

STONES OF MEMORY

by

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PROLOGUE

For millennia, the New England coast had been a place of rock and sea. Of island and storm-wave, of boulder and slab. Of crevice and hollow, homes for crabs and periwinkles and other living things, some of which had always scanned sky and sea for danger, for storms, for anything visible.

The islands remained, though they were a little smaller, the sea a little higher on their flanks. The storms came a bit more often, and the waves crashed higher on the shores. There were as many boulders and crevices as ever, but there were many fewer of the creatures that hid among them. The dangers had changed to ones watchful eyes could not avoid. There were invisible poisons in the air and water, and even in the sunlight. Some killed; others only injured, reducing health and vigor and fertility.

The eyes that now stared from under rocks above the high-tide line were of another, less paranoid, less vulnerable kind, much like those that hid in tangled briar heaps and among the witch's brooms of fir trees.

They watched the sky, stained unrelenting yellow by the dust of distant barren-lands. They watched the sea that surged against the shore and struck spray from pockets between the boulders. They watched the swirling bladderwrack.

They watched the clots of froth that reached like fingers toward the child who danced from rock to rock, teetering as she avoided the clumps of slippery weed, peering into clefts and tide pools.

"Mommy! Mommy! Is this good?"

God's Promise looked at what her three-year-old daughter had found.

Because this time it was edible, a small crab, she picked it up and put it in the gleaning basket she carried in her left hand. One of the few gulls wheeling overhead cried out as if in protest. She gripped the handle of her basket a little tighter, for the pickings were not much better for them. If she set it down even for a moment...

"Mommy!"

"Yes, Ruth." She used her sleeve to wipe sweat from her forehead and cheeks. She pushed a few strands of dark hair that had escaped from the coiled braid beneath her fishskin hat back where they belonged.

She sighed.

This time the discovery was a bit of sea lettuce, green and salty and full of a flavor she had hated ever since the Haveners had brought her to their island when she was hardly larger than this child herself.

Not far away from the seaweed, a cluster of blue-black mussels clung to a weathered stump. They were not as rare as clams, but... She shook her head. She had been told mussels and barnacles had once covered every rock below the high-tide line. They didn't anymore, though there

were more barnacles every year.

There were many of the stumps, marking where the shoreline had been before the climate warmed and the sea rose. She pried the mussels loose and put them in the basket with the crab and seaweed. Then she studied the rocks and gravel nearby. Tiny flecks of bluish-gray caught her eye, and she smiled. Perhaps the mussels too were coming back.

As she straightened, a wave dashed spray higher than usual and splashed her dark chin-to-ankle gown. Ruth shrieked with laughter and danced onward, dodging the finger-waves that reached for her as well. God's Promise wished that she dared remove the gown, or at least hike it up around her waist, and let the waves splash her skin. This summer, even by the sea, was hotter than usual.

"Mommy!"

Now the child was bending over, legs spread, bottom indecently exposed beneath her skirt. Her wicker-framed fishskin hat, small version of what God's Promise and all other decent women wore though without the ornate sidewings, had fallen to the ground beside her. Her hair, cut short, was exposed to the youvee that had already bleached it nearly blond. Now she reached into a crack between two stones and withdrew a piece of green sea-glass, worn smooth by waves, surface frosted by abrasive sand, gleaming in the sun. One end carried a small barnacle.

"Pretty!"

It was already drying in the sun, turning dull, becoming just another colored stone. A bit of spit or skin oil would renew the shine, the beauty that was the residue of a very different world. Too much beauty for the sternness of the Haveners and their god and Delivered of the Lord's sumptuary rule.

"A sea-gift. How far can you throw it?"

"All the way!" cried the child, though her gaze clung to the jewel in her hand for a long moment before her small arm swung back and jerked.

The bit of glass arced through the air, parallel to the water's edge just a few feet from their toes. It landed on a boulder wreathed in bladderwrack and bearing a corroded iron mooring ring. Storm waves had lifted it from the depths and tossed it ashore long before. Once it had represented home, respite from the storm, release from labor, for some fishing boat or pleasure vessel; now it was nothing more than a mute memory of another, betterday.

"Now put your hat on."

"Will the youvee eat me?" The stone was already forgotten.

"You know it will." Though the mists that hovered over Haven's shores every morning usually offered some protection.

This summer they had been thin and brief.

"Will it eat my brother?"

The woman looked down at the swell of her belly beneath the long gown.

As if the baby knew they were thinking of him--or her--he kicked. "If he doesn't keep his hat on too."

"No, it won't!"

But she obeyed her mother then, even as God's Promise looked up the slope of the stony shore toward the line of trees that began above the reach of tide and storm. An opening in the trees revealed a pasture and a flock of goats, brown and black and white; not far away would be the woman or man or child who tended them. Another opening exposed a slope planted with potatoes, their white flowers a field of stars against the green.

And there he was. Tall and lean, his face edged with black where he kept his beard trimmed close. Sitting on a boulder not far from a heap of driftwood awaiting transport to the village.

Watching her.

She wished he could do more than that.

Some of the hidden eyes shifted their positions to see where God's Promise was looking. None were surprised that the man was there. Nor that he sighed when he saw her face turn in his direction, and again when it jerked away to look toward the clouds that clung to the horizon. Nor that his lips twisted to show that Ruth's laughter plucked at his heart as if she were his own daughter.

But she was not. God's Promise belonged to Delivered of the Lord no matter how much they had once loved each other or how much they had once wished to marry. That was the way Haven worked; its leader tested every young woman, and if she proved fertile, he kept her, just as he had kept God's Promise.

If he had not.... He sighed again. Bitter pain ate at the roots of his soul. God's Promise should have been his wife.

Ruth, her daughter, should have been his as well, just as should the child she now carried within her womb.

But no. All three belonged to another man instead.

He looked at his arm. The joints stood out, the muscles were thin cords, the skin was thin and translucent, marked by mere traces of the rash that had once been so common.

The mainlanders had found a library and learned that the rash existed because food no longer had in it everything people needed. They needed to eat more meat and put ashes as well as dung in their gardens. But though that had eased the rash, people were not really any better off.

Everyone was still malnourished in this age of the world, no matter how they struggled to find or grow food. Only bandits ate well.

He got to his feet when the sea swelled and lifted and struck the rocks with a shout and a fountain of spray. For a moment his heart leaped

with fear that God's Promise and Ruth had both vanished, washed away, claimed by the sea. But no, there they were, soaked until their own thinness showed through the cloth they wore, and laughing, laughing in the face of the sea that had seemed to reach for them.

Yet why should the sea reach for them? Why should she reach for anyone? The sea had never cared whether human beings lived or died.

It was all one whether their kind continued or vanished from the planet. She had never truly noticed their existence, not even in those most ancient days of human sacrifice to her powers. She would never know they were gone.

