped the celebration. Ai observes the various groups participating in the parade: there are representatives from the Domains and Co-Domains of Karhide, jugglers, and musicians, but notably no soldiers. Ai marches in the parade with the royal party. This is composed of guards, ambassadors, and the King himself, King Argaven XV. Behind the King walk ceremonial guards carrying foray guns, a group of men who Ai refers to as “Death.”

Ai and the royal party gather on a platform next to the unfinished Arch of the River Gate. The finishing of the arch, and the River Gate itself, represents an expansion of trading possibilities. The King lays the **keystone** into the arch, and Ai is surprised that instead of briefly miming manual labor, Argaven works seriously at the task for many minutes. The keystone is laid with red mortar, and Ai asks Estraven, who is standing next to him, why red mortar is used. Estraven explains keystones used to be set with human blood, but now they use the blood of animals.

Ai is bored watching the King work, but he notices the people of Karhide are patient. He is uncomfortable because the sun has come out and he is briefly hot—a sensation, he notes, he will never feel again on Gethen.

From the beginning, The Left Hand of Darkness presents itself as a tale told by many voices, in many styles. While the events depicted are technically “true” within the world of the novel, each narrator interprets and presents the truth in a different way. Although each individual account is biased, they all add up to create a comprehensive whole.



Ai watches the parade as an alien observer. Although he marches in it, he remains an outsider. This is partially because he feels himself to be “other,” and partially because the people of Karhide see and know him to be an alien. On Gethen there is no war, and therefore no need for a military. While on Terra, this parade would likely have a significant military presence, in Karhide it has only a contingent of ceremonial guards, carrying outdated ceremonial weapons.



Argaven is a different kind of royalty than Ai is used to dealing with. This underscores how little Ai knows about Gethenians. Instead of being too prideful to engage in manual labor, the King genuinely and enthusiastically works to complete the arch. The laying of a keystone bookends the novel. Here, it is a literal keystone, whose laying physically completes the port, and signifies that it is open to trade and to expand the kingdom’s influence.



Unused to Gethenian weather, Ai is often uncomfortable when others are perfectly content. This is true regarding the climate, but also applies to various social and behavioral protocols.



Ai passes time by asking Estraven about the assembled Domains and Clans. He is impressed by Estraven's knowledge, but Estraven explains it is his job to know the Domains. The Domains, he continues, are Karhide, and Karhide is "not a nation but a family quarrel."

A member of the kyorremy named Tibe (the King's cousin) interrupts Ai's conversation so that he can talk to Estraven. Ai can tell the two men do not get along, but doesn't understand the politics. Still, in the Ekumen, power is subtle and complex, so Ai is familiar enough to be interested in what he sees as "old-fashioned" political intrigue. Ai reveals that he distrusts Estraven, whose authority he recognizes but whose motives he doesn't understand.

The parade ends when the King finishes laying the stones. As the royal party disperses, Estraven invites Ai to dinner. Ai is surprised because even though Estraven has helped him over the past months, they are not close. Ai suspects this is some kind of "effeminate intrigue," which annoys him.

As Ai walks home he is noticed by native Gethenians, who recognize him by his height. Although this recognition is part of his job, he admits he often "longed for anonymity," and "to be like everybody else."

Tibe intercepts Ai as he walks. They talk about the ceremony, and Ai says he appreciates Estraven's explanation of events. Tibe comments that Estraven is "famous for his kindness to foreigners." Ai remarks that as an alien, he's the most foreign a person could possibly be—a fact Tibe has forgotten. Tibe jokes that Ai would be safer if he forgot too, and then gets in a car to visit the King. Ai understands that the conversation is somehow significant, but he doesn't understand any of the double meaning in Tibe's speech.

Ai distrusts Estraven, although he respects that he seems to be good at his job. The two people are only able to connect professionally, not personally. The structure of Karhidish loyalty is new to Ai, and proves useful in understanding how the government works, and how he can win the trust of the people.



As an outsider, Ai recognizes the complicated politics of Karhide but does not understand them. Although his job is to decipher this alien government and convince it to cooperate with him, his lack of understanding translates to a lack of empathy, which makes it difficult for him to do his job, or understand when he fails to complete a task.



Some of Ai's distrust of Estraven stems from his inability to see him as truly androgynous. Instead, to Ai, Estraven's dual sexuality seems duplicitous. Additionally, Ai doesn't understand the political scheming that takes place in Karhide. Although all members of government engage in it, he seems to distrust Estraven more than he distrusts anyone else because he cannot pinpoint to whom he owes his loyalty.



Although a key part of Ai's job is working on an alien world, where he will inevitably be recognized as alien himself, it takes a toll on him. Being an outsider at once makes him the center of attention and isolates him, preventing him from making a connection with the native Gethenians.



When Tibe refers to Estraven's "kindness to foreigners," he is implying that Estraven's loyalties lie outside of Karhide, and that he is a traitor. However, Ai, who understands little about Karhidish politics, doesn't understand this innuendo. He assumes Tibe is referring to Estraven's relatively friendly relationship with Ai.



Ai returns to his boarding house, known as an island, and eats dinner, the third of four meals Karhidish people eat each day. Ai feels like he is constantly eating, but notes that he will soon discover that “the Gethenians have perfected the technique not only of perpetually stuffing, but also of indefinitely starving.”

In the evening, Ai walks past the palace to Estraven’s house. Ai thinks the architecture of the palace, with its walls and dungeons representing “centuries of paranoia on a grand scale.” Estraven greets Ai outside and brings him in to his home. Ai is surprised to discover he is the only guest.

Although Ai has been on Gethen for two years, he admits he has trouble seeing Gethenians “through their own eyes” as truly androgynous people. Instead, he sometimes sees them as men, sometimes as women. He considers again how he distrusts Estraven, and wonders whether this is because he distrusts his perceived femininity, or some kind of false masculinity. Ai considers that it might be his own attitude towards Estraven that is confused, which leads to a feeling of distrust.

Estraven apologizes to Ai for waiting so many months to invite him to his home, but explains that it is more appropriate now that they are no longer political collaborators. Ai is confused, and Estraven explains that he will no longer be acting as an intermediary between Ai and the King. For the past months Estraven has believed Ai’s story about his origin and mission as Envoy, and helped get him recognized by the Karhidish government. Ai is confused as to why now, a day before he is to meet with the King, Estraven is seemingly withdrawing his support.

Ai wonders if Estraven’s behavior is related to shifgrethor, in which case he doesn’t hope to understand it. Estraven points out that the King didn’t speak to him during the parade, and implies he is now out of favor because of his attempt to mitigate a conflict between Karhide and Orgoreyn in the Sinoth Valley. Ai thinks this information irrelevant, and is frustrated that an issue he sees as terrestrial and trivial is influencing his grander mission.

Almost everything in Gethen reminds Ai that he is an outsider. The weather, the way people eat, the way people live, and even the way people are able to tolerate conditions (extreme cold, extreme hunger) that are extremely uncomfortable for Ai.



Ai misinterprets Estraven’s invitation, assuming he is being invited to a dinner party, not a private meeting. In a country built upon “centuries of paranoia,” every political action has a second or third meaning. Ai knows this, but cannot decipher the meanings themselves.



In few ways is Ai more alien than in his inability to understand the Gethenian gender. Estraven, like all Gethenians, is both a man and a woman, but Ai can only see him as a man with feminine tendencies, or a woman with masculine ones. He distrusts Estraven partially because he sees his gender to be a duplicitous performance, when in fact Ai has a basic misunderstanding of how gender on Gethen works.



Once again, Ai understands that Estraven is saying something important, but does not know what he actually means. What Estraven is saying is that he must withdraw his support from Ai, because he, Estraven, has fallen out of favor with the King and doesn’t want to taint Ai by association. Estraven is trying to help Ai and his mission, but Ai sees this as a betrayal, and believes that Estraven is either not confident in him, or else deliberately undermining him.



Estraven tries to explain to Ai that politics beyond Ai’s control have affected Estraven’s political standing (which will, in turn, affect the King’s reception of Ai). Because Estraven didn’t support the Sinoth Valley conflict, he knows he will be forced out of the government. Ai doesn’t understand the connection between this dispute and Estraven, although it will prove to be extremely relevant to his future dealings in both Karhide and Orgoreyn.



Estraven warns Ai that there are people in court who oppose his mission as Envoy. Although Estraven has done his best to plead Ai's case with the King, Argaven sees Ai, and the Ekumen by extension, as a threat to his power. Ai is irritated, as Ekumen, whose goal is co-ordination, just wants Karhide to join its alliance, not to absorb and rule it.

There are misunderstandings on both sides of the aisle. Karhide doesn't understand the Ekumen's goal, and assumes they want to rule over Gethen. On the opposite side, the Ekumen doesn't understand Karhide's concerns, and therefore Ai has difficulty negotiating with the King.



Estraven explains that the King is patriotic, in that he fears the other. Estraven assures Ai that he (Estraven) is not patriotic, as "there are, after all, other nations on Gethen." Ai does not understand what he means, and assumes he is saying he has no true loyalties. Supper ends and the two men say farewell. Estraven tells Ai he will be leaving Ehrenrang soon—a fact which surprises Ai—but hopes he will see him again and ask him more about the universe. Ai walks home cold, lonely, and fearful.

The King's patriotism makes him love his country to the point that he hates everything outside of it. Ai doesn't fully understand Estraven's definition of patriotism, and assumes that if Estraven is not loyal to a single country, he is only loyal to himself. This is not true, but Ai will only realize the truth in later chapters.



CHAPTER 2

This chapter is introduced as a folk-tale recorded from an audio file recorded in Karhide during Argaven VIII's reign.

This folktale provides insight into Gethenian, and specifically Karhidish, culture. It is one of many chapters enlivening the fictional world through supplemental anthropological material.



The story, which supposedly takes place two hundred years ago, begins with two brothers who vowed kemmering to each other and had a child. Because of the laws of the region, incest is allowed, but after a child is born all sexual activity must cease. This upsets one of the brothers so much that he kills himself, and the other brother, Getheren, is driven out of his Hearth.

The brothers' loyalty to each other is more powerful than their loyalty to Karhidish law. This is often true, and kemmering pairs, related or not, serve as the foundation for much of Karhidish society. The acceptability of incest of likely one of the most shocking aspects of Gethenian culture, and one of the ways it most radically diverges from life on Terra.



A footnote in the story attributed to "G.A." observes that the second brother is driven out not because of the incest, but because suicide is a high crime in Gethen, and the incest became shameful because it led to suicide.

G.A. presumably stands for Genly Ai, who collected stories and mythology in his travels around Karhide and Orgoreyn.



The living brother, Getheren, goes from Hearth to Hearth but can find no one to take him in. He returns to his home and curses the town, giving it his cursed name, and proceeding nameless. The townspeople chase him from the Hearth, trying to murder him before he can kill himself, but he outruns them, running to the Pering Ice, where he walks for three days until he becomes so weak he must crawl.

The intense stigma regarding suicide is another unique aspect of Gethenian culture. On Gethen, life is highly valued, and so to be implicated in someone else's suicide is to be implicated in taking another person's life. This is a worse crime than incest, which is generally accepted across the planet.



On the third day Getheren has a vision of his brother Hode. Hode looks almost the same as when Getheren last saw him, but now he is clearly lifeless. Hode explains that he lives in “the place inside the blizzard,” where all people who commit suicide live. He implores Getheren to join him, but Getheren is frightened and rejects him. Hode broke his kemmering vow to Getheren by killing himself, and Getheren does not want to kill himself too.

Although the two brothers had made a promise to each other, a promise that has the potential to transcend even death, Getheren feels that Hode has broken his vow by killing himself. He is also forced to choose whether to honor his vow to his brother, and die, or his duty to society, and live, considering that his death would be a kind of suicide by inaction, which is looked down upon and criminalized by his homeland.



Getheren turns and walks to the south, where he is eventually discovered and taken in by a kind Hearth. Although they had heard of him, he denies he is Getheren, and takes the name Enoch. Sick and frostbitten, he somehow makes almost a full recovery, losing only his left hand, which Hode had held while asking him to stay. In his old age Getheren meets a traveler from his hometown, which has been struggling since he cursed it many years ago. Getheren declares that he has lifted the curse. He dies a few days later, and his Hearth soon begins to prosper.

While the townsfolk suspect that Getheren is a known criminal and outcast, Karhidish people are welcoming above all else, and happily accept him into their society. They feel a duty to feed and house all wandering strangers, no matter what.



CHAPTER 3

Ai wakes up the morning of his meeting with the King and nervously reviews his notes on Gethenian psychology and manners. He reminds himself that his job as Envoy is designed for a single person, and he doesn't need Estraven's help to succeed. He reasons that “one voice speaking truth is a greater force than fleets and armies” if given enough time—and time is a resource the Ekumen has an endless supply of, even if he, personally, does not.

Ai is loyal to the Ekumen and believes in his mission, although he is shaken by what he sees as Estraven's betrayal. By reviewing Gethenian customs he hopes to make a better case for himself and the entity he represents. He realizes that there is much he doesn't understand about Gethenian politics, but hopes his message of truth and unity, will nevertheless break through to the King.



Ai arrives at the palace, finally calm, but becomes immediately nervous when he is made to wait alone in an anteroom. A radio in the room plays a news bulletin, and Ai is shocked to hear that Estraven has been exiled for treason, and must leave Karhide within three days. The radio continues, saying that Estraven has been conspiring against the King, trying to sell out Karhide's sovereignty to a Union of Peoples, which in fact does not exist, and is a fiction created to undermine Argaven. Ai begins to panic, but before he can do anything he is called in for his meeting.

Listening to the radio reveals why Estraven refused to continue advocating for Ai with the King. Estraven has been declared a traitor for conspiring with the “Union of Peoples,” a fictional entity, which nonetheless seems to point to the Ekumen, and Ai's mission on Gethen. Estraven saw that if he were declared a traitor, his support for Ai would only damage Ai's cause, which is why he prematurely withdrew his support. Ai, however, has yet to fully see this.



Ai joins Argaven in his immense reception hall. Ai sits while Argaven stands. Ai asks about Estraven, and the King reveals that Estraven has been advising him not to meet with Ai, while at the same time Estraven was promising Ai he was arranging a meeting. Argaven tells Ai he doesn't see him as a traitor, just a tool of a traitor, and warns Ai to trust no one.

The picture Argaven paints of Estraven is unflattering, and makes him look like a traitor both to Karhide and to Ai. However, Estraven's motivations are simple enough: he fought for a meeting with the king when he thought the time was right for Ai, and backpeddled when it became clear he, and Ai by extension, were falling out of the King's favor.



Ai wonders if Argaven believes he is an alien, and Argaven says he does. Argaven doesn't understand what Ai wants, even as Ai explains that he wants to add Gethen to a vast trade network coordinated by the Ekumen. Argaven is used to speaking politically, where every conversation is a verbal duel. Ai, speaking plainly about the universe and the exchange of knowledge and goods, cannot get through to him.

Ai tries to soothe the King, explaining that all the people of Ekumen, 3,000 nations across 83 planets, are "all sons of the same Hearth." He shows the King images of people from across the universe. Gethen's sexual development is unique, and Argaven is disturbed by photographs of men and women, people who he perceives to be "perverts." Argaven wonders "why human beings here on earth should want or tolerate any dealings with creatures so monstrously different."

Argaven wonders what will happen to Ai if he refuses to join the Ekumen. Ai explains to him that due to the mechanics of space travel he (Ai) could spend what would feel, to him, like a few hours on a spaceship, and generations would pass on Gethen, at which point he could return and try again. Argaven sees this, together with Ai's ansible communicator, as forms of trickery, which he distrusts.

Argaven does not feel obligated to believe or even listen to Ai. He says Karhide is uninterested in worlds of "monsters." Karhide is on the brink of its own "great new age," and needs no help. Argaven admits he is threatened and made fearful by Ai, even though he is a single man. He fears "liars," "trickers," and "the bitter truth." He believes his fear makes him a better ruler, and while he fears Ai he has always been afraid. In Karhide, "fear is king." Unsuccessful, Ai is dismissed from his meeting.

As he walks home Ai, feeling like a failure, wonders what is true and what is false. Estraven is apparently exiled because he advocated for Ai, but the King claimed Estraven spoke against him. Ai is not sure whether he can trust Estraven, but he finally realizes that Estraven has been trying to warn him to stay safe. Ai thinks he will eventually go to Orgoreyn and try to work with the government there, but he has more business in Karhide, outside of Erhenrang, first. He will continue to gather information, specifically about the Foretellers.