If humans had ever grasped the sea's colossal indifference, they might have felt humbled. But they were not humble creatures. Once they had puffed to see their huge tankers and aircraft carriers and freighters slide across the waves and never glimpsed that to the sea, their greatest ships were mere flecks upon her breast, of no more significance than any other flotsam.

They had seen their worst toxins strike at the sea with deadly effect and in awed, pleased dismay called themselves a plague upon the Earth, catastrophe, disaster, a force to rival the gods they believed had created them and their world. Yet the sea had diluted those toxins endlessly, bound them to fine particles, and settled them into her bed.

For all its pride in its deadly effect, humanity was no more to the sea than a rash would be to a healthy child, soon passed, soon repaired, soon forgotten.

Humans had been nearer the truth when they called the sea the Mother of all things. She had once been full of life beneath her waves. Her margins had been rich with weed and grass and mangroves, the tiny plants and animals of the plankton, clams and mussels and oysters, reefs and crabs and lobsters. Seals and otters and whales had swum wherever she reached. Fish had schooled and migrated and visited the rich waters near shore to mate and lay their eggs where there was food to support the uncountable billions of their young. Salmon and shad had swarmed up streams and rivers to breed. Everywhere there had been gulls and terns, puffins and penguins and ducks, auks and albatrosses, skreeing and wheeling, feeding, nesting, resting on the great sea's heaving bosom and outthrust shelves of rock and ice.

Where had all the creatures gone? They had gone to feed the vast numbers of humanity at its peak, or died of humanity's toxins, or vanished when the food they needed vanished first.

How, then, could the sea be so complacent? How could she think that humanity had been only a rash and its damage would soon be healed?

How could she not? She had suffered worse from volcanoes, comets, and asteroids, and soon, each time, she had recovered.

Yet "soon" did not mean to the sea the days or weeks or months it had meant to humans. It did not mean even years, not even centuries or millennia, but eons. A few fish and shellfish, seals, whales, and seabirds remained. In time, they would multiply and replenish the sea.

Where species had vanished, new ones would appear, evolved to fit the same niches humanity had preempted. In time, in just a few million years at most, a fraction of a percent of the planet's age, quite "soon" enough on that scale, the sea would be as rich as ever she had been before.

So would the land, and not only the sea but the Earth would be restored.

Would it matter to the sea if instead everything that lived simply vanished? She was mindless, neutral, a bystander, Mother of All not by design but by suitability. Her tides would continue to rock back and forth in her vast basins. Waves would move before the wind and crash upon shores of rock, sand, or mud, wearing away at the land. In time, if there were no life, the climate would change. Carbon dioxide released by volcanoes would accumulate, heat would be trapped, and water would boil, wreathing Earth with clouds like Venus. Or perhaps, if the volcanoes lay quiescent for a few millennia, the carbon dioxide would dissolve in the sea and be lost from the air. Then the climate would cool. Perhaps the sea would freeze.

But even as she vanished in steam or ice, the sea would not care. To her, to the nature and the universe of which she was one small part, the moment was enough. Whatever was, was.

Regret and wish and dream were human things.

# "Soon" had not yet come to pass. It had been far too brief a time since the collapse of humanity, and the sea that species had so nearly sterilized might--if she were alive and aware and as much in pain as humans had once liked to credit--still be holding her breath against the possibility that the rash would return.

Yet the breath the sea held was only metaphoric. Humanity had never been more than flecks disturbing the wash of her fringes upon the shore. A few of those flecks remained, still stepping on the edge of the sea's foamy skirt.

Here were two, large and small, malnourished and weak and reduced in station to scavenging food from an impoverished shore, the lines of their thin bodies showing beneath soaked cloth.

It seemed impossible that they could ever rise again to the heights of power their kind once had occupied.

Yet the small one danced, and both of them laughed.

While hidden eyes watched every move.

## CHAPTER 1

"Our Father."

It wasn't the first time there had been no wind. The sea's bosomy swells rolled unruffled to the horizon, and Brother Michael leaned into his oar, repeating the line of the prayer with his fellow oarsmen.

"Which art in Heaven."

He pulled, feeling the working of muscle and bone, the sweat popping

out of his skin and disappearing. The yellow sky glowed like hot brass. The sun poured heat and youvee down upon the small boat.

"Hallowed be Thy name."

He reached again. The prayer was their work chanty, its phrases timing the strokes of their oars as perfectly as any coxswain. It was also their life; they were monks, after all.

Of a sort. Not a one of them had ever had instruction or known a bishop or a priest. The faith they claimed was one of fragments that had survived an age of chaos.

"Thy kingdom come."

There were no kingdoms any more. England and Rome were both myths of the past. The Church itself had vanished, though a pitiful few still groped after ancient beliefs.

He pulled. His heavy woolen robe was pushed down to his waist. The heat insisted, even at sea, and if cancers bloomed on his tonsured scalp, his neck, his back, why, it was God's will, wasn't it? They would surely have struck him anyway.

"Thy will be done."

Reached. When he looked over his shoulder, he could see a line of land and forest against the western horizon. Then they hadn't been insane to think they could cross the Atlantic. There were stories of people who had done it long ago, single madmen, Vikings in their longships.

But the madmen had had specially designed boats, and the Viking longships had been larger and carried spare masts. They hadn't rowed across.

He pulled, and the little boat surged forward. Yet their destination was no closer.

"In Earth."

And reached and pulled again. Of course it was. They had begun their voyage in Ireland, after all.

"As it is in Heaven."

Reached. In a ridiculous little cockleshell of a boat they had named The Green Isle because it was all they would ever see again of home.

Twelve monks and their abbot, fleeing the barbarians with all their treasures.

"Give us this day our daily bread."

Pulled. Though they had eaten the last of the oat bread and cheese they had brought with them a week before. One wooden barrel still held a few withered raw potatoes. The other barrels held only water, intercepted from the frequent rains. Yet they would have kept the empty barrels even if it had not rained, crowded between their feet.

All knew they would be invaluable later on, unless they came to a land

that had coopers.

"And forgive us our debts."

And reached. The treasures were sealed watertight into those shiny metal chests at either end of the boat.

"As we forgive our debtors."

Pulled. If they let us live. Thank God they had had a real sail then, and wind to fill it. Only later, over a week later, had the wind grown too strong and the mast snapped. They had been helpless, the leather sail stretched tight from gunwhale to gunwhale, shielding them from the waves that crashed over them, holding them within their cockleshell as it pitched and bucked, dove deep and shot to the surface once more while seawater sprayed through the cracks that even prayer could never seal.

The dark interior had stunk of vomit, but no one had thought to complain. God's will, and besides, it would have been suicide to unfasten the boat-cover. At least, until they had to bail or sink.

"And lead us not into temptation."

Reached. What could possibly tempt him now? He looked at his fellow monks. They had all been brawny men before they left.

Used to hard labor but fed well enough by the grace of God. They still had their muscles, though all else had withered. He tried to imagine them sleekened and breasted, not just the daughters of peasants such as he had known when he was young and a peasant himself but succubi of the sort he had once resisted in the night, and he felt nothing. The thought of land, though, ah, that made his limbs tremble and his mouth water.

"But deliver us from evil."

And pulled. That was why they had fled Ireland, wasn't it?

They all prayed they would find no barbarians ahead. No opposition.

Best of all, no one at all.

"For thine is the kingdom."

Reached. Just give us a tiny piece of it to tend for You.

And maybe a few natives to convert.

"And the power."

Pulled. Not that we want any. Just don't give evil men dominion over us.

"And the glory."

Reached. We will sing Your praises...

"For ever."

Pulled. Aye. And a day or two beyond as well, we will.

"Amen."

They shouted that last word as they always did, and they reached and pulled mightily, and for a stroke their little boat leaped ahead.

"A breeze," said Brother Brendan from his position in the bow. He had more gray hair rimming his scalp than any of the rest, which was why they had chosen him their abbot. There had been no bishop to say them nay.

The air was stirring, just a bit, just enough, and toward the shore as well. Going their way, so they could ship their oars, all but two which a pair of monks held erect. Brother Brendan himself stripped off his robe and slid it over the oars so that when the monks braced them between their legs and against a thwart to form a V, they had a sail.

A small one, to be sure, but it caught enough wind to move them forward and rest their arms. Thank God.

The monks, all but the two who held the sail erect, turned on their seats to face forward. The distant shoreline was closer already, its contours resolving into folds that might mark bays and streams, or perhaps islands. Gulls were in the air above them now, soaring from the land as if to welcome them, or as if praying that they were fishermen with offal to discard overboard.

Brother Brendan was holding his ancient map in his hands.

It was made of paper waterproofed and toughened by plastic, yet age had faded it, creased it, worn it thin in spots. The abbot was unfurling it, studying it, struggling to place their landfall.

Michael scratched at the salt in his beard. He touched the string of seeds and polished stones that was the rosary around his waist. If the devil had not led them astray, or if God had not seen a greater need for them elsewhere, they were in the Gulf of Maine, entering Penobscot Bay. The largest islands would be Matinicus, Deer Isle, Isle all Haut, Swan's Island, Vinalhaven, Mount Desert, Islesboro. The smaller would be Ragged, Wooden Ball, Seal, Great Spoon, Little Spoon, Great Gott and Little Gott, McGlathery and Hog and Eagle and Crotch and hundreds more.

Brother Michael had loved their names ever since he had first seen them on the map.

The wind freshened, and the sail-holders grunted as they leaned into their task. The water lost its smooth shine and developed a bit of a chop. Thin clouds spread to dirty the sky, and ....

"A whale!" someone cried.

"Where?"

Brother Herman was the only one of them all with red hair.

His cheeks bore the scars and pits of youthful acne. Now he pointed to port, but when Michael looked there was nothing there but a bit of spray in the air.



"You're daft, Hermie," said Brother John in the stern. He was one of those holding the sail. His cheek bore an angry red line, the not quite healed mark of a barbarian sword. "It was nothing but a wave."

"I saw it," said Brother Herman. "A great long swell in the water, the biggest one I ever saw. White scars on its back, and a raw red sore, and right after it spouted it waved a fluke in the air. That's when it vanished."

"I didn't see a thing." Brother John's tone was sour, as if he suspected Brother Herman of claiming a sore for the whale just to call attention to his scar.

"Nor I."

"It wasn't there, Hermie."

"It was, too."

"You're seeing things."

"Sunstroke and hunger will do it to you sure. Put your hood up."

"It's too hot."

"Getting cool pretty quick with that breeze," said Brother Michael. He thought he believed. Brother Herman surely could not be so petty as to torment his fellows. Though after so long at sea.... Nor would he have hallucinated that sore, would he?

Somehow Michael didn't think sunstroke could explain his claim to have seen the whale. Hunger, maybe, but they were all just as hungry, and no one else was seeing things.

"There aren't any whales anymore," said Brother Jason. When he licked his thin lips, he reminded Michael of how thirsty he was, and he did the same.

"No big ones, anyway." The snake tattooed around Jason's left biceps writhed as he worked his oar. Like all the others, he had not always been a monk.

"Maybe it was a seal." Brother Brendan was pointing toward a rough spot in the water, a ledge of exposed rock, and on it there were three slug-like harbor seals. Their heads were raised as if they had forgotten the days when a boat of any size meant danger and a sudden need for panicked flight. For a moment Michael wondered if they had any ancestral memory of passing Vikings.

"I know a whale when I see one. Seals don't blow."

"Then it must have been a pilot whale or a minke."

Herman shook his head insistently. "A blue. A humpback."

"Not a sperm whale. They've been extinct for centuries."

"Not that," Brother Herman agreed. "But it was bigger than a minke."

"It's not there now," said their abbot. "But perhaps we'll see it again." He pointed ahead, where they could see rocks along the shore of what was quite clearly a small island. The dark outline of a cormorant perched on a boulder and seemed to eye them skeptically.

Gulls were skreeing overhead.

They passed it by even though every one of them ached to set foot on land once more. This island was too small to support them, and larger ones were just ahead. One would be their future home.

If they made it. Brother Michael looked at the sky. The clouds were thicker, the wind harder, the water rougher. It suddenly seemed quite possible that God would play a cruel prank upon them at the very last moment.

At the abbot's command, four of the monks took up their oars as they approached the next island. The robe-sail came down, and while its holders worked the cramps from their arms, the oars pulled against the water. The boat steered closer to a shoreline fringe of rock and weathered stumps. Above the high-water mark was a wilderness of knobby granite, scattered trees, grass, and brush. There was no sign that human beings had ever dwelt there.

Brother Brendan shook his head. This island also was too small, too poor in the resources they would need. They shipped their oars, raised the sail again, and let the wind push them onward, toward a larger, darker shore. Here there was woodland, sometimes sparse, of mixed spruce, fir, pine, and oak. There was no sign of living human presence, though among the trees they glimpsed occasional bone-white walls of stone, blood-dark chimneys, a patch of pavement that had not yet been overgrown or broken by winter frost. A tumbled line of rocks, awash in the waves, marked where there had been a pier. Michael thought he glimpsed the broad-beamed outline of a fishing boat on the bottom below.

Too exposed, thought Michael. Too subject to the storms that would sweep out of the North Atlantic and make the wind that built the waves all around them and drove them scudding along the shore look like the gentlest of zephyrs. He looked at the sky.

The clouds were thick now, dark, blotting out the yellow sky and stained themselves with pus and old bruises, urging them to waste no more time or they would have no more to waste.

A cut opened to starboard. They let the wind propel them into it and close by the port shore, under dark masses of trees, thicker here but still revealing the tumbled ruins of the human past. They were in quieter water now, the wind sighing in the trees and hardly touching their makeshift sail. The oars went into play once more, and they put their backs into forcing their cockleshell onward.