Ai and the King have difficulty communicating with each other, because although they speak a common language, the subtext behind their speech is entirely dependent on culture. Ai is speaking straightforwardly, but the King assumes there are layers to his speech. Meanwhile the King is trying to win an argument against Ai, whereas Ai is attempting to compromise.



Ai hopes to appeal to the King's humanity, and his love for mankind as a whole. Unfortunately, just as Ai sees the sexual development of Gethenians as strange and alien, the King sees the sexual development of the people of the Ekumen to be strange and perverted. He cannot see his common humanity with them because he is barely able to see them as human.



Argaven doesn't understand Ai or his mission. Because Argaven is paranoid and aggressive, he assumes the Ekumen must be as well, and expects them to take Karhide by force. Instead the Ekumen will happily wait, and can take however much time is needed to persuade Karhide to join it. Argaven sees this ability to outwait him as a trick, and distrusts Ai because of it.



Once again, Argaven's patriotism blinds him to the benefits of the Ekumen. He sees the Ekumen and its people as "monsters," who have nothing to offer him and his country. He is unable to see the ways in which people unlike him could still share a common humanity. He sees his fear as an important component of his political strategy, and refuses to reconsider his decision.



Ai finally realizes that Estraven has not been exclusively working against him. Still, he is confused by his motivations, and does not fully trust him. Ai understands that the Karhidish government is not currently open to his mission, and after his meeting with the King understands why, if not how to change its mind.



CHAPTER 4

This chapter is introduced as “The Nineteenth Day,” a Karhidish story recorded by Ai. It begins with Lord Berosty rem ir Ipe paying for a Foretelling. He asks what day he will die, but is only given the day of the month (the 19th), not what month or what year.

This answer, which has not given him the kind of clarity he had hoped for, destroys Berosty, who retreats to his home and locks himself in a tower for many months. He lives in constant fear of death. His partner, Herbor, to whom he had vowed kemmering, becomes worried about him and goes to have a Foretelling of his own. He offers his life to the Foretellers if only they will tell him more specifically when his lover will die, so that Berosty can be free from his misery.

The Foretellers don’t charge Herbor for his Foretelling, but warn him there is always a price. He asks how long Berosty will live, and the Foretellers answer “Longer than Herbor!” When Herbor meets with Berosty, he tells him this new answer. Unsatisfied, Berosty becomes so upset that he kills his lover. He is immediately overcome by shame, and the next month, on the nineteenth day, he kills himself.

CHAPTER 5

Ai plans to leave Erhenrang, and gets advice from his landlady on how to leave and where to go. Understanding that Ai has no shifgrethor, his landlady can give him advice without worrying about offending him. Ai thinks of his landlord as a landlady, because of his soft body and face. Ai has difficulty understanding that this person is a “hermaphroditic neuter,” not a woman, and not a man.

Ai listens to the radio in the days before he prepares to leave the city. Tibe, the new prime minister, is often discussed, as is his desire to reclaim land in the contested Sinoth Valley. Ai reflects that anywhere else, this behavior would lead to war, but Gethenians, lacking the capacity to “mobilize” militarily, instead behave “like animals” or at least “like women.” Still, Ai understands that Orgoreyn, the neighboring country, has become “increasingly mobilizable,” and war could be on the horizon if Karhide becomes more patriotic.

This chapter is another example of anthropological world building. Although it does not directly affect the narrative, it gives context to the world of the story. Here, Le Guin introduces the Foretellers, and the complicated and often incomplete nature of their answers.



Foretellers answer questions about the future to underscore the futility of only knowing the future incompletely. Unfortunately for Berosty, knowing only a fragment of his future destroys him. He does not learn the intended lesson, and is instead unable to think about anything other than his incomplete knowledge of his own death.



As the Foretellers have designed, even getting slightly more information about his death is not enough for Berosty—in fact, it just increases his suffering and leads to his premature death by his own hand. By seeking out information about his death, he inadvertently brought it on, a cautionary tale about the danger of forbidden knowledge.



Although it is rude to give advice in Karhide, because it offends the pride of the receiver, Ai’s landlady recognizes that he has no shifgrethor, or pride, and so accepts and appreciates advice. Ai continues to struggle to see Gethenians as they see themselves, seeing each person he encounters as a man or a woman, not both.



Ai injects gender into his analyses of much of the political maneuvering in Karhide. He associates strength and war with masculinity, whereas he associates duplicity and peace with femininity. However, Ai is starting to see what Estraven meant when he referred to the dangers of patriotism. Tibe, who loves Karhide too much, is willing to go to war and kill anyone who he sees as a threat.



Ai rides the landboat for four days. He reflects that while people on Terra feel they need to get ahead, Gethenians are happy to live in the moment. However, even though he understands the cultural differences, Ai is impatient. The ride is uncomfortable, but he marvels at the mountain ranges, and at a tower that functions as a Fastness and is accessible only in the summer. After reaching the summit of the mountain range, the caravan descends, and caravan stops at the city of Rer, where Ai stays for the night before heading south in search of the town of Otherhord, which he knows houses a Fastness.

Ai hopes to find a Fastness, and to discover more of the Handdara religion, which was not deeply examined by the Investigators. Ai has heard of the Foretellers of the Handdara, who supposedly can see the future, and he wants to verify these rumors.

Ai has decided not to announce himself as Envoy, and present himself as a native Karhider. Although he is taller and darker than most, with a strange accent, there is enough national variety that he will not immediately draw attention. As he is walking in the woods he comes across Goss, a young man who lives in Otherhord. Ai tells Goss he'd like to ask a question of the Foretellers. When Goss asks who specifically he'd like to speak to, Ai admits he's "exceedingly ignorant," which he has forgotten in the Handdara religion comes across as bragging.

Goss takes Ai to a clearing where two men are practicing Presence, a kind of Handdara meditation. Ai notes that Handdara are "given to negatives," and so refer to this as an "untrance involving self-loss."

One of the men, who introduces himself as Faxe, comes to greet Ai. Ai finds Faxe very beautiful, and has the sudden urge to use his mindspeech to communicate. He tries, but it doesn't seem to work. Somehow, Faxe immediately recognizes Ai as the Envoy. He invites Ai to stay with him for a few days until he decides whether or not he wants to ask the Foretellers a question.

Ai enjoys his time in Otherhord. The town and the Handdara help Ai understand Karhide better, especially the "silent...fecund darkness" in its politics and culture. His life is introverted, inactive, and ignorant, according to Handdara values.

Traveling the country gives Ai the opportunity to reflect on more cultural differences between the Gethenians and himself. One major difference is the speed at which they move. Gethenians are slow and measured, which allows them to move carefully in treacherous conditions, but which is frustrating to the faster-paced Ai.



Although Ai does not have a specific question to ask the Foretellers, part of his job is to act as an explorer and record sights, sounds, and culture.



After spending months in the capital of Karhide, where he was known as the Envoy and treated as a stranger, Ai is excited to be perceived as a native Karhider. However, he immediately misspeaks, showing himself to be – if not an alien – then at least a foreigner. The Handdara strive for ignorance, so by saying he doesn't know anything about them he is professing that he is very enlightened, which is the opposite of what he intended to convey.



Handdara is centered around the concept of ignorance and loss of self. Practitioners believe the less you know, the more enlightened you are.



Faxe's beauty makes Ai feel instantly connected to him, but whether or not this is a sexual attraction (because Ai associates beauty with femininity) remains unclear. Although Ai attempted to blend in, to the perceptive, he can easily be spotted as an alien.



Ai finally starts to understand the inner workings of Karhidish politics. Retroactively he begins to comprehend the forces that prevented the King from accepting his proposal.



Ai helps with communal fieldwork and maintenance, and talks with Goss and Faxe. In the evenings there is conversation and music. One night, Ai watches two very old men dance for five hours, displaying dothe, or carefully controlled “hysterical strength,” a Handdara phenomenon Ai has heard of but never seen.

Goss helps Ai figure out how to ask the Foretellers a good question. He cautions that “vagueness breeds vagueness,” and some questions are unanswerable. Yomeshta, the other Gethenian religion, famously began when someone asked a group of Foretellers the meaning of life, an unanswerable question. It destroyed the group and killed some of the Foretellers, but gave the Weaver, Meshe, who was the founder of Yomeshta, the ability to see the past, present, and future. Ai still doesn’t fully understand Foretelling, which he had assumed was based on luck, or on mindreading.

Ai picks a question for the Foretellers to answer, and waits until all nine of them can gather together: the Weaver; Faxe; two Zanies, whom Ai diagnoses as schizophrenic; five Celibates, one of whom must be in kemmer for the Foretelling to work; and a Pervert, someone in perpetual kemmer. Although Ai had considered asking a throw-away question, when he realizes it is difficult and dangerous for the Foretellers to answer a question, he decides to ask something more serious. Ai asks if Gethen will be a member of the Ekumen within five years. Faxe tells him his question is answerable, and the Foretelling begins.

Using the sensitivity that allows him to mindspeak, Ai can feel a spider-web-like connection between the Foretellers. He tries to keep out of their minds, but as he resists he begins to hallucinate. The hallucinations are too powerful and he falls into the Foretellers’ web.

Ai feels powerful, confused, sexual forces, which are somehow controlled by Faxe. Times passes, though he doesn’t know how much, and Faxe becomes a woman dressed in pure, burning light. She screams “Yes!” in answer to Ai’s question.

The circle is broken and the doctor takes care of the Zanies as the rest of the Foretellers slump, exhausted. Faxe wonders if Ai has been answered, and Ai confirms he has been. He considers the “quality” of the answer, which was “not so much a prophecy as an observation,” with the “imperative clarity of a hunch.” He believes it to be true.

Ai continues to learn about Handdara, and the way in which the Handdara find peace in ignorance. This influences everything they do, as all of their pursuits are intended to clear their mind and allow them to meditate.



Because Handdara is concerned with ignorance, the questions answered by the Foretellers are not intended to give the asker a comprehensive look at the future. Instead, they are meant to illustrate the futility of knowing anything. In contrast, the Yomeshta religion worships a prophet who was able to see the past, present, and future. As a result, practitioners of Yomeshta worship total knowledge, which is associated with light.



Ai chooses to ask a question whose answer he does not know, and whose answer is important to him practically. He has respect for the Foretellers and does not want them to put themselves in danger for an inconsequential answer. His question relates to his mission, which is the most important thing in his life, and drives all of his actions. It is in fact the most consequential question he could possibly ask.



One aspect of Ai’s otherness, his ability to mindspeak, ironically allows him to connect to the Gethenian Foretellers.



Seeing Faxe as a woman confuses Ai, who has difficulty understanding the fluidity of Gethenian gender. It is unclear if Faxe truly becomes a woman, or if Ai’s perception of him just momentarily shifts.



Although Ai had been skeptical about the art of Foretelling, he believes in the veracity of the answer he receives. Additionally, because he was mentally drawn into the Foretelling, he believes it to be authentic.



Two days later, as they walk together, Faxe and Ai discuss the Foretelling. Faxe tells Ai that he felt a tenth presence in the room during the Foretelling. Ai admits he was telepathically drawn in. Ai suspects that Faxe is naturally empathic, and possibly telepathic. He offers to teach Faxe how to mindspeak. Faxe doesn't understand the appeal, even when he learns it is impossible to lie with mindspeak. Faxe declines the offer, saying that his "business is unlearning, not learning." Also, despite his prediction that Ai will change the world, Faxe wants no part in a world-changing form of communication.

Ai wonders why even though Handdara can predict the future there is still conflict on Gethen. Faxe explains it can be hard to know the right question to ask, and for someone like a king, the price would be extremely high, as the "Asker pays what he can afford."

The Handdara don't want answers, even though they are the Answerers. Their task is to "exhibit the perfect uselessness of knowing the answer to the wrong question." The only certain thing is that everyone dies, and according to Faxe "the only thing that makes life possible is permanent intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next."

CHAPTER 6

Estraven's cook wakes him in his home. There is a runner from the King's house, who has a paper announcing his exile. Estraven had known this was coming, but did not know it was coming so soon. He is briefly overwhelmed, but gets in control of his emotions, and has packed and prepared to leave by the late morning.

Estraven writes to his old kemmering, Ashe, warning him not to contact him, and promising him some of his valuable belongings.

Estraven briefly considers returning home to his Hearth, but decides against it. He considers the three days he has left until his exile officially takes effect. Because he was given no warning before the notice was sent out, he knows no landboat or ship captain will dare to help him. Instead, he will walk to the Gulf separating Karhide from Orgoreyn.

Although Ai is an alien, he was able to mentally connect to the Foretellers, a connection both he and Faxe sensed. Ai, who has been drawn to Faxe since they first met, wants to become even closer to him through mindspeech, which Faxe, in accordance with his religion, finds uninteresting. The Handdara do not like learning new skills or abilities, as they reach enlightenment through active "unlearning." Learning mindspeech would go against the central tenant of the religion.



Certain practitioners of the Handdara religion, although technically able to see the future, aren't interested in clearly illuminating every (or even any) detail. These Foretellers believe that knowing the future will only complicate the lives of those who have the knowledge.



The Handdara believe that just because a person knows a fraction of what comes next, the knowledge cannot guarantee they'll be able to use the information in a useful way. For example, even though Ai now knows Karhide will join the Ekumen, he has no sense of how to achieve his goal, only that it will, somehow, be achieved.



This chapter, like the earlier ones narrated by Genly Ai, is told in the first person. However, this chapter is from Estraven's point of view, as we finally see Estraven's "alien" perspective. Although he knew his political behavior had fallen out of favor, he was surprised by the swiftness of his exile.



Though they are no longer a "couple," Estraven and Ashe still feel obligated to look out for each other.



Estraven knows that he will be safe in Orgoreyn, where his exile will have no effect. However, he worries that the widespread knowledge of his fall from grace will prevent anyone from helping him in the three days before his exile officially begins.



Estraven's cook kindly left him food, so he is not hungry during his journey. He is reassured that one man, at least, doesn't think him to be a traitor, and is surprised at how the label hurts him.

A small act of kindness reminds Estraven that although the government may neither like nor trust him, individuals still care for him in spite of the potential legal consequences.



After three days of walking, Estraven arrives at the Gulf. At the gates is Ashe, his former kemmering, with whom he has two children. Although Ashe is now a Celibate Foreteller, the two still love one another.

Once again, Estraven is moved that people in his life still care about him despite his new status as a traitor to Karhide. He is happy that personal bonds transcend political ones.



Estraven wants to protect Ashe by driving him away, so he is purposefully cruel and bitter. Estraven accuses Ashe of breaking his vow, which Ashe denies breaking. Estraven then suggests it wasn't a real vow, as he (Estraven) promised kemmering to another man (his brother Arek) who is now dead. Ashe, tearful, tries to give Estraven (whom he calls Therem) money, but Estraven will not take it, and walks away toward the harbor.

While Estraven recognizes Ashe's love for him, his love for Ashe makes him want to protect his former lover. He decides he must hurt Ashe in order to save him, believing it is the only way to protect him. He feels a stronger obligation to protect Ashe's life in the long term, than to protect his present feelings.



Estraven is concerned to see that the fishermen recognize him and will not rent out their boats to him. He sees that Tibe plans to keep him in Karhide for three days, after which his exile will truly begin, and he can be killed for a reward.

Estraven realizes his exile is truly a death sentence. Tibe hopes to turn all the people of Karhide against Estraven, who he sees as a threat that must be removed, not just from the country but from the planet itself.



Estraven sits and thinks. He will have to take a boat to Orgoreyn, and will have to commit a crime to get a ship. He steals a rowboat, and begins to paddle out into the harbor. As he's rowing, he is overcome by weakness and sickness. Two agents of Tibe, still on the shore, have shot him with a sonic gun on a lethal setting, a blast which would have killed him had he been in range. Although in pain, Estraven forces himself to keep rowing, knowing the agents will come after him in a motor boat to finish him off.

Estraven must consider the strength of his moral obligation to the laws of Karhide. If he obeys them, and does not steal, he will die. He decides his own life is more valuable to him than any legal codes. Tibe's men, similarly, have decided that Tibe's orders to kill Estraven are more important than the laws of the country, which protect him until his exile officially begins the next day.