Brother Brendan pointed to an indentation in the shore ahead. It proved to be a narrow, shallow harbor that had once sheltered a fleet of small boats. Some of their wreckage was visible littering the seabed beneath their own hull. Some, shattered and twisted, its colors bleached by decades of youvee, formed part of the windrow of debris and driftwood at the highwater line. The shore was gently sloping mud and gravel.

Half an hour later, Brother Michael was stamping one foot, then the other. If he did not, his legs trembled, but it was really quite enough to marvel at the solidity of the ground beneath him. No more rocking, heaving, lurching. He could stretch. He could walk and run and stamp. He could even.... He tried it, but when he landed, he staggered and almost fell. No, he couldn't jump. Not yet.

All the monks were covered with mud past their knees.

Brother Brendan was inspecting the treasure chests for leaks, touching his rosary and nodding with satisfaction, ordering their concealment beneath a driftwood log. Brother Jason was kindling a fire. Brother Michael was hauling a line ashore to tether their boat securely.

Brothers Diego and Samuel were doing their best to construct a shelter by stretching another line between two tree trunks and throwing over it the leather sheet that had already served them as sail and boat cover and now would be their tent. Brothers Herman and Kretzmer, stripped to their clouts, were combing their arms and hands through the mudflat's substance, seeking and finding clams in a profusion they had never seen in Ireland.

Not that profusion was quite the right word. But an hour's labor produced two dozen clams, where at home it might have yielded six. And all had heard old tales of clams by the basketful. All knew the world was not what it once had been.

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The storm finally blew itself out three days later. Brother Michael emerged that morning from their shelter, saw the sun, and said a brief prayer. He checked the harbor; their boat was still there, though it rode low in the water. "Praise God," he said, grinning as if his prayer had been answered. Brother Brendan agreed, plucking at his own sodden robe; wind had filled the tent with spray until they wondered whether the sea had risen to engulf them.

The monks kept their clothing on until after their abbot had performed a brief service. Then while their robes dried, draped from tree limbs and over bushes, they explored their refuge. It did not take them long to decide they did not wish to stay.

There was a sheltered harbor. There was wood. But the soil was rocky; feeding themselves would forever be a struggle.

By midafternoon, they were staring across the narrow gap that separated their island from that other shore. Brother Herman pointed out a seal and a pair of cormorants in the water and said, "There's fish enough for them. We could survive here."

Their abbot indicated the boat wallowing in the harbor.

"Why has no one bailed the Green Isle out?"

Michael thought the answer obvious: None of them had wished to think of how they had spent the last few weeks of their lives.

But he did not say the words aloud. Instead, he and the others waded into the sea as if Brother Brendan had just ordered them to prepare their boat for another voyage.

They embarked the next morning, rowing so quickly across the cut that they hardly felt at sea. They then turned to port, paralleling the shore while they studied the ruins they could see. They did not wonder what had happened, for the scene was familiar; the only difference in Ireland was that armed men would be visible wherever some rocky knob deigned to lift them high.

Their presence would have drums rolling, horns blowing, smokes rising to warn the locals of raiders, or of prey.

Here there was none of that. The land seemed deserted as they passed the end of the island on which they had sheltered and saw to port an endless stretch of open sea interrupted by the humps of two or three smaller isles. To starboard was a promontory, and beyond that a bay that dwarfed the anchorage they had just abandoned. They entered, and soon they were staring at what had been a town or small city. The trees were sparse enough to reveal dozens of ruined buildings and a gridwork that had once been streets. A long pier jutted into the harbor. When they came closer, they could see that it had been built of granite blocks; storm waves had disarranged the stones enough to show that the pier had been added to in response to the rising waters.

Layers of stone covered ones of asphalt that marked the pier's older surfaces.

Brother Brendan studied his faded map. Then he scanned the lines of the harbor around them. Finally, he said, "I think, Vinalhaven. We stayed on Swan Island."

They tied up to a corroded mooring ring set in the stone.

Brothers Samuel and Kretzmer lifted onto the pier one of the treasure chests they dared not abandon even briefly. Diego and Joseph took the other.

As soon as they reached the foot of the pier, Brendan fell to his knees, raised his arms to the sky, and cried, "We thank Thee, Lord.

For safe passage and a welcome harbor, for a land where we may pass our days and keep our treasure safe."

"It just lacks people," said Brother Jason. "If we can't recruit new monks, we're only delaying the inevitable."

"God will provide," said the abbot.

Brother Michael laughed. "He's done a fine job so far."

"Aye." Brendan climbed back to his feet. "And why should He stop now?"

The ground at their feet was hard, a thin layer of soil over pavement.

Brother Herman scuffed at the sparse grass and moss with his sandal.

What he revealed was as black as soot.

They found more char everywhere they looked. It was a distinct layer in the city's yardsoil. It was deepest in the cellar holes still clearly defined by stone foundations. It was absent only from the stones themselves and from the brickwork of broken walls and lonely chimneys, for wind and rain had scrubbed them clean.

"The city burned," said Brother Jason. "There's nothing left for us.

Not a house, not a roof, not a library."

"Then we'll build what we need," said Brother Brendan. They walked the streets, and he pointed at granite foundation stones, each one a foot thick, two feet wide, and four feet long. He ignored those foundations that had been built of brick or concrete; they had cracked and bulged and broken where the stone stood firm against the years. "There's all we need for walls."

"We'll have to build hoists," said Brother Michael.

Their abbot shrugged. Of course they would, but they knew how.

"Here's our place." Brother Herman was standing on the rim of a long stone rectangle.

"Why here?"

Herman pointed at a mass of metal, green with years of corrosion, that rested in the cellar hole. As Michael stared, its shape suddenly defined a bell. "A church," he said.

Brother Brendan turned to survey the neighborhood. There was certainly stone enough nearby. There were trees as well, and surely somewhere in these ruins were the tools they would need to hew rafters and split shingles. He nodded, agreeing with Herman that this site would do for their abbey.

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Over the next few weeks, they cleared the debris from what had been the church's basement, leaving the bell where it had fallen when the building burned. Then they hauled the stones that had been the foundations of other buildings, levering and hoisting them into position until the walls of the abbey began to take shape.

Their masonry labor was slow and arduous, but it was not all they found to do. They gathered grass and fir boughs and arranged their bedding in the shadow of the walls they were building. Their leather sail, which had sheltered them from storms at sea, now stretched overhead as a lean-to roof.

The treasure chests had a place of honor against one wall.

They used foundation stones to frame and roof a box that would keep off rain even if a storm blew away their sail, wall out fire, and even stand firm if the larger wall above it collapsed.

Before they tucked the chests into their niche, Brother Brendan opened one. From it he withdrew a small wooden box which he handed to Brother Kretzmer, who opened it gently to inspect the array of scalpels and curved needles it held. When he nodded approvingly, Brother Brendan

withdrew a massive book whose leather cover was rich with tooling.

There was an expectant sigh and a gentle rattle as each monk fingered the seeds and stones of his rosary. When the abbot undid the metal clasp that held the great book closed, it opened as if of its own accord to expose pages that had been copied by hand almost a thousand years before and their margins filled with tiny paintings. He did not read from them, for neither he nor any of the other monks could do more than recognize the ancient Latin, but he could recite the passages he had memorized from other, English Bibles: "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice. For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas, and the floods compassed me about; all Thy billows and Thy waves passed over me."

He closed the book again. "And He delivered us. He gave unto us a new land, and a task, to rebuild His house. When that is done, He will show us what next to do."

"Amen," said his followers.

He handed the book to Brother Jason and stepped aside.

Jason set the illuminated manuscript Bible back in the chest.

But he did not then close the chest. Instead, he drew out another book, its cover of faded paper, and opened it carefully.

He turned several pages before settling on one: "The highest officially recorded sea wave was computed to be 112 feet from trough to crest.

The night of February 6-7, 1933, during a hurricane. I don't think anything quite that bad passed over us."

Someone chuckled. Someone else said softly, "Our Lord is merciful."

Seeds and stones rattled once more.

Jason put the book away. Others were visible as well, but he did not touch them. The monks all knew what they were: more Bibles, a hymnal, a history of the world, a lives of the saints, a home-repair manual, an anthology of Irish poetry, several more, all the library of their order and all they could save when the barbarians reached their portion of Ireland.

When the sun and its youvee glare were strongest, they stayed beneath their roof, weaving baskets to use as fish traps and nets to capture seabirds, fitting handles to the rusted axeheads they found in the ruins, grinding metal on stone to restore an edge, binding knives to poles to make spears with which to claim seals for meat and oil. They sorted the other tools they found as well, hammers and saws and more, and marveled at those that had been made of metals that did not rust.

From time to time, they stopped work to pray.

When the sun was not so fierce, they sweated at their stonework. But they also explored the island. They found berries and roots. They discovered the quarries that had originally supplied the stones they were stealing from the ruins, and with them piles of broken stones of all shapes and sizes.

They found vantages from which they could see other islands; the largest, to the northeast, their map called Deer Isle, and it was close to the mainland.

Brother Samuel was the one who saw the sail.

## CHAPTER 2

The eyes gathered thickly around the Webb family's compound, hiding beneath shingles and strips of sheet metal on the roofs, in cracks between foundation stones, in shadows under porches, in the weeds at the bases of fence posts, everywhere they would not be noticed. Their task was to watch and notice, record and report, and they were more faithful to that task than any mere human being could ever be. They never slept. They never paused to eat. They never let themselves be distracted. And they rarely missed a thing.

#

The target was an old birch log, gone too punky to use for decent firewood but still firm enough to thunk as the arrows struck it one by one. They did not strike quite beside each other, but not one of them missed. If the log had been a torso instead, every arrow would have killed it.

"Luanna!"

The archer lowered her bow and turned toward the circular colonnade that stood on the poisoned ground beside the garden, where nothing grew. Beneath its open center, exposed to sky and sun, Great-Grandpa and Mad Doctor Vanya, Maddoc, shared a stone bench. They themselves were stone as well, a foot thick, half that again in width and depth.

Their eyes were bands of sparkly glitter an inch below their tops.

Between them was the stone that had once held the dog Thunderstone and now held portions of an ancient medical library.

Dried saliva clotted the scraggly, gray beard of the man who sprawled on the ground, his back against one of the posts that held up the colonnade's roof. The few hairs he had left on his scalp were wispy and gray. His skin was jaundiced and puffy.

His head lolled, but he held up a bottle and called again, "You're a proper daughter. I'm glad Felix found you."

Felix Webb laughed as Luanna flipped one braid back over her shoulder and returned to her archery. His Pa never failed to be impressed that his wife had more talent and inclination for the bow than any of the men who also lived in the Webb compound. If he was on his feet, he might even throw a comradely arm around her shoulder and offer her a swig of his applejack. At such moments, she had confided, it was all she could do not to recoil from his wheezing, stinking breath.

Luanna's bark quiver hung from the handle of an ancient refrigerator that had been a shrine for Felix's late Ma. By the time she had used the last of the arrows in it, Pa had finished his bottle and passed out. She retrieved quiver and arrows and crossed the compound to the house she shared with Felix and Karyn and their children.

The compound was an oblong scatter of buildings set on the cracked, eroded surface of what had once been a paved road. The smallest was the animal shed, which sheltered chickens and goats and pigs. Beside it was the workshop. Beyond that was the small house where Ox and Bella and their daughter lived; flowers clustered beside the stoop, where old asphalt had been removed and replaced with dirt. Across the yard was the original Webb house, where Pa still lived beneath a leaky sheet metal roof.

Uncle Alva occupied its snugger el.

Felix and his wives had the largest place, long and low, banked with flowers, and the only one whose chimney at the moment vented smoke.

Windows everywhere were mismatched salvage from the ruins of the past, squares and oblongs and bulging bubbles.

"You know the old man needs a surgeon," said Maddoc. His usual jauntiness seemed subdued. "That's a cancer. If you leave it alone, it'll kill him."

Curses burst from the workshop across the yard, beside the animal shed.

Then Uncle Alva fell silent and the metallic sounds of hammer and wrench and file resumed.

"There aren't any surgeons. You know that. No doctors, either. Not any more." Felix stared glumly at the black growth on the back of his Pa's neck. It was the size of his little fingernail, surrounded by brown-weathered, wrinkled skin that said that even broad-brimmed leather hats could not be total protection from the youvee. There was no sign of the rash he once had worn, as had all his family and all the other people they knew.

"You could cut it out yourself," said Maddoc. "Do it now.

He'll never know a thing, the amount of applejack he's swallowed."

Felix shook his head. He fingered his thin beard and softly said, "He needs it. But what if he came to while I was carving on his neck?

What would he say?"

"He wishes you could do it," said Great-Grandpa.

"I would...."

"He would if he could but he coont," chanted Leo. Felix's son by Luanna, named for her father who had died in the bandit raid from which Felix had rescued her, he was a skinny threeyear-old. When his hat fell off, he showed a ragged mop of sweat-streaked blond hair. "He's just a big rock. Got no hands, got no balls, can't do much but talk."

Felix grinned, for the boy had captured precisely the way Maddoc often spoke.

"If I had hands, I'd smack you a good one."



Leo's laughter rang beneath the circular roof that shaded them against the sun and echoed off the stones. Gravestones held no fear for him, and the sassy banter he exchanged with Maddoc and Felix's Great-Grandpa and the other stones that stood about the compound was as familiar as the yellow sky above and the stunted trees that covered the surrounding landscape.

"I can't do it," said Felix. "I wouldn't know how deep to cut."

"I'll talk you through it. Stitching up afterward, too."

"What about infection?"

For a moment the stone was silent. Then it said, "Soap and water.