After some time Estraven is pulled out of the water and onto a Karhidish patrol ship. Estraven is too weak to move or speak, but he can hear the captain arguing with someone. The captain insists Estraven's exile hasn't fully come into effect yet, and in response to radio commands from Tibe's agents telling him to return to shore, the captain declares "The king exiled him, I'll follow the king's order, no lesser man's." Estraven doesn't know why the man saves his life, but appreciates it.

The captain of the ship that rescues Estraven must decide where his loyalty lies. Although it is clear that Tibe wants Estraven dead, the captain decides to honor the letter of the law declaring Estraven's exile – which protects him for a few more hours – as opposed to the spirit, which is intended to kill him as soon as possible. This deference to the King as opposed to his prime minister, and to humanity as opposed to law enforcement, saves Estraven's life.



Estraven is dropped on the Orgota coast the next morning. He is weak but tries to walk toward the nearby town of Shelt. He collapses in the street, is found, and transported to a hospital some time later. Estraven had used dothe strength to row himself away from Tibe's men, but had not sufficiently rested during the thangen phase, which led to his collapse and hospitalization. The doctor chastises him for putting himself in danger.

After the doctor leaves, an Inspector comes to ask Estraven for his information. Estraven jokes that "behind every man in Orgoreyn comes the Inspector." Estraven tells him he is from Karhide, but has lost his identification papers during his unconsciousness. He is briefly angry, and then laughs at the ridiculousness of his situation. The Inspector is angry, and thinks Estraven doesn't understand the seriousness of his situation.

As an "indigent and unregistered alien" without papers, Estraven cannot return to Karhide, and the Inspector threatens to send him to a prison work camp. The physician recognizes Estraven's name, and tells the inspector who he is—the former prime minister of Karhide. The Inspector, disappointed, softens slightly. No longer comfortable arresting him, he reminds Estraven he will have to apply for new papers and permanent residence in Orgoreyn where he can get a job and become a useful citizen. For the next few days, before Estraven is granted permanent residence, the physician keeps him in the hospital ward.

Five days later, Estraven sets out to Mishnory. He pays his way by working on a fresh-fish landboat. Once in Mishnory, Estraven continues to work with fish, even living in a boardinghouse called Fish Island. His work is smelly, but he likes working in a refrigerated room during the (relatively) warm summers.

Estraven spends his free time wandering the town, noting that although streetlights have been smashed by local residents, Inspectors patrol the area, depriving "poor men their one privacy, the night."

The use of dothe strength is a Handdara practice. It is a sustained use of hysterical strength, which Estraven used to save himself in the Gulf. Like many Handdara concepts, dothe requires a careful balance between dark and light, action and inaction, and its use requires a commensurate rest phase, which Estraven did not observe, and which has further injured him.



Estraven, so comfortable in Karhide, is an outsider in Orgoreyn. In Orgoreyn, paperwork and bureaucracy rule everything. Estraven, coming from a disorganized country built around family units and a top down monarchy, is able to recognize the ridiculousness of each system — Karhide's extreme disorganization, and Orgoreyn's extreme regulation.



Law and order reign supreme in Orgoreyn, and so without papers initially Estraven is not given any special treatment. Luckily, even in a place with as much bureaucratic red tape as Orgoreyn, personal connections, like the one between Estraven and his doctor, can override loyalty to a vague governmental body.



Estraven's pride doesn't prevent him from doing manual labor, work an outsider like Ai might assume to be beneath the former prime minister.



Many of the people of Orgoreyn desire darkness and privacy, but government denies them this luxury. Unlike in Karhide, where Handdara is the dominant religion, in Orgoreyn Yomeshta and its embrace of total light and total knowledge influences the government and the culture.



Later in the summer, an Alien Registry Law causes Estraven to lose his job. It takes him half a month to get reregistered, during which time he subsists off of fish stolen by his former coworkers. He likes these “hard loyal men,” but realizes they live in inescapable poverty, and he has political work to do which is impossible in the Fish Island.

Estraven makes calls to some officials he knows in the Orgota government, who come the next day to collect him from his boarding house. Commensal Yegey takes Estraven in as his secretary, which makes him a dependent—a term he dislikes, but which is important to the label-obsessed Orgota. Estraven is made to wait for another month before he is finally allowed to meet with Yegey and Obsle, another Commensal.

Obsle and Yegey wonder how Estraven, known for his shifgrethor, was evicted from Karhide. Estraven explains that his fear of conflict in the Sinoth Valley outweighed his caution. Obsle wonders if Estraven liked “Karhide better than its king,” and Yegey suggests Estraven likes the Karhidish style of government more than the Orgota style, a more brutal and efficient regime favored by Tibe. Estraven confirms Yegey’s speculation.

Estraven confesses that he worries that if Karhide grows too powerful it will go to war with Orgoreyn. Obsle fears the same thing, as does Yegey. All three see the Sinoth Valley dispute as a potential catalyst for further conflict.

Obsle agrees the men must work together to prevent war, but first wants to know about the Envoy (through this Estraven infers Genly Ai has requested permission to enter Orgoreyn). Obsle waives shifgrethor and asks Estraven for the truth. Estraven confirms Ai is an alien being, not a man to be feared, but a man who can connect Gethen with the wider universe. Yegey is made uneasy by the idea of eighty extraterrestrial worlds, and Obsle is skeptical of a man sailing in on a spaceship. Estraven tells them that following Ai can lead Obsle to greatness.

Estraven is a foreigner and a traitor to his own nation, but is able to form personal connections with the other men he works with. Although none of them makes much money, they care for Estraven and look out for him during his unemployment.



Although Estraven has enjoyed his time as a manual laborer, he knows it is time for him to resume his mission: trying to convince the government of Orgoreyn to join the Ekumen. He has no single allegiance (which is why he dislikes being connected to Yegey), and so does not care if Karhide or Orgoreyn joins first, as long as one of them eventually does.



These Orgota officials wonder how Estraven, known for being a savvy politician, managed to fall out of the graces of the king. They correctly guess that his allegiance was not to the politicians who ran his country, and was instead to the nation itself, specifically the people within it. Estraven only cares about politics as a means to an end, with the end being the well-being of all nations’ citizens.



Although of different nations, all three men can agree that they do not want their countries to go to war. In their minds, human lives are more important than a political victory.



Estraven begins to reveal his true reason for traveling to Orgoreyn. Although it was partially to save his own life, it was also to further promote Genly Ai’s alien ambassadorial mission. He trusts Ai, and although he is from another world, Estraven finds Ai recognizably human and trustworthy. Faced with the vastness of the universe, he sees Gethen’s conflicts to be insignificant distractions, although he still cares for its people. In contrast, Yegey is disturbed by his personal insignificance in the face of such scale.



Estraven continues to praise Ai to the Commensals. He wonders, “How shall we deal with strangers, except as brothers?” and adds that if Ai “were one of us I should call him an honest man.” Estraven believes that terrestrial boundaries mean nothing in the face of extraterrestrial alliances. Yegey is convinced but Obsle remains skeptical. Estraven suggests letting them speak to Ai themselves. They admit he has requested permission to enter Orgoreyn.

Estraven continues with his mission to connect any Gethenian nation to the Ekumen. He, unlike essentially every other Gethenian, can see that Ai, although alien, is still a human man, and that his mission is one of peace and brotherhood. He emphasizes the ways in which Ai is similar enough to Gethenians to be trusted, with a mission grand enough that it ought to erase any petty political infighting.



CHAPTER 7

This chapter, titled “The Question of Sex,” is from the field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, an Investigator who explored Gethen forty years before Genly Ai began his journey as Envoy. In it, she describes her observations of Gethenien sexuality. Ong Tot Oppong hypothesizes that Gethenian sexual physiology, which has no clear adaptive value, is the result of a genetic experiment.

This chapter, which reads almost like a scientific or academic text, presents Gethenian sexuality from the point of view of an outsider encountering it for the first time, thus translating it for a similarly unfamiliar audience.



Ong Tot Oppong describes the sexual cycle, which lasts twenty-six to twenty-eight days. For twenty-one of these days a person is “in somer,” has no sexual interest and presents as totally androgynous, and then for the rest of the days a person enters kemmer. In isolation, or with other people still in somer, sexual intercourse is impossible, however, if another person is in kemmer at the same time, one partner will become male, and the other female, until they are able to copulate. This phase of kemmer takes between two and twenty hours.

To Oppong, as to readers, the Gethenian sexual cycle is alien and unfamiliar. Although a deep understanding of the phases of kemmer is not necessarily essential to one’s enjoyment or understanding of the novel as a whole, Oppong’s detailed scientific account provides useful context for the later unfolding of the narrative. It also gives a sense of the ways in which Gethenians truly are different from Terrans, not in a way that implies they are better or worse, but simply that their lives are necessarily different because their sexuality is vastly different. This examination of how sexuality affects society is then a crucial part of Le Guin’s “project” in writing the novel.



During kemmer, Gethenians sometimes present as male, sometimes as female. In Karhide individuals seem to have no preference, but in Orgoreyn sometimes hormones are used to induce one or the other.

While Terrans often derive much of their identity from their gender and sexuality, on Gethen individuals do not, as they are both male and female (and thus something different altogether), and only present as a single gender for a fraction of their lives.



Descent is matrilineal — children are attributed to the parent who was female at time of conception and carried the baby to term. This parent is referred to as “parent in the flesh.” Oppong speculates that because anyone can become pregnant, parenthood is less of a burden, and everyone has more empathy.

Gethenian society is shaped by their unique sexuality. Parenting is different based on whether a person gave birth to a child or not, but unlike with most bi-gender societies, there is no single gender of mothers and a single gender of fathers, instead, anyone could potentially become pregnant.



Kemmer sometimes happens in pairs, sometimes in group settings. Some individuals choose vow kemmering, which is essentially the same as monogamous marriage. It has a social and ethical, but no legal meaning. Ong Tot Oppong hypothesizes the structure of society in Karhide—which consists of Clan-Hearths and Domains—is made possible through these monogamous family units.

Ong Tot Oppong observes that, as fascinating as the Investigators find kemmering, it “dominates” Gethenians even more. Every aspect of their society revolves around the kemmer-somer cycle, with every person taking a holiday once a month during kemmer. She relates, “Everything gives way before the recurring torment and festivity of passion.”

Ong Tot Oppong makes a note to herself to include certain facts in her final report for the Envoy. She warns that it is important not to see Gethenians as men or as women, as they do not see themselves that way. She also justifies her use of the male pronoun. In Karhide there is a “human pronoun,” but in English, Ong Tot Oppong feels that *he*, *him*, and *his* are the closest to universal pronouns. Ong Tot Oppong herself dislikes being “respected and judged only as a human being” as opposed to as a woman. She continues, “It is an appalling experience,” and warns that any Envoys will have to discard any pride they attach to their gender.

Ong Tot Oppong notes that Gethenian society is not divided into male and female. By extension, she sees no division of strong and weak, active and passive. She observes that there is no war on Gethen, and wonders if that is because war is a masculine activity, a “vast Rape.” Although there is competition on Gethen, and murder on a small scale, it never escalates. Perhaps, she considers in her final paragraphs, the weather on Gethen discourages aggression. Maybe “the dominant factor in Gethenian life” is the frozen planet itself, which seems to discourage placing any stock in the “victory or glory” of conquest.

CHAPTER 8

Ai resumes his report. He has spent the summer more as an Investigator than a Mobile, gathering information and learning about the culture. He notes that in his early days as Mobile he was a “marvel and monstrosity,” and appreciates the ability to blend in more easily. The people he meets are generally warm and welcoming. In Karhide strangers are not your enemy—threats come instead from your neighbors.

As with the rest of humankind, Gethenians treasure the bond between parent and child, and the bond between lovers. These connections, in fact, are the glue that holds society together on Gethen as well as on Terra, despite the vast differences in sexuality between the two worlds.



Ironically, Oppong comments that the Gethenian sexual cycle dominates and shapes their society. However, she seems to overlook the ways in which Terran gender and sexuality also influence every aspect of their society as well.



Here the reader is reminded that this chapter is an informational report intended for Genly Ai or another Envoy. Oppong provides a grammatical suggestion (the male pronoun), which is used throughout the novel, and provides a warning as to how difficult it is, as a person with a gender, to adapt to a genderless society (and language). On Gethen, no one considers their gender, as it is the same for everybody. In contrast, visiting Terrans like Oppong and Ai want to be acknowledged as men or women, which they've been socialized to see as huge components of their identity, and will have to learn to live as someone whose gender is irrelevant.



Oppong's theory of how Gethenian gender shapes society explains many Gethenian laws and behaviors. The lack of a strong and weak half of society prevents one group from trying to dominate anyone else, which means there is no gender discrimination, but also no war. However, more than anything else, more even than the Gethenian sexual cycle, the Gethenian weather likely influences the lives of the planet's inhabitants. Because they are constantly fighting the inhospitable cold, they have little time to fight with each other.



As an Envoy and an alien, Genly Ai has not always enjoyed being a visible outsider. Now, for the first time, he is able to see Gethen not as a stranger, but as someone seen and accepted as human. He benefits from Karhidish hospitality, and the easy bonds Karhidiers form with strangers in need.



Ai observes that very little in Gethen has changed in thousands of years. They are in a Machine Age, but have had no true Industrial Revolution. Gethen has developed much more slowly than Terra, but in its steady development it has avoided environmental or societal disaster. Ai suspects that the planet itself is so unforgiving that it discourages risky and rushed behavior.

Ai hears on the radio that Argaven is pregnant. He finds it funny because he had seen Argaven as a man. People in Karhide also find it funny, but because they think Argaven too old to have a child.

Ai realizes, as he travels, that Karhide is a disjointed nation, made up of “pseudo-feudal tribal economic units,” or small aggressive towns, often united by blood ties.

Ai returns to Erhenrang, where he now feels unsafe. Argaven has taken time off for his pregnancy, and Tibe is in charge in the interim. While Argaven was insane and fearful, his political cabinet did good work. Tibe, in contrast, is insane and logical, capable of doing great harm. Ai notices Tibe speaks on the radio much more than Estraven ever did. He talks about pride of country, but not shifgrethor, or personal pride and honor. This seems to be intentional, forcing listeners to become fearful and angry on Karhide’s behalf. He frequently discusses the Sinoth Valley conflict, referring to Karhidish farmers as “true patriots,” and discussing his plans to escalate the violence.

Tibe also talks about Truth, and claims to be “cutting down beneath the veneer of civilization.” Ai sees this as dangerous—the implication being that primitiveness is the opposite of civilization, and that civilization is artificial and unnatural. He believes the two to exist on a spectrum, with the true opposite of civilization being war.

Orgoreyn has, in the past few centuries, achieved material stability, which allowed it to centralize its government and build up its power. Karhide now has the opportunity to do the same thing, having “got a little ahead of Nature.” Ai sees that Tibe wants to unite Karhide into a nation. He can mobilize it either through a new religion, which isn’t available, or war, which is.

Like Ong Tot Oppong suggested in Chapter 7, Ai suspects that the Gethenian climate, as much as Gethenian culture, has shaped and changed Gethenian culture to a great degree, slowing progress so as to preserve a fragile society, easily destroyed by any shifts in climate.



Ironically, Ai unites with other rural Karhiders in ridiculing the king. Each group, however, finds a different aspect of the pregnancy funny depending on their cultural background.



This realization echoes an observation Estraven made earlier in the novel. Karhiders’ loyalties are primarily to their families and Hearths, and secondarily to their nation.



Ai, always an outsider in Karhide, is suddenly both an outsider and a potential threat. Karhide is a nation governed by fear, and is slowly turning from an agenda of self-defense towards a path of violent paranoia. As Estraven warned, Tibe is embracing a dangerous patriotism, elevating the “true patriots” of Karhide over the increasingly dehumanized Orgota. Whereas Argaven simply wanted to protect Karhide through isolation, Tibe wants to actively destroy its enemies.



Tibe uses his speech as a way to indoctrinate the citizens of Karhide. By referring to an objective “Truth” he hopes to discourage residents of Karhide from challenging him, and instead expects them to blindly follow him in his hatred for the Orgota.



Ai worries that the only thing preventing war between Karhide and Orgoreyn is their different stages of development. Orgoreyn is more developed than Karhide, and so previously neither seemed like a threat to the other. Unfortunately, under Tibe, Karhide is developing the kind of national pride that could see Orgoreyn as a threat, and could lead to violent conflict.



Ai informs Tibe of his question to the Foretellers, to no response. He then goes to the Orgota Embassy and requests to enter Orgoreyn. Ai is excited to leave Karhide. He feels less welcome than he did earlier in his mission, less like a sideshow and more like a political suspect.

One evening Ashe comes to visit Ai. He introduces himself as “a friend of one who befriended you.” Ai assumes he’s referring to Faxe, but Ashe is referring to Estraven. Ashe can see Ai has no feelings of friendship towards Estraven, and becomes angry. He is playing shifgrethor but Ai is not, which offends him. Ashe feels he has made a mistake in coming to Ai and tries to leave, but Ai catches him.

Ashe wonders bitterly if Ai feels himself in debt to Estraven, who was exiled partially because of his support for Ai’s mission. Ai explains that his mission “overrides all personal debts and loyalties,” which causes Ashe to argue that it is therefore “an immoral mission.” Ai is taken aback. He concedes, “the shortcomings are in the messenger, not the message,” and encourages Ashe to speak his mind.

Ashe wants Ai to take money to Estraven, since Ai has no political ties and cannot be punished for it. Ashe, however, feels he has misjudged and forgotten that Ai does in fact have his own (interplanetary) politics.

Ai agrees to take the money, and Ashe is overcome with emotion, crying easily. He tells Ai he was Estraven’s kemmering, which surprises Ai. Ashe makes a gesture of friendship to Ai (one that Ai notes is not made lightly) and wishes him luck.

Two days later, Ai leaves for Orgoreyn. Some higher-up has expedited the immigration process. Ai walks to the border, relying on the hospitality of Karhidish townsfolk, who by code must provide three days of lodging, but will often happily provide more. Ai feels warmly towards Karhide, a land he found “indifferent to the Envoy, so gentle to the stranger.” He is nervous to leave and begin again in a new nation.

Ai’s duty is to the Ekumen. He likes Karhide, but feels no need to continue to try and convince its government to cooperate with him. Orgoreyn will provide him with a new opportunity to plead his case.



Ai doesn’t see Estraven as his friend. This is because of an enduring miscommunication between the two characters, based on their different cultures. Ashe clearly believed Estraven and Ai to be friends, and sees Ai’s initial confusion as an insult to both him and Estraven.



Ai’s loyalty is primary to the Ekumen. This duty, at least initially, transcends any personal bonds, and certainly bonds of friendship between himself and Estraven, who he had not even seen as a friend. Ashe, who sees interpersonal bonds as the foundation of any larger society, dislikes Ai’s mindset.



Ai and Ashe have difficulty communicating because of their different cultural backgrounds. Ashe assumes Ai to be apolitical, forgetting that his mission is a diplomatic one. Ai explains his allegiance is to mankind, not to a single government.



Ashe and Ai eventually understand each other. Ashe’s tears, however, come as a surprise. Ai rarely cries, and links this to his masculinity. In contrast, with no sense of male pride or masculine suppression of emotion, Gethenians cry freely.



Although Ai has felt like an outsider wandering the country as an Envoy, he has appreciated how accepting the people of Karhide have been. While his mission has not been a success, he has made personal connections in spite of the fact that he is alien to the Gethenians, and they are alien to him.



At the border, the Karhidish bridge-keeper happily lets Ai cross, whereas the Orgota Inspector reviews his documents for hours. His passport is eventually taken for further inspection and Ai is sent to a Commensal Transient-House for the night.

Ai is taken to a Commensal and fed. Everyone else is already sleeping and he goes to bed as well. He wakes up to an attack upon the village. He manages to escape his boarding house with his papers and his pack, which luckily holds a change of clothes and the rubies he's used as money. Ai joins a crowd of people evacuating their smoking hometown. Orgota guards eventually stop the group. They separate out those without papers, including Ai, who has no passport. This group is locked in a cold, lightless storage barn for the night. Ai is surprised by the compliance of the men locked in with him, who were first attacked and driven out of their homes, and then imprisoned by their own government.

In the morning the group is let out into the sunlight, but Ai is singled out by an official who knows his name. He is relieved to be "named, known, recognized." He is taken to the Local Commensal Farm Centrality, which is filled with Inspectors who recognize him not as the Envoy, but as a "distinguished person." They help get him a new passport and send him on his way to Mishnory.

On the radio Ai is happy to hear calm announcements about the weather and the economy, worlds away from Tibe's ranting. He is happy to be out of Karhide, which he now considers "an incoherent" and irrational land. It takes Ai two days to reach Mishnory. During his travels he notes that the Orgota seem incurious, a welcome change from Karhide's passionate people. Arriving finally in Mishnory, even the architecture makes Ai feel as though he has "come out of a dark age."

Ai is greeted in Mishnory by Commissioner Shusgis. Shusgis also recognizes Ai as Envoy, the first in Orgota to acknowledge his origin. Ai suspects Karhide has kept his presence as a national secret. Shusgis reveals he expected Ai to look like a monster, tall and dark, but was surprised to find Ai looked almost Gethenian.

The governments of Orgoreyn and Karhide are wildly different, although the sexualities of the people and climates of the nations are the same. Orgoreyn is highly organized, and Karhide highly disorganized.



Unlike in Karhide, where Ai was frequently treated as a friend and a citizen in spite of his literal alienness, in Orgoreyn he is initially treated as a stranger and a criminal. Because he doesn't have his papers, he is imprisoned with dozens of other men, all of whom are actual Orgota citizens. However, the people of Orgoreyn defer to the government in a way that Ai finds shocking. Although he is unhappy to be treated like a criminal, these actual citizens seem happy to sacrifice their personal comfort for the (perceived) wellbeing of the state.



In Karhide Ai didn't like being recognized as the Envoy. Now, ironically, he is relieved to be singled out. His special status, although vaguely defined by the Orgota officials, saves him time, and maybe even saves his life.



Although Ai enjoyed Karhide while he was there, and was greeted unenthusiastically with a brief imprisonment in Orgoreyn, he has decided (in this moment at least) that he prefers Orgoreyn. He feels its culture to be more organized and rational, a far cry from the passionate disorganization of Karhide's government.



Part of the difficulty of Ai's task on Gethen is convincing other people of his humanity, and of the humanity of the Ekumen. Although Ai looks recognizably human, to those who don't know him he is described as monstrous — and a monstrous alien person is more difficult to sympathize with than a fellow human man.



As they talk and tour his home, Shusgis tells Ai that Karhide was afraid of him, and afraid that if they mishandled him there would be celestial retribution. Shusgis professes he is not afraid of Ai or his mission. He is ready to introduce Ai to various people who are interested in him and his goal.

Shusgis wants to join with the Ekumen because he thinks it will increase Orgoreyn's power and influence. He is dedicated to his country, and wants to see it succeed while Karhide fails. He is less interested in Ai's grand mission than in what Ai can do for him.



Ai is given new clothing, and driven to his first dinner. There are almost thirty guests at the dinner, but Ai is the center of attention. He believes the government officials want to use or manipulate him in some way, but he is not sure what they plan to do. It is considered rude in Gethen to talk politics over dinner and so Ai remains in the dark as to the meeting's purpose, talking instead with Obsle about life on his home planet, Terra, and the wider universe.

Once again, Ai's lack of knowledge of Gethenian custom and culture puts his future in jeopardy. He is unable to navigate whatever political scheming has brought him to Orgoreyn, to this specific dinner, and is unable to guess how he will be used and abused by the officials, and whether or not they believe in him and his mission.



Obsle is distracted and turns away to another conversation. At this point Ai looks to his right, where he realizes Estraven is sitting. Ai remarks he is surprised to see him, and tells Estraven he has money for him from Ashe. Ai has no desire to talk to him further, and feels Estraven doesn't want to talk to him. He becomes unhappy as he realizes Estraven has summoned him to Orgoreyn.

Although Ai had believed he was moving about Gethen of his own free will, he sees that many small factors have pushed him towards Orgoreyn. Because Estraven believes in him and his mission, he has made Ai's journey to Orgoreyn easier, where he hopes Ai will have a better chance at completing his mission.



CHAPTER 9

This chapter is a folktale recorded by Genly Ai called "Estraven the Traitor." It begins a long time ago, in Karhide before it was unified. The story concerns two Domains, Stok and Estre, which have been feuding for three generations.

Although this story does not directly affect the plot, it gives insight into inter-Hearth relationships, and the mythology of Karhide.



A young man named Estraven, heir to the Lord of Estre, is skiing one day and falls into a lake. Frozen and sickly, he is far from home and makes his way to a cottage at the edge of the water. In the cottage is a young man who saves his life, warming and feeding him. This man is named Stokven, son of the Lord of Stok, and is his mortal enemy. However, the two men are both near kemmering, and instead of fighting they have intercourse and vow kemmering to each other.

This folktale underscores the importance of romantic and sexual bonds in Karhidish society. Even decades-old feuds fought on a large scale can be overcome by the personal connection between two people in kemmering.



The next morning men from Stok come to the cabin. They recognize Estraven and kill him. Stokven demands they return Estraven to Estre for burial. Secretly, they do not follow his orders, and instead leave Estraven's body in the woods. When they return, Stokven banishes them, knowing that if they had truly delivered the body they would have been killed in Estre.

Although Stokven's allegiance, up until the previous night, had been to his Hearth and his community, he now feels an obligation towards Estraven, his one-time lover. This love is strong enough for him to punish members of his own Hearth, and demonstrates the importance of the connection of people who meet in kemmering.



Stokven has become pregnant, and when the baby is born he delivers it to Estre, announcing the child is named Therem, and is Estraven's son. Sorve, the Lord of Estre, mourns his son and decides to keep and care for his grandson, even using the name Therem, which is uncommon in his clan. Therem grows up, and one day, as a young man, he is ambushed by jealous men from Estre, who resent that he has been made heir to the Domain. Therem kills two of his ambushers, but is wounded in the chest and neck. He is too far from home to go for help, and instead makes his way to a cottage on the lakeshore.

In the cottage is Stokven, who tends Therem's wounds. Stokven says the two are mortal enemies. Therem says he's never seen Stokven before, though Stokven has seen Therem once. They vow peace to each other, and in the morning, Therem returns to Estre. When Sorve dies, Therem becomes the Lord of Estre. He ends the feud with Stok, giving up half the disputed lands. Because of this, Estraven becomes known as Estraven the Traitor, but children are still given his name.

The story warns of the danger of continuing the cycle of violence. Although Therem could serve as a kind of peace offering, Estre and Stok remain enemies, and the fighting continues. While murder is not outlawed in Gethen, life is precious, and it is easy to see this story as underscoring the futility of family feuds, which lead to a loss of life that benefits no one.



Once again, the bond between a kemmering pair, which leads to the bond between a parent and a child, leads to loyalty stronger than the loyalty Therem feels to his own Hearth. That is not to say that he does not still feel an allegiance to his home; instead, he understands that he can feel pride in his Hearth without also feeling animosity towards outside groups.



CHAPTER 10

The morning after their dinner, Estraven comes to visit Ai in his room. Ai doesn't feel guilty for contributing to Estraven's exile, and is convinced they can never be friends, as he believes Estraven has been purposefully concealing his actions and motivations. Ai dislikes that he will have to continue to interact with him.

Ai gives Estraven the money Ashe gave him. Ai feels guilty for a moment, but decides to humiliate Estraven so he will stop visiting. Estraven cautions that the radio in Orgoreyn can lie, and offers Ai advice, switching from speaking Karhidish to Orgota, which he feels in its sweetness "suits a traitor better." As compensation for the money, Estraven warns Ai that in Orgoreyn he is a political tool, and he should be careful. Ai can tell Estraven is being strangely formal, but doesn't know what this means. The warning surprises him, and his good mood is spoiled. After Estraven leaves, Ai is suddenly homesick. Winter is beginning again and he does not look forward to months of cold.

At lunch Obsle gossips to Ai about other men in the room. Mersen is a Karhidish spy, and Gaum is an agent of the Sarf, although Ai doesn't know what the Sarf is.

Ai's misunderstanding of Gethenian and Karhidish customs, along with a distrust of Estraven because of his ambiguous gender, have prevented him from trusting the former prime minister. Although Estraven is committed to the same cause as Ai, Ai is uninterested in collaborating.



Ai understands enough of Karhidish social etiquette to know how to offend Estraven. However, he does not understand Karhidish etiquette enough to understand how deeply he's hurt Estraven's feelings, or that Estraven has lashed out in response. In Karhide, it is rude to offer another person advice, as it offends their shifgrethor. Ai, however, doesn't know this, and so accepts Estraven's advice, which is offered as an insult, earnestly.



Ai doesn't understand the Orgota gossip. Although he recognizes that it is significant, he is missing too much background cultural information to decipher it.



As Ai sits to eat, someone announces that Argaven gave birth, but the child quickly died. This leads to speculation over who Argaven will name as heir.

The officials feel no pity for Argaven. They cannot relate to him as a fellow human, but instead see him as a political threat.



After lunch the assembled officials ask Ai about himself, his mission, and the Ekumen. Ai remembers Faxe's stance on questions and answers. In Karhide he was primarily questioned by experts asking questions limited to their areas of expertise. Only Estraven, Ai reflects, asked him enough questions to form a clear picture of Terra or Ekumenical society.

The Orgota people primarily observe Yomeshta, and so believe that knowledge can lead to enlightenment. However, the questions they are asking do not give them a full sense of who Ai is, or what the Ekumen is, and so he remains strange and foreign to them.



In Orgoreyn, pride doesn't govern social behavior in the same way, and people are more open in their questions. However Ai senses some men are trying to prove him to be a fraud. This is a new experience, as most people in Karhide believed him—even Tibe, who distrusted him. Ai's spaceship is still in Karhide, so he has just his body, his mind, and his pictures with which to convince the government officials of his truthfulness.

In Karhide Ai felt as though people believed he was an alien, even if they distrusted him, but in Orgoreyn he feels like a phony and a liar. He is still treated as a foreigner, but is now suspected to be a fraud. Still, he must do his best to complete his mission, whether or not the Orgota officials will easily cooperate.



Yegey doesn't understand why Ekumen is interested in Gethen, and Ai explains that he's just trying to facilitate trade and the exchange of goods and ideas. Slose, another official, wonders if Ai wants to connect Orgoreyn or Gethen. Ai responds that Orgoreyn could be the first, but the goal is the planet.

Many officials are uninterested in the connection between various facets of mankind offered by the Ekumen. Instead, they are mostly excited by the possibility of joining with the Ekumen before Karhide, which would be a blow to its national pride.



Gaum, the Sarf, who Ai finds very attractive, wonders where Ai's ship is. It's in Karhide, but Ai could have a ship sent from the closest planet, 17 light-years away, or alert the spaceship that brought him to Gethen, which would arrive in days.

Ai, who has difficulty seeing Gethenians as a combination of two genders, is occasionally attracted to a person such as Gaum or Faxe. However, he never acts on this attraction.



This revelation shocks the room. It is a fact Ai has kept hidden from everyone, even Estraven. Obsle wonders if the spaceship would come if Ai never signaled it. Ai says no; they would just send another Envoy. Slose wonders why Ai never mentioned the ship before, and Gaum jokes "How do we know that he didn't?"

It's clear by their genuine surprise at this new information that the Orgota officials knew more about Ai than what Karhide had intentionally broadcast. When Gaum asks, "How do we know that he didn't," he's joking. He has clearly been spying on Karhide, and the Commensals know for a fact Ai never mentioned his ship.



Ai says he understands that the idea of a waiting ship can be threatening, but he feels the Orgota are less ruled by fear than the Karhidish, and more ready to accept him. Slose promises he will be able to bring down the ship within the month, as a symbol of a new age. Obsle wants Ai to give him more proof, but Ai cannot bring down his ship without having its safety guaranteed, which would require a public announcement of his mission.

Ai is excited by what he feels is a warm response from the Orgota government. However, to protect himself and his colleagues, he is unwilling to fully trust his hosts until they demonstrate that they fully trust him.



Ai recognizes that Slose sees him as a religious figure, and Gaum sees him as a fraud. Obsle, Yegey and others think that by joining with the Ekumen they can demonstrate their superiority to Karhide, thus diminishing the other nation's shifgrethor permanently. Additionally, they know this national political victory would boost their personal political status as well. These men are also members of the Open Trade faction, a non-nationalistic minority in Orgota government that wants to end the Sinoth Valley dispute.

After the lunch, Ai drives home with Shusgis. Ai asks about Sarf, which is apparently an Internal Administration bureau investigating forgeries, unauthorized travel, and similar minor crimes. Shusgis describes the areas it oversees as *trash*, which translates to sarf. They act as a secret police force, and control some of the Inspectors. Ai finds this idea sinister. He wonders what Gaum's end goal is.