Some moldy bread. A little of that applejack...."

"Don't you dare." Pa's head rolled against the post, hiding the tumor.

One eye opened, showing red. "Just waste it."

"You don't want to live?"

"Ain't gonna."

"There's that," said Maddoc. Even if his cancer vanished, Pa Webb would not be a healthy man.

"Rotten liver, rotten heart," said Felix. "I never can remember what you called it."

"Yellow skin," said Maddoc. "That's jaundice, and it means hepatitis, probably cirrhosis. And look at the way he's all puffed up in the ankles and wrists and cheeks. Extra fluid because his heart isn't working as it should. Edema and congestive heart failure.

"Besides, Ma's gone." His wife and Felix's mother had died the winter before, coughing and wheezing as a cold turned into pneumonia. They had buried her in the family's small cemetery in the shadow of firs thick with witch's broom. Soon after that, Pa's energy had seemed to drain away, and he had spent more time than ever with his jug.

"Grampa's gonna die?" said Leo.

"Betcha ass," said Pa. He blinked as a sunbeam found his face. He groped for his hat and flopped it onto his head. He did not seem to mind that a little sunlight and youvee struck his neck. "But later."

"Will he turn to stone too?"

"No," said Felix. "People don't do that anymore." Neither he nor anyone else tried to explain that the talking dead were a product of vanished technology, just as were antibiotics and automobiles and electrical power plants and heart transplants and a thousand other things now known only by the shadows they cast upon the world: the memories of the recorded dead, piles of coal, miles of roads and ruins and derelict machineries.

The gravestones that stood as sentinels around the compound erupted in a clamor of bells and horns and hoots and hollers to interrupt his worrying. Little Leo screeched, "Company!" and began to run toward the trail that led away from the compound.

As he passed the doorway of the house, Luanna stepped into his path, braids swinging, and scooped him up. "Not till we know who they are!"

He struggled, but her grip was firm.

Uncle Alva emerged from the workshop with a long-handled axe in his hands and peered toward the trail. "A couple," he said.

Then he put a bloodied knuckle in his mouth, not far from a scab left by the broken glass with which he shaved. In the shadows behind him one could see the thin line of mustache that identified Hussey. When he stepped more into the light, he showed gaunt cheeks, dark sunken eyes, a blade-like nose. He had changed since he had come to live with the Webbs and partitioned off part of Pa's living room for his quarters, where he spent his nights alone. Now he looked more like a bandit than he ever had when he had really been one.

Bella appeared in her own doorway. The child in her arms squirmed and whimpered. "Hush, Marjy." She jounced her daughter gently as she waited for the visitors to draw nearer, a pair of broad hats above two figures wrapped in leather cloaks, one a man, the other a woman. Their exposed skin was red with rash.

They stopped in the center of the compound. The man turned small, dark eyes on Uncle Alva and Hussey, on Bella and Luanna, and then on the colonnade and the figures beneath it. Pa Webb did not stir. The woman stared hungrily at Luanna and Leo, Bella and Marjy. Her lips were tight, and the skin of her face seemed pale.

"It's true then." She trembled as she spoke.

Luanna nodded. Her expression was kind, caring, sympathetic, though she said nothing aloud.

"You can have kids."

Bella nodded too.

"We heard," said the man. He held out one hand and stared at his own rash. "Someone knew how to fix this. How to make the babies live.

And they would tell us."

"Tell them," said the woman. "Who we are."

"Abner," he said, looking at her now. "And Tamsin.

Curtis."

"Yes." Felix stepped out of the shadow of the colonnade.

He identified himself and the others. "You heard right."

"So introduce us," cried Great-Grandpa. "That'll bring 'em up to speed

fast enough."

Abner Curtis stared at the colonnade. The three stones stood plainly sunlit in the center. "We have some of those out our way, too."

"Devils," said the woman. "Decent folks stop talkin' when they die."

"That's what my Ma used to say," said Felix. "But then that one..."

He pointed at Maddoc and said his name. Then he explained that the stone that had once been a doctor had urged him to search out a hospital library to learn the nature and the cure for his own rash, as well as the infertility that had threatened the human population of the region with extinction.

What they had found was a computer with barely enough life left to tell them it could help.

"It had lots to tell us, too." Luanna was still holding tight to Leo, who still squirmed and tried to break free.

"But it was dying."

"That's Great-Grandpa," said Felix. "We saved some of it."

"Wiped the pups and budgies," said Maddoc. "Did you know some folks used to store the minds of their dead pets in those electronic gravestones?"

Abner nodded. "I've heard 'em howlin' at night."

"Demons," said Tamsin. Her eyes were wide now. "That's why you never see 'em."

"Just pets," said Felix. "Though they could talk a little once they were in the stones." He turned and patted the image of a dog that had long ago been carved into the face of the one that had been Thunderstone. "My favorite."

"But he's not a dog anymore," said Maddoc. "We wiped him out and downloaded a piece of library."

Abner and his wife looked perplexed, but no one explained what the stone meant, though Luanna smiled sympathetically and said, "It gives advice now. Ask it about the rash."

Tamsin hesitated. She had called the stones demons, after all, and she had behind her a lifetime--a tradition, if her mother had also called them demons--of distrust and fear of the dead who did not die. But then she fingered an angry-red and scaly patch on her arm. Her face was more pinched than ever and she was shaking her head, but then she took one step toward the colonnade and said, "Why don't my babies live?"

"Chlamydia and gonnorrhoea," said the stone promptly.

"Love bugs," said Pa. "Can't do much about them."

"Vitamins and minerals," the stone added. "Increase proportions of meat and fish in diet. Increase proportions of legumes, grains, and

green vegetables in diet. Expected benefits: Reduced dermatitis, enhanced fertility, enhanced probability of live term delivery."

"It sounds like you," said Abner, looking at Great-Grandpa.

"But stiffer."

"It's a piece of him," said Leo from the doorway where his mother still held him.

"Not room enough for me and all those databases, too."

Both Curtises were shaking their heads now. Tamsin looked especially disbelieving.

"We'll give you one," said Felix. "You can ask it lots of things, and if you don't understand the words it uses, it can simplify."

"Give?" Abner seemed suspicious.

"That's what they do," said Hussey. "Make copies and give them to people so the information gets spread around."

"Can't give you one yet, though," said Uncle Alva. "Not till Ox gets back with a new load."

Tamsin Curtis licked her lips and looked toward the stones that had announced their arrival so loudly.

"They're not petstones," said Felix.

"Not volunteers," added Great-Grandpa.

"Though we did pretty well fill up their spare memory with databases," said Maddoc.

"But why give them away?" asked Abner. "You could..." He seemed to be groping, as if for a concept that once had been familiar, too familiar to be spoken of, but had now escaped his mind entirely.

"People would give you things for them, wouldn't they? Food, or work, or..." He glanced sidelong at his wife.

"Or..."

Felix laughed. "They don't have anything to spare, do they?"