Ai feels that his mission is suddenly as complicated in Orgoreyn as it was in Karhide. He blames Estraven, and wonders what Estraven is doing in Mishnory. He also realizes Estraven didn't come to lunch and is purposefully avoiding him. Shusgis tells Ai that Estraven is aligned with the Open Traders, who are using him to annoy Mersen, Tibe's spy. Shusgis's opinion of Estraven is that he's a traitor who unsuccessfully tried to block Tibe. He thinks Estraven has no patriotism, only self-love, and has suffered for it. Ai is glad Shusgis also distrusts Estraven.

Back in his room, Ai considers how everything in Orgoreyn seems insipid, as though it does not cast a **shadow**. He feels like nothing, and no one, can be fully trusted.

CHAPTER 11

This chapter is made up of Estraven's diary entries. He first relates intrigue in the Thirty-Three. He is aligned with Obsle and Yegey, who are Open Traders, of which there are only seven. Obsle thinks ten more could be convinced to vote with them to consider Ai's mission seriously. One man, Commensal Ithepen of the Enyen District, wants to join with Karhide to invite Ai's spaceship down, but Estraven knows Orgoreyn will not collaborate with Karhide. Estraven, who had brought Ai to Orgoreyn and tried to get others to trust him, is not sure that the majority of the Thirty-Three can be convinced.

Slose, a follower of Yomeshta, sees Ai as a prophet. His allegiance is to his religion before anything else. Other commensals are dedicated to Orgoreyn, but primarily they are dedicated to their own political status, and they know that their success is tied to that of their nation. In all cases, however, Ai is seen as a tool, a person to be manipulated so that others can get what they want.



Once again, Ai doesn't fully understand the political machinations and intrigue of the nation in which he resides. He understands Gaum and the Sarf are working against him, but he doesn't know why, and he doesn't know what he can do to combat them.



Estraven, like Ai, wants Gethen to join the Ekumen. However, Ai distrusts Estraven. Though Estraven is no less trustworthy than any of the other officials working with Ai, Ai likes him less. He looks for any excuse he can to further denigrate his would-be collaborator, and assumes that Estraven's defection from Karhide reveals his selfishness. In fact, Estraven cares about mankind more than any single nation, but Ai assumes he only cares about himself.



Ai likes Orgoreyn at first, but feels as though it is all artifice and no substance, all bright snow and no contextualizing shadows. Although everything seems to be conducted in the open, something essential is missing, and this makes him suspicious.



In this chapter, told from Estraven's point of view, it becomes clear that he believes in Ai's mission and has been working actively to support him. Unfortunately, although Ai has convinced Estraven, Estraven has struggled to convince the Orgota Commensals, who can only consider the impact of Ai's proposal narrowly — how it would affect their own careers and the fate of the nation.



Estraven knows the Sarf contingent in the Thirty-Three fears the Envoy, and thinks he is a hoax. They worry if they call down his spaceship it will not come and they will look foolish. Estraven realizes that “Genly Ai demands of us an inordinate trustfulness,” though to him “evidently it is not inordinate.”

Estraven is thankful for Ashe’s money, which allows him to live as a “unit” and not a “dependent.” He distances himself from Obsle and other members of government. He is angry at how Ai gave him the money, “as one would give a hired assassin his fee.” He meant to insult Ai by giving him advice, an insult Ai didn’t understand. It concerns Estraven that Ai is so oblivious. He worries that Ai had been seeking his advice for months, and had misinterpreted much of what Estraven had told him. Estraven realizes Ai’s shifgrethor is totally different than most Gethenians, a trait that has kept him ignorant.

Estraven begins to see that Ai is not arrogant, but ignorant, and that he, in turn, is ignorant of Ai. He commits to controlling his own pride and vanity so as not to jeopardize Ai’s mission.

During the day Estraven works in a plastic factory and practices fasting, and in the afternoon he works on improving his dothe-strength. He wonders why he even bothers to write in his diary. He thinks maybe it is just nice to write in Karhidish, his native language.

A few days later, Estraven writes again. Ai has not been mentioned on the radio. He wonders if Ai understands that the Orgoreyn government is full of secrets. Yesterday Orgoreyn attacked a Karhidish granary, and Estraven reflects this is what Tibe and the Sarf want.

A few days later Estraven writes that he’s becoming more uneasy. Ai has still not been mentioned on the radio. Although Ai is taken publicly through the city, Estraven sees this as deception. The people of Orgoreyn do not know of him. He is seen but not known, and so he is hidden. Estraven thinks it is unfortunate that Ai blends in. However, Estraven knows that upon close examination Ai’s biology is different, and reflects, “one must know him to know him alien.” Estraven urges Obsle to speak out, but he has a thousand excuses and will not.

Although Ai does not like or trust Estraven, Estraven has given up his career and his country for Ai and his mission. Although Ai is a stranger and an alien, Estraven deeply trusts Ai.



Ai meant to insult Estraven when he gave him his money from Ashe, but had no idea how offensive he was being. Estraven, initially hurt, has realized that many of Ai’s faux-pas are not the result of intentional rudeness, but instead the result of his alienness, and his unfamiliarity with Gethenian customs. Although Estraven still doesn’t understand Ai fully, he has at least begun to realize how much he misunderstood Ai in the past.



Estraven believes Ai’s mission is more important than his personal pride, and promises to serve the Ekumen and mankind instead of himself.



Karhidish connects Estraven to his home, culture, and himself. Language is a powerful tool, and he can fully be himself in his native tongue, as opposed to a translation of himself, as he is in Orgota.



Tensions between Karhide and Orgoreyn are increasing, and Estraven worries that Ai, unfamiliar with Gethenian politics, will be accidentally caught in the crossfire.



Because Ai does not look like an alien, his presence is not enough to convince people of his origin and mission. However, as Estraven has grown to know Ai better, he has increasingly seen the ways in which Ai is an alien. Still, although Ai is an alien, Estraven cares about him and his wellbeing, and worries that the Orgota Commensals do not.



The next day, Estraven comments that he thinks Gaum is stupid for believing that Ai is a fraud. Gaum has also noticed that Yegey is no longer invested in him, and thinks Estraven's loyalty can be bought.

Gaum notices Estraven is about to go into kemmer, and so induces his own kemmer. He intersects Estraven in the street and tries to seduce him, using his given (informal) name. Estraven resists, noting that "detestation" overrides any arousal he feels. He is uneasy that Gaum thinks him so easily manipulated.

The next day, Ai gives a speech to the Thirty-Three. Estraven is not invited, but Obsle plays him a tape of the meeting. Estraven thinks Ai is innocent but clearly disciplined with a "largeness of purpose that awes" him. He sees that Ai has become a better speaker since his time in Karhide, and notes his task is profound and immense, difficult for a man to carry. Throughout the recording are interruptions by some of the Thirty-Three, many of them who think Ai a fraud, but Ai handles himself well. Estraven is frustrated that, although he set these events in motion, he no longer has any control.

The next day, Estraven notes Ai's transmitting device has been turned over to the Thirty-Three. Estraven suggests to Obsle they communicate with Ai's spaceship, but Obsle claims the radio, run by Sarf, would block or falsify the transmission. Estraven can see the tide is turning, and knows if Obsle calls off a planned reception for Ai the situation is truly dire. The next day the reception is called off.

Estraven goes to meet Ai by his house. He pretends it is a chance meeting, "Orgota style." Estraven warns him that if he is not allowed to contact his ship by Obsle or Yegey, he should call it down himself. He warns Ai his life is under threat, but Ai doesn't respond. Estraven believes the Orgota too narrow-minded to understand what Ai has to offer. He worries everything is falling apart and blames himself.

CHAPTER 12

This chapter is from "The Sayings of Tuhulme the High Priest," a Yomeshta religious text written nine hundred years ago.

To Gaum, it looks like Estraven defected to Orgoreyn from Karhide for political reasons, and is looking to advance his own political career. In fact, Estraven is committed to a cause outside of himself – he sacrificed his whole life in Karhide to further Ai's mission.



This is a seduction that would only work on Gethen – it is one of the few instances in the novel in which Gethenian sexuality is essentially weaponized, and used as a way to manipulate another person.



Estraven and Ai have interacted very little in Orgoreyn, but Estraven has still become increasingly sympathetic towards Ai. Estraven has always supported his mission, but he now better understands the "largeness of purpose" Ai is saddled with, and the difficulty of his task. Estraven feels responsible for Ai, and so it is frustrating that he has so little control over Ai's success or safety.



Estraven can see that the Thirty-Three either do not believe Ai, do not trust him, or simply do not care about his mission. Although Estraven believes Ai is working to unite humankind, the Thirty-Three are more concerned with their own careers and their own country than with Ai's universal mission.



Estraven suspects that Ai does not understand the danger he is in. He tries to warn Ai to save himself by contacting his colleagues orbiting Gethen, but Ai doesn't recognize the gravity of the situation. While Estraven understands Ai's mission, it is clear that the Orgota do not understand, or else do not care.



As with other supplementary chapters, this chapter provides non-narrative background information on Gethen and one of its primary religions.



According to this text, Meshe began to See when he was thirty, which was perfectly halfway through his life, in the Center of Time. Nothing is unseen to Meshe.

In one anecdote, a man came to Meshe complaining of his poverty. Meshe told him to dig in a field where he would find precious stones. His advice was good, but Meshe cried because he could see that the jewels would lead to fighting in thousands of years.

In Yomeshta, there is no darkness. Darkness only exists for mortals. Meshe can See everything, and everything is in light. There is no beginning and no end, no darkness and no death, and everything is in the Center of Time always. The text also notes that those who “call upon the darkness,” the Handdara, “are made fools.”

CHAPTER 13

After Estraven’s surprise visit, Ai is shaken. He tries to drive to the residences of Obsle, Yegey, and Slose to ask why Estraven was advising him to do the opposite of their suggestions, but they are not home and the snow is too thick to stay outside for long. At dinner, Shusgis suggests that Estraven is powerless and desperate to remain relevant. Ai accepts this explanation but still feels anxious, skipping supper to go to bed.

In the middle of the night Ai is awoken, arrested, and taken to the Kundershaden Prison. Ai notes that unlike so much in Orgoreyn, this is not a facade or euphemism—it is a jail. Ai is put in a small room. When a guard enters, Ai asks if he can send word to the Commensal, but is informed the Commensal is already aware of his arrest, and the guards are following the orders of the Thirty Three.

Ai is strapped to a table and injected with truth serum. He has lost all memory of his time in prison, but assumes he was interrogated. Ai wakes up four or five days later, naked, in the van of a caravan-truck, traveling west to an unknown location. Although there are twenty-five other people in the van, Ai notes that none of them complain. This is similar to when he was locked in a barn his first night in Orgoreyn. He realizes that the “black cellar” was the true Orgoreyn, and he was foolish to look for substance in the light.

Practitioners of the Yomeshta religion believe that enlightenment can be reached through the acquisition of knowledge.



The Handdara believe that ignorance is the path to enlightenment, and that knowledge isn't useful. However, even in Yomeshta, which worships knowledge, information comes at a cost.



The Handdara believe that darkness and light must coexist. In contrast, the Yomeshta believe that only light is holy, as light gives life, and wards off death. The Handdara also believe that darkness can relate to or symbolize death, but they see this as part of an essential balance.



Ai suspects something is wrong, and senses that the Commensals are no longer working with or for him, but he doesn't know what to do. He has navigated Gethen for two years, but is still a foreigner, and the politics of Orgoreyn remain opaque to him.



Ai has trusted the Commensals and they have betrayed his trust. Not only have they allowed him to be arrested, they have helped facilitate his imprisonment, as Ai is no longer useful to them. Ai was only useful in that he could help them politically; the Commensals were uninterested in his greater mission.



Although when Ai first arrived in Orgoreyn he didn't understand its customs or people, he does now: all of its citizens easily defer to people in positions of power. Even if their rights are violated or stripped entirely, they generally remain submissive.



During Ai's first night in the truck, a man dies. The group huddles for warmth, and the corpse is pushed to the outside. The group gets a jug of water once a day, and has no other outside contact. Ai appreciates the kindness in the group. Those most sensitive to cold are allowed to sleep in the middle. He comments on the terribleness of kindness in these moments, as kindness is all these people have left to give. Although the group huddles together at night, they form no connections with each other, and are silent during the day.

On the third day one of the prisoners begins to talk to Ai, and he realizes he is going through kemmer, and has been drawn to him. Ai is unable to give the Gethenian what he needs.

Although Ai does not eat, he is not hungry, but he is permanently thirsty, as the single jug given to the group a day not enough to satisfy anyone. Still, he appreciates that the group makes an effort to allow everyone a drink. Ai considers that the Orgota people act the way they do because they are trained to be cooperative and submissive their whole lives.

On the fifth day the truck is finally opened. Twenty-four of the twenty-six men have survived. They've arrived at Pulefen Commensality Third Voluntary Farm and Resettlement Agency, a prison and work camp that also functions as a sawmill. It is difficult for Ai to go from the truck to performing physical labor, but the guards allow the prisoners to keep an easy pace. They're fed lunch and dinner, and then locked in the dorms at night. Every man is given a warm, if dirty, sleeping bag, but Ai is too tall to fit comfortably.

Ai finds the work to be "genuine," and thinks it would even be enjoyable if he were not so hungry and cold. The guards are harsh but not cruel. For the first time Ai feels like "a man among women, or among eunuchs," as all the prisoners are given drugs that prevent kemmer and depress their emotions. Ai believes long-term prisoners have adapted to their chemical castration, but sees their loss of shame and desire as a loss of their humanity. The involuntary suppression of a sexual drive leads to widespread passivity, and allows for easy control of large groups, which Ai finds ominous.

Ai is struck by the solidarity within the group of convicted persons. Although they do not know each other, they feel some kind of camaraderie, and do their best to make sure that each member of their cohort is as comfortable as possible. However, there are clear limits to the connection between the prisoners; they do not communicate or commiserate. They only undertake the most basic actions to alleviate their discomfort.



Because Ai is permanently male, he has drawn a Gethenian, who is briefly becoming sexually active, to him. Although Ai is now more used to Gethenian sexuality, he still finds it strange, and feels no reciprocal sexual desire. Ai is at once close enough to a Gethenian to spur kemmer, but far enough away to be uninterested in engaging.



The group is submissive, deferring to the government even if it means letting go of personal freedom. Although he is an alien, here in this prison truck Ai is the same as anyone else. The group looks out for him as it does for every other prisoner.



Though Ai is a prisoner working at a prison camp, the Voluntary Farm feels that it is obligated to keep him alive. Even if he must work, and even if he isn't comfortable, the Farm sees him as its responsibility, and takes better care of him than is strictly necessary – he is fed and clothed, and he is provided with a place to sleep.



Ironically, while prison is conventionally an institution that acts as a great leveling agent, Ai is more alone than ever. Whereas previously on Gethen he had been a man among androgynous beings who were both male and female, in prison he is a man among androgynous beings who, because of stress or drugs, are neither male nor female.



As a political prisoner Ai undergoes drug-assisted questioning every fifth day. He doesn't know what the questions are, and cannot remember the sessions, but he knows the drugs are negatively affecting him. After each session he is sick and slow, and the haze lasts longer and longer.

On the farm people either work or they die, so there is no infirmary. Ai and other prisoners who cannot stand are allowed to remain in the dormitory indefinitely. Ai spends a lot of time talking to a man named Asra who is dying of kidney disease. Although Ai does not understand much of what Asra says, and Asra doesn't understand Ai, they distract each other. Ai still manages to get the drift of Asra's recollections, and will sometimes ask to be told myths and folktales.

One day Ai shares a story about people living on other worlds. It is hard to describe space travel in Orgota, which doesn't have a word for "flying." Ai explains that people on other worlds are permanently in kemmer, that is, they have a distinct, permanent biological sex. Asra jokingly asks "is it a place of reward, then? Or a place of punishment?" Ai wonders what Asra thinks this world is, and Asra explains it's just the world, the same one everyone is born into. Ai says he chose the world, which Asra doesn't understand. A few days later, Asra goes into a coma and dies. A day after that, Ai, sicker than ever, is called for examination.

CHAPTER 14

Obsle, Yegey, and Slose have left town or shut their doors to Estraven, and he realizes something bad has happened. He blackmails Shusgis into telling him what has happened to Ai. He then goes to the Karhidish Embassy and sends a message to Argaven informing him that Ai is imprisoned. Estraven's visits to Shusgis and the Embassy have put him in danger.

Winter is coming, and Estraven worries that Ai will not survive on the Voluntary Farm. Estraven boards a caravan that travels northwest from Mishnory to the city of Ethwen, not far from Ai's prison camp. Estraven begins to formulate an escape plan for Ai.

Although the prison camp keeps him clothed and fed, in the end, the overseers' own agenda is more important than Ai's wellbeing.



Ai and Asra were born literal worlds apart, but manage to connect emotionally. Each person recognizes the common humanity in the other, and although they don't even fully speak the same language, they are kind to each other, each working to distract the other from his pain through stories.



Ai and Asra use stories and myths to connect with each other across the barrier of culture and language. Ai's story, although a true account of his life, is too strange to be believed, and Asra is unable to comprehend Ai's confession that he was not born on Gethen. Asra also has difficulty imagining the world Ai was born into, one of men and women, which, to him, seems like a planet of perverts.



Estraven feels as though Ai's wellbeing is his responsibly. After all, he did lure Ai to Orgoreyn, and he has been his strongest supporter. Although Estraven is in exile, he decides the situation is dire enough for him to reach out to Argaven. He hopes that perhaps Karhide will decide it does believe Ai, and will want to help him.



During much of this chapter, Estraven constructs an elaborate plot to save Ai. Although Ai does not particularly like him, Estraven feels obligated to look out for the Envoy.



Estraven joins with a hunting party led by a man named Mavriva. Estraven travels with him, learning about the region, breaking off from the party at a town called Turuf, where he pretends to be sick and leaves the group. Estraven spends a few days in the foothills outside of the town, memorizing the area, and storing his skis, snowshoes, and provisions in a valley. He then loops back to Turuf, where he buys a second pair of skis, snowshoes, and winter clothes, as well as a tent and a sledge.

A month has passed since he first left Mishnory, and winter has begun—the river is frozen and snow is falling. He feels that his luck is changing for the better.

Estraven hides his sledge between his cache and the Farm, which he now marches towards. He has disguised himself as a paroled convict, who is now employed as a prison guard and is accepted into the prison with little suspicion. Once inside, he tours the jail, steals a non-lethal gun from the cook, and identifies Ai's sleeping body in the dormitory. He feels lucky, like he understands exactly how to act to achieve his goal. In Erhenrang he lost his foresight, but it has now returned. He is happy to have it back.

Estraven is put on the midnight guard shift. Some time before dawn he activates his dothe-strength and seeks out Ai. He stuns him using his gun, and then begins to carry him out. Two guards stop Estraven, but he pretends Ai has died in the night. Estraven stops in the Inspection Office to turn off the fences. He then carries Ai outside, where it is snowing heavily. He escapes the farm and hides Ai in a valley with the sledge. He waits until a pair of guards has passed by, and then pulls Ai on his sledge until the pair reaches his cache.

Ai, who should be awake by now, remains unconscious. Estraven worries that by calling Ai dead to the prison guards he has abused his luck and has killed the Envoy. Estraven's dothe-strength has persisted for hours, and now he must rest. He feeds himself and Ai, cleans Ai's bedsores, and then is overtaken by thangen. He and Ai sleep for days.

Estraven continues to Ai's rescue. His preparations are elaborate, but essentially he is doing his best to cover his tracks and avoid suspicion — by buying winter supplies in two different towns. no one will suspect one of the sets is for a soon-to-be-rescued prisoner of the state.



Throughout the novel Estraven reflects upon his luck. This is more than ordinary luck, and seems vaguely linked to the ability of the Foretellers to harness a hunch. Estraven, a practitioner of Handdara, seems to have some limited ability to see the future.



Estraven continues to put himself in harm's way in order to save Ai. He feels obligated to help Ai because of their personal connection, but also because of the vast implications of Ai's mission, which is larger and more important than either person. Again, Estraven mentions his almost supernatural luck, which is related to the way the Handdara Foretellers can harness hunches.



Estraven's obligation to Ai is stronger than any obligation he feels to Orgota law. He will happily lie in order to save the Envoy and ensure the success of the Envoy's mission. He is able to use dothe strength, which he has been practicing for the past few months in Orgoreyn. This is a type of religious practice related to his observance of the Handdara religion.



Estraven is concerned for Ai, and worries that he has abused his semi-magical luck. When he is feeling lucky he can influence the future, and he worries that by calling Ai dead he manifested his death.



For a day and a half, Estraven is in catatonic thangen-sleep, and for some time after that he is in a milder recovery period. In this second phase he sleeps and wakes, feeding Ai broth when he can. By the third night, Ai begins to speak, but does not fully wake up. He speaks in his native language, and also a mixture of Orgota and Karhidish. Estraven worries he has been permanently changed by the Farm, and regrets saving him. Luckily, the next time Estraven wakes, Ai is fully conscious and coherent. He recognizes Estraven, and speaks his name. Estraven is relieved.

The next day, Ai is able to have a conversation. He tells Estraven about the drugs he was injected with. Estraven hypothesizes they were trying to get him addicted to a hormone derivative, or else trying to mindchange him. Ai wonders if there are secret Farms in Karhide, but Estraven asserts that Karhide is not sophisticated enough for this kind of prison system.

Ai wonders how Estraven managed to break him out of prison, and is slightly suspicious. Estraven explains he used his dothe-strength, revealing that he is of the Handdara, a fact Ai had not known. Ai doesn't understand why Estraven has helped him, which deeply offends Estraven. He takes a moment to compose himself, finally explaining that he feels he is partially responsible for drawing Ai to Orgoreyn, which led to his imprisonment.

Ai denies that Estraven motivated his trip to Orgoreyn. Estraven, who now realizes Ai has "seen the same events with different eyes" explains his perspective: back in the spring, fearful of Tibe's ascendancy, Estraven began to encourage Argaven not to meet with Ai. He hoped that by delaying the meeting he could protect Ai from Argaven's fear and wrath.

Estraven's plotting led to his own political exile, at which point he was afraid to talk to Ai and "contaminate" him, putting him in more danger. Once in Orgoreyn he encouraged the Thirty-Three to let Ai travel into the country, hoping they would accept Ai and his story. Estraven hoped the Thirty-Three would see the Envoy as a way to become superior to Karhide and break free from the Sarf's control. Instead, Estraven's contacts were too timid, and his plan backfired.

In this moment the reader is reminded that although Ai has been able to converse with most of the people he's met on Gethen, he has not yet been shown speaking in his native (and therefore alien) tongue. Also, it becomes clear that Estraven's obligation is to Ai's mission as opposed to Ai himself. Estraven's assertion that if Ai is brain dead he would be better off on the prison farm makes it explicit that Ai was taken from prison because of his mission, not because Estraven wanted to improve the quality of his life.



Even after years on Gethen, Ai doesn't fully understand the differences between Karhide and Orgoreyn. Estraven, who knows the cultures well, believes Karhide would never have secret prison farms, whereas they're commonplace in Orgoreyn.



For months, if not years, Estraven has been risking his career and his life for Ai. It is frustrating to him that Ai cannot, or will not, see how dedicated Estraven has been to the Envoy and his mission. However, as frustrated as Estraven is, he understands that much of the animosity between him and Ai is based on miscommunication, and so he tries to remain calm.



Although Estraven has understood Ai to be ignorant of aspects of Gethenian culture and behavior, he finally sees how alien Ai truly is. While the politics of Karhide and Orgoreyn, as well as the nations' feelings towards Ai, are clear to Estraven, he realizes Ai was living in total ignorance of the politics of the world around him.



Estraven tries to explain months of behavior to Ai, who he now realizes has been misinterpreting Estraven's actions. Estraven cut ties with Ai before leaving Karhide because he thought it would give Ai a better chance with the King, not because he didn't trust Ai or have faith in his mission. Similarly, Estraven remained hands-off in Orgoreyn because he knew this is what Ai wanted, and he mistakenly thought Ai savvy enough to navigate on his own.



Ai still doesn't understand Estraven's motivation. Estraven explains he wants the alliance of his world with Ai's. He doesn't care which country is the first to make contact, as "what does it matter which country wakens first, so long as we waken?"

For the first time, Estraven explicitly explains his politics to Ai. Estraven is on Ai's team — and he also wants to serve mankind by bringing the Ekumen to Gethen.



Ai is upset that Estraven didn't explain himself earlier. Estraven admits his "biggest error" was not being clearer. Ai says he doesn't mean to be unjust, but Estraven angrily points out "I am the only man in all Gethen that has trusted you entirely, and I am the only man in Gethen that you have refused to trust." Ai apologizes, and Estraven asks to learn mindspeech.

Ai finally begins to understand that Estraven was not inherently untrustworthy — instead, the two men continually miscommunicated because of their different backgrounds. Estraven's request to learn mindspeech is a peace offering — in mindspeech he cannot lie, and Ai will have to trust him.



CHAPTER 15

Ai wakes up in a tent with Estraven. He has woken up before, but is finally fully conscious, and understands where he is. Estraven is warm, and so he is sleeping outside of his sleeping bag shirtless. Ai feels as though he is seeing Estraven as he truly is for the first time.

For months, if not years, Ai has seen Estraven as strange and other. He hasn't trusted him, partially because he hasn't understood his gender. But now, seeing Estraven naked and vulnerable, Ai begins to see him as he sees himself.



When Estraven wakes up, the two men discuss how to get out of Orgoreyn. The most practical way is overland, traveling off road to the north, and then across the Gobrin Ice. Ai wonders if this is possible, but Estraven believes it could be. He hopes weather on the glacier might be easier to endure, like the peaceful glacial world within the folktale "The Place Inside the Blizzard."

In "The Place Inside the Blizzard," which is recounted in an earlier chapter, a Karhidish man crosses a glacier in a blizzard. In the middle of the blizzard he meets his (dead) brother, who is living in an inexplicably temperate zone within the snowstorm. Although this tale is likely fiction, Estraven hopes it was inspired by real weather patterns, which will protect him and Ai on their journey.



Estraven tells Ai, "I think we might make it." He is straightforward in a way Ai had, for many months, interpreted as irony. Ai asks Estraven to forgive him for what he said yesterday, but Estraven brushes it off.

As the pair spends more time together, each begins to better understand the other. What Ai had long interpreted as irony was actually Estraven speaking straightforwardly and earnestly.



Ai observes that Estraven is "never rash or hurried, but he was always ready." This constant readiness is why Estraven succeeded politically, and why he accepted Ai's mission from the start. Estraven confides in Ai about his intuition and "luck." Ai suspects this is related to the talent of the Foretellers of the Handdara. He also thinks it is related to the Yomeshta belief in seeing "everything at once: seeing whole."

Ai understands Estraven more and more with each passing day. Part of this comes from an open mind, and part of this comes from increased communication between the two. As they talk, Estraven explains the way in which he can wield luck and a vague sense of the future, which he believes is related both to the Handdara and Yomeshta traditions.



Estraven leaves for a day and a half. He returns with a huge bag of food. He has stolen it, but is not proud, and will not discuss it further. In Karhide the stigma attached to stealing is second only to suicide.

Estraven carefully calculates the rations required to travel the eight hundred miles across the arching glacier connecting the northernmost point of Orgoreyn to Karhide. They will first travel north onto the glacier, then east across the glacier for six hundred miles, then southeast. They'll stay off roads and avoid Inspectors. It is a plan Ai admits is both "practical" and "insane." It seems impossible to get a signal to Ai's spaceship, and so it the only way for them to survive.

The pair decides to leave the next day. They spend their final afternoon doing nothing so as to store up energy. Estraven writes in his journal, which Ai assumes is both an "obligation to and a link with his family."

As they sit in the tent Estraven wonders why Ai was sent alone. Ai explains the first Envoy is always alone, as "One alien is a curiosity, two are an invasion." Estraven comments that the First Envoy's life must be "cheap," but Ai explains all lives are valuable, which is why fewer are risked. He also reveals he wanted the job. Estraven says, "in danger, honor"; a proverb.

The next morning the two set out. They begin using snowshoes, carrying almost three hundred pounds on their sledge. They make it fifteen miles the first day, three miles over their twelve-mile a day goal. In the evening they discuss a previous sledge-trip Estraven took as a younger man. He describes that trip as a journey undertaken for "the augmentation of the complexity and intensity of intelligent life," an Ekumnical quote borrowed from Ai. Ai responds with his own Ekumenical quotation.

As they eat, Ai wonders if Estraven hates Orgoreyn. Estraven denies this, and admits he doesn't understand how someone could hate or love a country. If love of a country is hate of another, he thinks that is dangerous. He adds that "A man who doesn't detest a bad government is a fool," but it would be a joy to serve a good government. Ai says he feels the joy of serving a great government.

Because life is so precious on Gethen, anything that jeopardizes life is essentially criminalized. Still, Estraven's duty to Gethenian law is secondary to his desire to survive and to help Ai complete his mission.



Although Estraven's plan is risky, it is no riskier than leaving Ai in prison to die. He has decided that his own life and his own survival are less important to him than trying to save Ai's life, and allowing him a chance to complete his mission.



Estraven remains connected to his homeland and to his family (both of which he has been estranged from for at least a decade) through storytelling and language.



Although Ai has often been gawked at as a stranger and an alien, because he is alone he has rarely been seen as a threat. His singular presence makes him unique, but it also makes him more relatable, easier to engage with one-on-one as a fellow human.



Only a single day into their several hundred mile trek, Estraven and Ai are brought closer together through shared hard work and conversation. By using Ai's language and phrasing, Estraven shows that he has been listening to Ai and internalizing his message, and by responding, Ai affirms that he appreciates Estraven's gesture, increasing the intimacy between the two.



Estraven has frequently warned against the dangers of patriotism, and once again makes it clear that he has no single allegiance to a single nation. He finds it easy to love the people and places within a nation, but not the concept of a nation itself.



As they prepare to sleep, Ai wonders if Estraven will continue to call him “Mr. Ai.” The two decide to be less formal, calling each other Ai and Harth. Ai asks Estraven who uses first names, and Estraven explains “Hearth-brothers, or friends.” As they say goodnight to each other, Ai refers to both Estraven and himself as “alien.” As he drifts off to sleep, Ai wonders how he can be friends with someone who, in kemmer, could be his lover. In his mind, someone who is neither man nor a woman is “no flesh of mine.” He believes there could be “no love between us.”

As they travel through the forest Estraven traps and kills some pesthry, which they eat. The next day, as he and Ai climb into the mountains, Ai becomes ill. Estraven stops their journey before their scheduled break, and orders Ai to rest. Ai is upset by what he sees as patronizing behavior. Ai doesn’t like being ordered around by someone he sees as weaker and more feminine, a “mule” to his “stallion.” Eventually, Ai realizes Estraven wasn’t being purposefully patronizing, he was just trying to help. Without his own sense of masculine pride, Estraven didn’t understand how he was offending Ai’s. Ai decides that if Estraven can lower his shifgrethor and personal pride to better get along with Ai, he can work on being less competitively masculine.

The pair continues on. On the ninth day of their journey, thousands of feet above sea level, they come to Fire Hills. This is a borderland between the mountains they’ve been climbing and the Gobrin Ice, a hotbed of volcanic activity puffing smoke and melting ice into steam. Both Ai and Estraven are happy to see this awe-inspiring sight, even if the fire and ice seem to spell “DEATH, DEATH.”

CHAPTER 16

Estraven continues to keep a diary. Ai, although he knows he should keep a record of his time for Ekumenical files, does not. Estraven keeps his diary for the Records of his Domain, and for his son.

For the past months, Ai and Estraven have called each other by their last names and formal titles. Now, in a more intimate setting, they agree on less formal names for each other, the equivalent of calling a friend or colleague by their last name instead of “Mr.” or “Ms.” Still, there remains a level of separation between the two. They notably do not use their informal first names with each other (Genly and Therem), which would indicate a deeper intimacy, and one which Ai, at least, resists.



Estraven cares about Ai and his wellbeing, but the two are on different pages when it comes to how to communicate their feelings. Ai, a man, takes pride in his masculinity, which is tied to pride he feels in being strong and healthy. He sees Estraven, who is androgynous, as less of a man, and therefore as someone who cannot and should not be stronger and healthier than he is. However, Estraven hasn’t intentionally insulted Ai’s masculinity; instead, because of cultural differences, he simply didn’t consider it. By trying to be more aware of how the other is feeling, the two hope they can get along better and be kinder to each other.