And they never will, if we don't help them now."

Another woman appeared in the doorway of the house beside Luanna. Her hair was a cloud of tight curls, and the skin of her face was taut over jawline and cheekbones, but her belly was round. In her arms she held a girl who might have been almost two.

As soon as she saw the belly and child, Tamsin Curtis's face took on a look of hungry yearning.

"I'm Karyn." The glance she sent Felix's way plainly said she too was his wife, while the way she and Luanna seemed to lean against each other in the doorway just as plainly said the two women had no

difficulty sharing a man. "We can put you up while you're waiting.

Can't let you leave empty-handed."

Leo reached up and tugged at the wrist that braced his sister's bottom.

"I'm hungry."

"It's ready. Enough for everybody."

#

Later, Uncle Alva and Hussey showed the visitors the workshop. Its floor was dominated by a narrow wagon with six wheels that had been taken from the trunks of the automobiles the ancients had left beside every road. "A trundle," Alva said.

"It's not very fast except downhill. The canopy is solar cells I salvaged from an old roof. I've found batteries here and there."

Abner made admiring noises, but Tamsin's attention was more for the bench that spanned the wall at the end of the room. It was littered with wooden sticks and feathers. Some of the sticks were straight, some gently arched and tapered.

"That's Luanna's," said Felix.

"I make bows," said his wife. "Bows and arrows."

"Rabbits?" asked Abner.

"And bandits. We keep them just inside the doors, just in case...."

Tamsin showed her teeth in a mirthless grin; at some time in her life she must have suffered at bandit hands. Abner grimaced and glanced at the houses, obviously thinking of the reception he and his wife would have met if they had not seemed peaceful.

"I'll give you a set."

"A gun would be better," said Abner.

Felix shrugged. "The only gun I ever saw was in a Havener's hands."

Both Curtises spat on the workshop floor, but before anyone could speak, the shouts and hoots of the sentinel stones drew everyone outside once more to find another couple entering the yard. The man moved awkwardly, his arms and legs crooked and ungainly. He used a stick to stay upright, but despite the effort movement clearly cost him, he smiled. His spiky hair looked like a tuft of grass.

"Aunt Miriam!" cried Leo, and there was no mistaking the resemblance to Karyn of the woman who walked beside the crippled man, her hands held ready to catch him if he fell. Nor was there any mistaking the look of yearning that settled on Hussey's face when he saw her.

The man bent his steps toward the colonnade that surrounded the stones, let himself down onto the bench beside them, and stared sadly at Pa, still slumped against his pillar. When he looked up a moment later,

Miriam relaxed and scooped up her nephew. Only then did she let her eyes meet Hussey's; once their parents had intended them for each other, but life had taken them on separate paths.

"We need something better than a pointed stick," Abner said.

"For what?" The stranger did not wait for introductions but plunged into the conversation as if he had been there all day.

"Bandits?"

"Good guess, Gil."

"It isn't hard, Alva." Gil turned back to Abner. "There's other ways, you know. Look at me."

Abner and his wife both looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"I'd be easy meat even if I had a cannon, eh? But I've never been bothered."

"She has." Abner gestured toward his wife, whose eyes were suddenly haunted.

"And you lived out in the bushes all by yourself. I've always had neighbors. Had to, you know."

"We help each other out," said Felix. "He makes wine. We cut his wood and such."

"There are others too," said Miriam. "Not too far off, and the bandits stay away."

"Too tough a nut to crack," said Pa.

"Waking up, are you?" said Gil. "But even if you've got a hangover, you know that's not so. They just have easier prey somewhere else, and they don't trust each other enough to band together." He looked at Abner. "That's all it is, really. But it's enough, for now."

"There's safety in numbers," said Great-Grandpa. "Move closer to your neighbors. If there's enough of you, the only weapons you'll need will be rocks to throw."

Abner looked skeptical. "The soil won't support very many folks in one spot."

"That we can help." Felix once again patted the stone that had been a dog. "It knows more than we do about gardening."

Luanna indicated the garden, where panels woven of branches and vines provided partial shade. "It told us how to block out some of the youvee. Everything grows better now."

"I'd still rather have a gun." Abner's expression seemed calculating as he watched the stone under Felix's hand.

"You wouldn't need it if you moved nearer here," said Gil.

Looking suddenly frightened, Tamsin Curtis poked at her husband's

arm.

He shrugged her off. "We've got a nice place now." He stared at Felix. "Can't these stones tell you anything useful?"

How to make a gun?"

"What do you mean, 'useful'?" cried Maddoc, but Uncle Alva cut his protest short. "Not these," he said. "But there are other libraries.

At least there ought to be."

"The university," said Great-Grandpa. "North of here. With everything the ancients ever knew."

"If it's still working," cautioned Felix.

"The hospital was." The stone did not say just how nearly dead the hospital had really been. "So there'll be something.

Engineering and physics and mechanics. Art and literature and film.

History and politics. Everything that ever made our kind great."

Abner was leaning forward, intensely interested. "Guns, then," he said. "And bombs. Tanks and jets. Everything we need to stop the bandits."

"Or to become them," said Great-Grandpa, though no one seemed to notice what he said, any more than they had noticed the expression on Abner's face, to which the stone was responding.

"Are you going to go there?" asked Abner.

"Eventually," said Luanna.

"As soon as possible," said Great-Grandpa. "There's no telling how much longer whatever's left will last."

Felix nodded, remembering the condition the hospital had been in when they found it. Its library was almost dead until they found a way to restore its solar power supply, and once they did that its memory immediately began to fail. He shared his ancestor's sense of urgency, for though they had no way to guess what knowledge might have survived in the university library for them to salvage, there was also no telling how long it would remain salvageable.

He wished they had known about the libraries earlier. Then they would have been able to mount salvage expeditions while those repositories of ancient knowledge had more life and more knowledge left to them. But he had been the first Webb in generations to pay much attention to the stones in the cemetery, the first to listen to them and act on what they said. He did not know whether anyone else in the world had ever done the same.

"But we can't rush off," said Luanna. "First we have to make sure everyone we can find has a copy of what we got from the hospital library. They need all the help we can give them."

"Gardening and nutrition and health," said Maddoc. "The basic needs.

We should even give stones to the bandits."

"No!" Tamsin Curtis sounded horrified.

"It'd keep them tied down to one place. You can't haul us all over the countryside, you know."

"Not easily," agreed Felix. "But we'll manage. We have to."

"That's what the trundle's for." Uncle Alva was pointing back toward the workshop. "We'll put a few empty stones on it, to fill up with whatever we find."

"It looks ready," said Abner.

"Almost. I have to replace part of the canopy, and it needs a few more batteries."

"And then you'll go."

"We really have to," said Felix.

Uncle Alva nodded. "If the Haveners or bandits don't interfere."

### CHAPTER 3

The eyes also clustered around the Inger farmstead, just as they did around every place where humans lived. It was as if they--or whatever intelligence lay behind them--found humans and their doings fascinating beyond all else.