When Ai and Estraven see the Fire Hills, they have an almost religious moment. Although the volcanic activity is dangerous, it is also beautiful. Additionally, although they do not mention it, volcanic activity often leads to the formation of landforms, thus allowing new life—even if the volcanoes themselves are deadly. In this contrast of fire and ice is the central contrast of light and dark, worshiped by the Handdara.



Each man has a reason to keep an account of his journey. Although Ai’s mission is arguably more important, it is Estraven’s family who motivates him to write.



Estraven asks Ai about his family. Ai, who has spent many years traveling through space in suspended animation, is only thirty, but he was born a hundred and twenty years ago. He has outlived his parents and everyone he ever knew. Estraven has never considered this. He remarks that Ai is also an exile. Ai jokes that he is exiled for Estraven's sake, and Estraven is exiled for his. Estraven has noticed Ai is more patient with him. He thinks perhaps the two "have learned to pull together."

For the next several days Estraven and Ai struggle to make significant progress across the rocky, uneven terrain. They are unable to move their sledge the desired twelve miles a day, but they do make personal progress. The pair begins to cooperate and communicate, compromising on the heat of the tent (Ai wants it very warm, Estraven prefers it cooler).

Estraven observes that Ai is both vulnerable and strong. He can haul twice as hard and fast as Estraven, but his mood is more changeable. Estraven respects Ai's lack of fear and his courage. This manifests in Ai's desire to take risky, unstable paths from the rocky ground up onto the glacier.

These risky routes do not work, and Ai and Estraven must go west, the wrong direction, in order to find an intact ice flow that will allow them to ascend the glacier. Estraven can see Ai is frustrated, but Ai does not cry in front of him. Estraven wonders why—whether it is shame, or some combination of "personal, racial, social [and] sexual" reservations.

On the twenty-third day of their journey, after twelve days of stalled progress, Estraven and Ai finally make it up onto the glacier. On the twenty-fourth day of their journey, Estraven begins to feel more confident about their chances of making it to Karhide. Unfortunately, he is entering kemmer, and being close to Ai is difficult for him. He distances himself from Ai as much as he can in their small tent, but Ai notices and asks if he has offended him somehow. Estraven, embarrassed, explains he is in kemmer.

On the glacier, alone with Ai, Estraven feels their sexualities to be equally strange and alien. Removed from the context of Gethenian society, he sees himself as isolated and unique. Ai remarks that in the universe, Estraven's race is sexually unique and lonely.

Both Estraven and Ai are united in their isolation. Both men have been separated from their families. Estraven left his Hearth under what seems to be a self-imposed exile, and left his country under a government-imposed one. Ai, meanwhile, is separated from his family by time and space. Both men are alone, but find solace as they come to better understand each other and grow closer.



Although Ai and Estraven come from different backgrounds, and although Ai did not initially trust Estraven, the situation demands they work together. They are able to make their relationship work, sacrificing personal pride for the sake of their collaboration.



Ai's masculinity makes him volatile and courageous. In contrast, Estraven, like many Gethenians, is measured and cautious. However, he is able to understand why Ai acts like he does, and does not become frustrated by him.



Gethenians cry easily, as there is no social stigma against it, but Ai does not. Estraven suspects that Ai's masculinity, which makes him take pride in his strength, also prevents him from crying because it could represent weakness.



Ai is essentially in permanent kemmer. He is constantly male, and so Estraven is stimulated into kemmer (presumably, though not explicitly stated, as a woman). Unconsummated kemmer is frustrating, and although Estraven has no choice but to interact with Ai, he does his best not to let himself get aroused, being uninterested in, or at least wary of, attempting sexual intimacy with the Envoy. Still, the pair has become intimate enough that they can discuss Estraven's kemmer.



Although each person is alien to the other, through their shared journey each is able to see that he himself is also strange. Without the greater context of Gethenian or Ekumenical society, both Ai and Estraven are totally unique and alien to themselves and to each other.



Estraven remarks that the Yomeshta would argue “man’s singularity is his divinity.” Ai wonders what the Handdara would say, and although they do not have a “dogma,” Estraven repeats a related song, “Light is the left hand of darkness / and darkness the right hand of light. / Two are one, life and death” joined together. Ai hypothesizes that Gethenian isolation leads them to be interested in wholeness. Estraven disagrees. “Duality is an essential” as long as there is “myself and the other” or “I and Thou.”

Estraven, made bold by kemmer, asks Ai about women, which he has never seen. Ai explains that in many societies women lead different lives than men, though it is unclear if this is because of innate or learned differences. Estraven senses “equality is not the general rule” in Terran society. Ai reveals he has begun to forget what women are like after two years on Gethen, and that women are essentially as alien to him as Gethenians.

CHAPTER 17

This chapter takes the form of an ancient Orgota Creation Myth. This myth begins with the beginning of the world, when there is only sun and ice. The sun melts a valley in the ice, and from this valley three shapes come to life. One of them says, “I bleed,” another “I weep,” the third, “I sweat.” The three shapes climb out of the valley and create the world, sculpting mountains and hills, rivers, plants and animals.

In addition, the ice-shapes create thirty-nine sleeping men. The ice shapes allow themselves to melt into milk, which flows into the men’s mouths and wakes them. The first man to wake up is named Edondurath. He is afraid of the other men waking around him and kills all but two. Of these remaining brothers, one is nameless and the other is named Haharath. Haharath escapes but Edondurath tracks him down and kills him.

Edondurath returns to his home on the ice and builds a house out of his brothers’ frozen corpses. The corpses speak, and continually ask, “Does he burn?” and then answer themselves, “No.” Eventually, Edondurath enters kemmer, and the corpses shout “He burns! He burns!” Edondurath’s final living brother comes to join him in kemmer, and Edondurath becomes pregnant with the race of man.

Estraven and Ai’s relationship mirrors the central relationship in the Handdara religion. The two do not strictly represent lightness and darkness, but they are very different, and have learned to overcome their differences in order to work together. They have managed to transcend thinking of the other man as “other,” and instead have begun to think of the other as a partner and a friend.



This moment is one of explicit social commentary about “Terra” or Earth. Through Ai’s eyes, Le Guin suggests that the gender binary has made men and women feel as alien to each other as Ai and Estraven are to each other. Although men and women are the same species, Ai and Estraven are literal aliens, and still manage to find common ground.



This chapter, told as an Orgota myth, provides the reader with insight into the culture of Orgoreyn. It at once illuminates the foundation of the nation’s culture and the basis of their spiritual life, if not necessarily the basis of one of the two major religions (Yomeshta or Handdara).



This myth acts as a kind of warning — Edondurath’s fear of other people leads to the murder of his siblings. On Gethen, where life is hard, and therefore especially precious, this likely reads as a particularly heinous crime, and so Edondurath’s fear is especially dangerous.



Along with accounting for the birth of mankind, this myth covers the first kemmering as well. Here, kemmering brings together a murderous brother with the man he would have killed, and from their unlikely union comes the human race. As is often the case in Gethenian mythology, a kemmering pair is able to overcome a greater animosity and bring love and peace into the world.



All of Edondurath's children have a **piece of darkness** within them "because they were born in the house of flesh" and "therefore death follows at their heels." According to this story, in the beginning there is only sun and ice, but in the end there will be only ice and darkness.

Although not tied to a specific religion, the concept of a "piece of darkness" lodged within the soul of mankind echoes Handdara principles. The Handdara believe every person contains both darkness and light within them, and both are necessary for life to endure.



CHAPTER 18

Ai, writing from later in his life, remarks that he is sometimes taken back to his time in the tent with Estraven, the two of them in "the center of all things," insulated against the lonely darkness of death. Ai identifies these moments as the center of his life.

In the introduction to this chapter, the reader is reminded that these events are from a story in the past, reflected on from the future. However, Ai engages with the events as though they are his present, similar to the way the Yomeshta believe that even as time passes they remain in the center of their lives (their calendar, for example, is perpetually in year zero).



Ai's months on Gobrinn are difficult, but in hindsight he sees them as joyful. He and Estraven enter into an easy rhythm of walking, eating, sleeping, setting up the tent and taking it down. They rarely converse while marching because of the painful cold, but talk in the evenings. Ai finds setting up camp exhausting, and often resents Estraven's methodical insistence on maintaining order. However, Ai recognizes that this order keeps him alive.

Ai and Estraven are able to overcome their differences in order to survive. They understand the loyalty they owe each other, and know that collaboration is key if both men want to outlast the harsh winter.



The two march for over fifty days. Estraven keeps a journal, recording short thoughts and notes about the weather, but nothing about his deeper conversations with Ai or the subject of mindspeech. Ai has promised to teach this skill to Estraven, but has asked him to keep it a secret from other Gethenians until he can check in with his Ekuminical comrades. Ai feels that mindspeech is the only gift of civilization he can give to Estraven, and possibly the only gift the Ekumen can give Gethen.

Mindspeech is one of the most alien offerings Ai has brought to Gethen. Ironically, although it is essentially an alien technology, it will allow him to be closer than ever to Gethenians who engage with him. Teaching others mindspeech goes against the Ekumen, but at this point Ai cares more about his personal relationship with Estraven than the details of his obligation to the Ekumen.



Ai suspects Gethenians and "one-sexed" humans can have sex with each other, but he and Estraven do not test his theory, even though Estraven enters kemmer one night early in their journey.

Ai and Estraven have become increasingly intimate, but neither man is interested in making their relationship sexually intimate.



In this moment, in kemmer, Ai sees Estraven as both a man *and* a woman. Up until now, Ai sees that he has been rejecting and “refus[ing] [Estraven] his own reality.” Ai finally understands Estraven’s frustration at Ai’s lack of trust, when Estraven had fully trusted him. Estraven had seen Ai as a human being, but Ai had been unable, until now, to see Estraven as the same, instead distrusting him because he seemed false, neither fully man nor fully woman.

Estraven tells Ai that while he is in kemmer they cannot touch, and so they do not. Ai thinks this sexual tension leads to great friendship, and eventually to love. It is the differences between them, not their similarities, which draw them to each other. Ai believes that “to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens.” However, Ai admits he and Estraven may have been wrong not to experiment with each other sexually.

A few nights after Estraven has gone through kemmer, Ai offers to teach him mindspeech. They try for many days, but although Ai reaches out, Estraven cannot hear him. One night, after an unsuccessful session, the men go to bed. Ai feels an empathetic bond between them, and as they fall asleep he reaches out to Estraven a final time, calling him by his first name, “*Therem*.” This time the mindspeech works, but Estraven is alarmed because, in mindspeech, Ai’s voice sounds like that of Estraven’s dead brother, Arek.

Ai calms him and explains what has happened. Estraven relaxes, but is surprised that Ai used his first name, *Therem*, instead of *Harth*. The use of this name is part of the reason Estraven thought his brother was addressing him. Ai apologizes, but Estraven tells Ai he can call him *Therem* from now on. Estraven doesn’t understand why the voice he hears is Arek’s. Ai doesn’t know, but asks more about his brother. Estraven tells Ai that Arek was a year older than he was, but has been dead for fourteen years.

Ai encourages Estraven to call him by his first name, *Genly*. Estraven reaches out, and he is able to mindspeak to Ai. However, mindspeech remains difficult for Estraven, as it disturbs him. Ai wonders if Gethenians are ill-suited for it, or if Estraven is a special case. He understands that something happened between Estraven and his brother, and the mindspeech, which sounds like Arek’s voice, is painful to him.

Estraven has trusted Ai and believed in his mission for most of their relationship, and was frustrated by Ai’s lack of reciprocal trust. This came from Ai’s more general distrust of Gethenians, which flowed from a misunderstanding of their gender. Now, finally, he is able to see Estraven as he sees himself, not as a man “pretending” to be a woman or a woman “pretending” to be a man.



In line with Gethenian—and specifically Karhidish—tradition, Ai and Estraven overcome their differences through love for one another. Their bond is not formed through sexual kemmering, as it is in much Gethenian lore (such as in “Estraven the Traitor”); instead Ai and Estraven divert any potential sexual tension into deep, unifying friendship.



Mindspeech is a way for Ai and Estraven to connect even more deeply with each other. In mindspeech one cannot lie, and so it would once and for all eradicate the mistrust between them. When it finally works, however, Ai speaks in the voice of Estraven’s dead brother. This is never fully explained, but perhaps Ai and Arek are the only two people Estraven has ever been fully open and honest with, and therefore they are unified by his subconscious.



The use of familiar versus formal names indicates the relationships of characters. Although earlier on in their journey Estraven and Ai decided to use slightly less formal versions of their names, the switch to first names signifies a newfound intimacy. As Estraven explained earlier, first names are used only for friends, family, and lovers.



Using their first names with each other introduces a new kind of intimacy into the lives of the two. However, some questions remain unanswered — Ai never finds out more about Estraven’s past life or his relationship with his brother, and they continue communicating verbally because the mindspeech is painful to Estrean.



On the fortieth day of their journey, Estraven remarks that they might have to cut rations. He begins to fast, but insists Ai continue to eat half-rations. This offends Ai, but Estraven explains that he has practiced fasting for much of his life, whereas Ai has not, and will die if he tries.

As they consider the future and their eventual arrival in Karhide, Estraven predicts what will happen to Ai. He suspects the Orgota will claim he has died, and will be embarrassed when he resurfaces. Argaven will briefly be happy to have him back, during which time Ai must send for his spaceship. Estraven knows that Karhide has been humbled by Orgoreyn and will appreciate a status boost of welcoming an alien ship.

Estraven wonders again why Ai was sent alone. Ai explains it is the Ekumen's custom, though he doesn't fully understand the reasons, knowing only that it values beginnings, and proceeding slowly and subtly. Alone as Envoy, he's more vulnerable and less threatening, but also more open to the world, able to be changed by it. All of his relationships are as personal as they are political. He is forced to think not in terms of "We and They...I and It; but I and Thou."

As with Ai's food-poisoning earlier in their journey, he is resentful of what he sees as Estraven's patronizing behavior. However, Estraven doesn't doubt Ai's manliness. Instead, he is merely taking practical steps to ensure they both survive.



Estraven predicts that Ai's mission will succeed because Karhide will see collaborating with him as a way to increase its own power and embarrass Orgoreyn. Although not explicitly stated, this foresight is likely linked to Estraven's special brand of luck, which allows him to sense the future.



Ai frequently felt like a freak and an outsider on Gethen, but he also felt the hospitality of its people and the richness of its culture. Although often seen as alien, he was forced to engage with Gethenians as potential friends and allies, which is what has led to his close friendship with Estraven. His solitary status has made him more open to religion, and the Handdara principle of "I and Thou" which has helped bring him and Estraven together.



CHAPTER 19

By the sixty-first day, Estraven and Ai have spotted a series of mountains, which signals that their journey is close to being over. They begin to travel south, which is encouraging, but the ice is rotten, which is dangerous. Additionally, they must navigate severe "white weather," thick precipitation that reduces all visibility. In this weather there is no sound and no **shadows**.

Estraven falls through a crack in the ice, and although Ai pulls him back out, Ai becomes increasingly tense. Estraven makes the decision to stop and set up camp for the day and plot a better, safer route down from the glacier. They reflect on the white weather. Ai fears it, and Estraven observes that "fear's very useful. Like darkness; like **shadows**." He continues, noting "we need the shadows, in order to walk." This reminds Ai of the symbol for yin and yang, darkness and light, which he draws for Estraven. He tells Estraven this symbol, two balanced opposites, male and female, are like Estraven himself, "a shadow on snow."

In the previous chapter Ai and Estraven discussed Handdara, and the essential balance of light and dark at the center of the religion. Here, on the glacier, they see a real-life example of the importance of contrasts; in a snowstorm, without darkness or shadow, they have no way of knowing where it is safe to pull their sledge.



As the chapter progresses Ai and Estraven draw an even more explicit comparison between the light and dark of the Handdara religion and the world in which they live. For example, fear, which Ai worries makes him weak, is a useful companion to bravery; it makes Ai cautious and keeps him alive. Importantly, Ai then shares the Terran yin and yang symbol with Estraven. This strengthens his bond with Estraven through cultural exchange, and also makes the Handdara principle more explicit to readers.



After the blizzard breaks, the journey becomes easier. Ai and Estraven finally reach the southeastern edge of the glacier. They abandon their sledge and put their supplies into backpacks, navigating down the broken ice more easily. Ai observes that Estraven, who is loyal even to objects, misses the sledge.

On the 75th day of their journey, after 51 days on the Gorbini Ice, Ai and Estraven finally leave the glacier to ski across the sea ice of the Guthen Bay. Two days later they finally see the Karhidish coast. From here Ai's recollection of the journey begins to fall apart. He and Estraven have almost run out of food, and although he remembers hunger cramps and moments of joy and exhaustion, he remembers few details until the pair finally reaches land. The day after, they reach a Karhidish village, 81 days after they first set out.

Finally on solid land, after 840 miles of travel (of which 730 were in the right direction), the pair find an inn in the village of Kurkurast. At first, Ai finds the light and noise overwhelming, but he feels as though he is home.

Everyone is shocked to hear that the two came over the Gorbini Ice, a journey no one undertakes in the winter. Ai is awed by the generosity of the villagers. They are poor fishermen, with little to give, and yet they give it happily.

Estraven knows that he is still considered a traitor and worries that the kind villagers will potentially be punished for helping him. He is careful not to divulge any details of his and Ai's journey, so as to protect the innocence of their hosts. He decides they must leave, partially for the villagers' sake, and partially because they need to find a transmitter so Ai can contact his spaceship.

Estraven intends to return to Orgoreyn after his work is finished. Ai is depressed both by the fact that their journey is not over and by Estraven's impending departure, and so commits to asking Argaven to revoke Estraven's banishment before Karhide is inducted into the Ekumen. Estraven appreciates the gesture, but says he has been exiled from his true home for twenty years.

Estraven is a loyal friend, even to the inanimate objects that have helped him on his journey. On Gethen, life is valuable, and objects that maintain life are as well. However, Estraven seems especially empathetic.



From the beginning of the first chapter Ai has admitted that he is an unreliable narrator. Although he is doing his best to report the truth of his journey, the truth is subjective to his experience. Here is a moment where Ai's storytelling breaks down entirely. Unable to even remember his journey, he makes no attempt to invent details for the reader.



After feeling like an outsider in Karhide for so long, it took a journey to Orgoreyn and then months on a glacier for Ai to begin to think of Karhide fondly—as not only a place where he is welcome, but a place where he belongs.



In Karhide, strangers feel obligated to help each other. Thus Estraven and Ai, complete unknowns, are nevertheless treated with amazing hospitality, as though they are friends or family.



Just as their hosts are looking after their wellbeing, Estraven feels obligated to protect his hosts. He knows that although the villagers are helping him willingly, his traitorous designation could rub off on them and harm them. He feels that he must pay his debt to the townsfolk who helped him by leaving, therefore saving them.



Occasionally Estraven mentions that he, like Ai, is a stranger far from home. Although Estraven is still on his home planet, Karhide is not truly his home. His home is his Hearth, from which he was exiled far before he was exiled from Karhide. Once he was separated from his family, he felt he would never be truly home again.



As they prepare to leave again, Estraven tells their hosts the story of their journey. Ai observes that Estraven tells it “as only a person of an oral-literature tradition can tell a story,” turning it into an epic saga that captivates even Ai, who lived it.

On their fifth day in Kurkurast, Ai and Estraven leave. For the next eight days they travel towards Sassinoth, which houses a radio powerful enough for Ai to contact his Ekumenical shipmates. Instead of camping, as they did all winter, the pair relies upon the hospitality of Karhidiers. Although the terrain is easy, Ai is joyless. He feels the true journey is over. Once in Sassinoth, Ai and Estraven seek out an old friend of Estraven’s from his early political career. This friend, Thessicher, is a farmer living outside the city. Although he is poor, he opens his home to the travelers, and offers to let Estraven hide out with him for the next few months as he waits for his exile to be revoked. Estraven doesn’t want to burden his friend, but the offer is appealing.

The next day Ai travels into Sassinoth. He sells the stove he and Estraven have carried with them all winter, and uses the money to buy time at the radio station. At the station, he signals a relay satellite in orbit above Gethen, which will in turn wake up the other men and women on his spaceship. He does not know if he is making the right decision, but has learned that life is full of uncertainty.

It begins to snow, so Ai spends the night in the College that houses the radio station. He feels secure and welcome, confident in Karhide’s kindness to strangers. In this moment he feels Karhide to be superior to Orgoreyn.

The next day, Ai begins to ski back to Thessicher’s house from Sassinoth. As he skis he sees Estraven, who is coming in the opposite direction. Thessicher has informed the government of Estraven’s whereabouts, and now Estraven must flee to the border. Ai is angry with Thessicher, but Estraven generously reasons that he asked too much of his old friend. The two men ski to the border, where they hide and watch guards, who Estraven assumes are Tibe’s Inspectors, patrol.

In this passage, the reader is able to see the powerful Gethenian oral tradition come to life. Readers have already read Ai’s and Estraven’s accounts of their journey, but Estraven’s retelling is clearly a different experience intended for a different audience – an epic told around a fire, instead of a book read alone.



Once again, Ai and Estraven rely upon the kindness of Karhidish strangers, who are legally obligated to house travelers for three days, but seem to feel morally obligated to house and feed them for as long as they choose to stay. Even Estraven’s friend will happily face legal censure if it means he can accommodate an old friend. Although Ai’s mission is not complete, his friendship with Estraven has by now almost eclipsed his primary task. Knowing that he and Estraven could soon be separated is more important to him than knowing his objective will soon be completed.



Although Ai’s whole purpose on Gethen is to unite it with the Ekumen, his journey has shifted his priority to his personal relationships, as opposed to his celestial obligations. Ai has also begun to internalize the Handdara idea that knowing the future is useless. He has begun to feel more comfortable with uncertainty.



Ai is unable to avoid the kind of patriotism Estraven warned against. Ai frequently feels warmly towards whatever country is currently housing and feeding him, lulling himself into a false sense of security, while forgetting that no nation is wholly good or wholly bad.



In the end, Thessicher’s concern for his own wellbeing overpowered his desire to protect Estraven from Tibe and the Karhidish government. Ai is angry, but Estraven understands. Even as Thessicher does not look out for him, he looks out for Thessicher, and understands that he was only protecting himself.



Now that Estraven has been outed, he can no longer hide in plain sight, but without a tent or food they cannot hide in the wilderness either. Estraven must try to make it through the border to Orgoreyn. As the day progresses, Ai becomes colder and sadder. He begins to realize what Estraven's plan entails. He will likely be jailed due to his lack of papers or sent to a Voluntary Farm, or shot by the guards before he even makes it to Orgoreyn. Ai sees that Estraven is willing to suffer or die for him, and for his mission.

As the sky grows darker, Estraven prepares to ski toward the border. Ai asks him to wait but he will not. Estraven skis towards the border and towards the border guard's guns. They shoot to kill, using foray guns instead of stun guns. Ai skis after his friend. Estraven has collapsed on the ground and is dying. He does not speak, but in mindspeech calls out, "Arek."

The guards allow Ai to stay with Estraven as he dies. Ai is then escorted to prison, and Estraven journeys "into the dark."

Estraven has made up his mind to suffer and die for Ai's cause. He worries that remaining in Karhide will compromise Ai's wellbeing. Estraven sees the bigger picture — Gethen's induction into the Ekumen — and is willing to sacrifice himself for it. In contrast Ai, who should be even more dedicated to his cause, is at this point more concerned with Estraven's safety than his mission.



The guards at the border value their orders from Tibe more than they value a human life. Ai, who understands that Estraven is sacrificing himself to save Ai's mission, still wishes his friend would be less selfless, so the two could continue on together.



Ai imagines that Estraven goes into the darkness of death in accordance with Handdara lore.



CHAPTER 20

Ai is taken back to Sassinoth where he is imprisoned. He is treated well, but must be imprisoned partially because he was with Estraven, a criminal, and partly because no one knows what to do with him. He reflects on Estraven's diaries, in which Estraven wondered why Ai was ashamed to cry. It wasn't shame, Ai thinks, but fear. Now he is beyond fear, and knows tears will not do him any good.

In Sassinoth, Ai is sent a physician who advises him to rest. Ai tries to sleep, but has nightmares of his time in the truck driving to his Prison Farm. The physician sits with him some nights, and at one point Ai wonders why Estraven did not stop skiing towards the border guards. He wonders if Estraven was trying to kill himself. The physician refuses to believe it, and chastises Ai for speaking ill of his friend.

Estraven's diaries help Ai feel close to him even in death. They will also be used as a way for Estraven's family to connect with him, and his life, posthumously. Estraven had suspected Ai didn't cry because it was not manly. Ai doesn't deny this, but suggests that it wasn't shame of seeming feminine, but instead a more general fear of appearing vulnerable.



Ai loves his friend and wants to respect his memory, but he still has much to learn when it comes to Karhidish codes of conduct. He was trying to work out for himself what Estraven's death meant and how intentional it was, but by considering this, Ai unintentionally insults his friend. Ai had forgotten that on Karhide, suicide is seen as a betrayal of one's community, whereas in his own culture it is more of a tragic personal choice.



News of Ai's escape from Orgoreyn is broadcast, as is news of his arrival in Karhide. However, news of his spaceship, and Estraven's role in his rescue, are omitted. Within ten days both the governments of Orgoreyn and Karhide have fallen. In Orgoreyn this means a new group of Commensals has replaced the old, and the Open Trade faction eventually takes over. In Karhide this means Tibe, cowed by Ai's new prestige, resigns. He resigned before he even knew of Ai's ship, but after he heard of Estraven's death.

Argaven invites Ai to Erhenrang. Still residually ill from his winter journey, Ai remembers little of the trip. However, when he arrives in Ehrenrang again, he feels stronger, his heart harder. He decides he must "set the **keystone** in the arch," and accomplish the task Estraven died for.

In Ehrenrang, Ai meets Faxe again. Faxe has since joined the kyorremy. Ai suspects Faxe only became involved in politics because of fear over Tibe's governing.

Faxe has heard that Ai's spaceship is coming, and wonders when it will arrive. Ai realizes he has not set a date, and needs to get to a transmitter to radio the spaceship. Luckily, where Ai was once met with resistance, now he is met with easy cooperation, and is able to signal it that day. The next morning Ai, who previously had waited six months for an audience with the King, meets with him after having waited only day. He reflects, "It had taken Estraven six months to arrange my first audience. It had taken the rest of his life to arrange this second one."

During this second meeting, Argaven sits instead of standing. Ai thinks he looks like a parent who has lost his child—which he is. Argaven is no longer afraid of Ai, and comments that Ai has served him well. Ai interjects "I am not your servant." Argaven wonders why Estraven betrayed him. He sees Estraven's attempt to get the Orgota government to join the Ekumen as an affront to Karhide and to himself, as its King.

Although no one initially believed Ai or wanted to collaborate with him, news of his spaceship has forced the government's hands. Yet now that Ai is closer than ever to achieving his goal, he is sadder than ever at the death of his friend. Connecting Gethen to the Ekumen was his life's mission, but trading Estraven's life for his success doesn't seem fair to him.



Understandably still upset and despondent, Ai feels that he cannot let Estraven die in vain. Just as Argaven laid the keystone in a literal arch in the first chapter, opening up Ehrenrang to trade, Ai must complete his mission and open Gethen to the Ekumen.



Faxe's political aspirations are not personal, as Tibe's were, but instead societal. He wants to do his best to make sure the government is taking care of the people he already personally cares about.



Ai, formerly perceived as an alien and an outsider, is now treated with great respect. Engaging with him and opening Karhide to the Ekumen is now politically convenient for Argaven, and so Argaven is treating Ai as a man who can do something for him, as opposed to earlier, when he was merely a threat, or possibly just the unwitting tool of a traitor.



Argaven, like Ai, has personal concerns beyond his primary mission. However, Ai is quick to point out he and Estraven worked for the good of mankind and for the Ekumen, not for Karhide and not for its king. They believed their interests were vaster than a single nation on a single planet.



Ai tries to explain that Estraven knew that if one Gethenian nation joined the Ekumen, others would follow. Ai tells Argaven that Estraven loved his country, but served only one master, the same one Ai serves: "Mankind." However, although Ai does not say it aloud, he considers it is only partially true to say Estraven served mankind, since Estraven also partially acted out of "pure personal loyalty" towards Ai.

Argaven wonders why Ai has only now called down his spaceship. Ai explains that while his survival is unimportant on a personal level, he has called down the ship to ensure he will be able to fulfill his mission. Argaven is happy Karhide will be the first nation to greet the Ekumen. Argaven is also happy Ai has made "liars" and "fools" of the Orgota Commensals. Ai reminds him that both Orgoreyn and Karhide will soon be allies of the Ekumen, though Argaven stresses "Karhide first!"

The meeting almost over, Argaven comments that Estraven was a good man. Ai asks Argaven to revoke his exile, but the King will not. Ai leaves upset with himself. He feels he has betrayed Estraven, although he knows that Estraven's primary wish was for Gethen to join the Ekumen.

The next day, Ai's ship arrives. He finds his colleagues, men and women, strange to look at, with voices either too high or too low. He is grateful to speak to his Sassinoth physician who has come to watch the disembarkment. His face, neither male nor female, seems more "familiar, right." After three years on Gethen, Ai's friends seem "like a troupe of great, strange animals, of two different species." His shipmates are all happy to see Ai, and embrace him.

By the end of the spring Ai's shipmates have spread across Gethen, working with the governments of all the planet's nations. Ai has decided to take a vacation to Estre, where Estraven was born. Although Ai could travel more swiftly with flying cards brought from his ship, he walks much of the way.

Estraven was not a patriot, and felt no obligation to elevate his loyalty to Karhide above his loyalty to mankind as a whole. However, Ai knows that Estraven persevered in his mission partially for the greater good, but also partially out of a love for Ai. Just as Karhide was built around kemmering pairs who grew into families, the alliance between Gethen and the Ekumen will have begun with two people who loved each other deeply.



Argaven still displays the dangerous patriotism that Estraven warned against earlier in the novel. Although Ai is happy Argaven is finally cooperating with him, he seems to be cooperating for the wrong reasons: elevating the status of his own country, and embarrassing his rival nations.



Ai feels an obligation to honor Estraven's last wishes, but in this moment he lets his duty to the Ekumen overpower his duty to his friend.



Ironically, after many years on Gethen during which time he felt lonely and alien, Ai has now begun to assimilate. His shipmates, who were once familiar faces, are now the strange and alien ones, and the faces he finds comfort in are the faces he once found to be "other."



Although Ai once resented the slow pace of Gethen, and once disliked feeling like an alien and an outsider, he has learned to love the planet. He is comfortable enough in Karhide that exploring it is no longer work, but instead relaxation.



Once in Estre, Ai can see the Kerm Glacier to the south. He recognizes the town is very old, its stone buildings cut out of the mountain itself. Ai knocks on the door of the Hearth and is admitted by a young man named Sorve, who feeds, cleans, and clothes him, before setting him up in a bedroom. Sorve then takes Ai to meet the Lord of Estre, Esvans Harth rem ir Estraven, Estraven's father. Ai came to Estre for two reasons. Firstly, he hoped for solace, but found none. Secondly, he brought Estraven's journals back to share with his father. Esvans remains unmoved by the mention of the journals, but Sorve comes forward, angrily. He is upset that Estraven is still called a traitor in Erhenrang.

Esvans introduces Sorve as the heir of Estre, and Estraven's son. Esvans is eager to hear of Ai and Estraven's journey across the Gobrin Ice. Sorve asks Ai to tell him how his father died, and about "the other worlds out among the stars—the other kinds of men, the other lives."

Even after Estraven's death, Ai continues to feel an obligation to him, and presumably remains curious about his early life. Ai has brought Estraven's journals to bring peace to his friend, but also to Estraven's father and son, both of whom Ai feels connected to through Estraven.



Although an alien and a foreigner, Ai's relationship with Estraven will allow him to forge a relationship with Estraven's family as well. Additionally, storytelling, manifested both in Estraven's diaries and in Ai's recounting of their journey, will help Estraven's family mourn, and better understand his life and death.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sanders-Schneider, Ivy. "The Left Hand of Darkness." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jan 2018. Web. 5 Apr 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sanders-Schneider, Ivy. "The Left Hand of Darkness." LitCharts LLC, January 17, 2018. Retrieved April 5, 2021.
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-left-hand-of-darkness>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Left Hand of Darkness* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Ace Books. 1987.

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Le Guin, Ursula K.. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace Books. 1987.