Yet they went to great pains never to be seen. In that way they were like the elves and brownies and pixies of by-gone ages.

But they were neither mischievous nor helpful. They only watched.

#

They worked at opposite ends of the kitchen, chopping carrots and potatoes and turnips for a stew. But the sounds their knives made on their cutting boards were the only sounds.

Her own mother wouldn't look at her. Day after day, the bitter, frozen silence dragged on, and neither noticed the glitter of tiny eyes in the corners where walls met rafters.

"It wasn't my idea," she said.

Nothing, unless one counted that stiffening of the neck and shoulders, that sudden slam of knife through turnip. Her mother was so much older now, dark hair gone gray, face lined and grim, thinner, bonier, as if something had gone out of her when her children left.

There was the slam of metal on metal outside the house. She did not think it came from the smithy. Her father hadn't built a fire in his forge since her return. More likely he was working on his still, getting ready to run off another batch of applejack.



"You know what he's like."

Still nothing, and of course her mother knew what Caleb Inger was like.

As soon as their first daughter had been old enough, he had been on her. The second and the third had suffered his attentions in their turns, and there had never been a thing they or their mother could do about it. Their only hope had been escape.

Trudy had been kidnapped by the Havener before her own turn had come.

But when she came back....

She should have stayed on Haven, shouldn't she? Accepted her lot, known what would happen, kept her ambitions to herself.

But....

She transferred her share of the vegetables to the bowl beside the woodstove. Only when she had turned away did her mother do the same and then add water to cover everything against the air.

They would need a chicken next. For a moment she was tempted to do nothing, to force her mother to say something about the need, to ask her.... But then she shook her head and sighed and left the house.

The chickens were scratching in the yard. When she swept one arm as if strewing scraps upon the ground, they rushed toward her. Before they could realize her gesture was only a feint, she grabbed the oldest hen by the neck.

The axe she needed for the next step in the process was in the shed, where Caleb had his workshop and his still. She stepped into the dimness, noting the odors of goats and chickens and hay and old smoke and well-fermented cider, and there was her father, one hand on her elbow, breath reeking, his belly--soft behind a leather apron--pressing against her hip.

"Going to make me a grandpa, eh?"

"Pa, more like." She wished she dared to spit at him. She did try to twist away, but his grip was too firm.

"I'll take care of that little thing for you." He was grinning now.

"But first...." He tugged her toward the haystack to one side.

"Not now. She wants this right away."

"You mean she said something to you?" He shook his head, but he let her go. "Frigid bitch. She's just jealous, you know.

Ain't got what it takes anymore. Too old and ugly to make another kid."

She had the axe in her hand now. The hen, as if it knew what was coming, began to flap its wings and create a gale of dust and litter.

Her father backed off, one hand in front of his face.

She wished she knew whether it was the axe or the cloud of dust he was avoiding.

#

While she plucked feathers into a bag, she told herself that if she had been fertile a little earlier, she wouldn't be here now.

She had just passed the woodpile behind the shed when a rough, fish-stinking hand had clapped over her mouth and an arm had wrapped around her chest and lifted her into the air. She was powerless to scream or move; she could only exist, frozen, as her captor carried her away from the house and onto the trail.

Later, when they stopped so he could catch his breath, she told him: "You're a Havener."

He had nodded and identified himself: "Consideration Wiggin."

"Why?"

"Can you walk by yourself now?"

"I want to go home."

He had nodded and sighed and produced a length of rope. He had tied her hands and leashed her like an animal. She had bowed her head and wept.

"Why?" she had repeated at last.

"We have a mission," he said quite plainly and sanely. "God gave it to us. We have to multiply and replenish the Earth with our own righteous people. When we have obeyed...."

"The Second Coming." She had heard of that.

"The Resurrection." He tugged on the leash. It held.

"Let's go. We don't have to run now. Your Dad can't chase us."

He had taken an arrow in his leg when he joined the Haveners to chase down the Webbs and her sisters.

"I don't want to go."

He ignored her protest. "We need women. Fertile women, and your family is a large one. Delivered of the Lord will be pleased with you."

"Who's...?"

"Our preacher. Our leader."

Trudy was a fast learner. By the time they reached the coastal ruins where his boat was docked, she rarely balked or faltered and he almost never had to use the end of his rope to sting her butt. He tethered her to the rail, pushed off the shore, and struggled to raise the sail.

"It really takes two to sail this tub." He shrugged.

"But...." He managed, though the boat lurched and the sail boomed in the wind. An hour later she was standing on the Haven dock, beneath the high cross they had built, its arms tipped with golden balls.

The dock stretched ahead of her toward shore. It had been built of heavy stone slabs; heavy beams ran along its edges and were studded with cleats to which were tied a dozen skiffs.

Larger boats, such as the one that had brought her there, swung at anchor in the harbor.

However, her attention centered on Delivered of the Lord, tall and gray and round in the belly, who was smiling at her and handing her leash to another, thinner man. "Put her in Applicant's House."

The thin man took her first to a low wooden building presided over by an elderly woman with no teeth and severe gray hair drawn back in a tight bun. Her black gown concealed her figure, but the way she moved showed that she was built of root and sinew. As soon as she saw Trudy, she lifted a bundle from a shelf, shook it out to reveal a shift of rough black cloth, and said, "Strip, child."

Trudy did not wish to obey, but when the woman began to push one sleeve up a corded arm, she realized she had no choice. Soon she was naked except for the gold locket her mother once had given her.

"No, child," said the woman. "No vanities here. No pretties but the Word of God." She brushed aside Trudy's hand and seized the locket.

The thong that supported it snapped like a thread.

Applicant's House was not far away. A single room built of stone, it had one tiny window high in one wall, tucked beneath the peak of a roof of salvaged planks. A narrow plank bench was all that passed for a bed. The door was barred on the outside.

When her door opened for the first time the next morning, she leaped to her feet. But the man there had no food with him, only a book, and when she cried, "I'm starving!" he merely opened the book and began to read: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light...."

While he read, she studied him: He was young, barely old enough to show a beard, and so slender that she did not think he got enough to eat.

His wrists and knees, his elbows and the backs of his hands, his cheek were marked by a scaly red rash much like what she had seen on Felix Webb and Ox and Luanna. She had it too, though hers covered less skin and was not so red or scaly.

And he seemed so serious! As if what he read were more important than food or air or life itself!

Half an hour later, the boy changed his tone to ask: "What was the first part of existence, before the creation of Adam?"

"The Earth, of course."

He shook his head and sighed and began again: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth...."

"Heaven, then." She almost shouted as she saw what he was after. "Or God, who made heaven and earth. And then the darkness and the waters and the light and...."

He nodded, closed his book with a clap, and turned toward the door.

"Can I have something to eat now?"

But he only reached around the corner for a bucket half full of sand.

The sand he poured over the wet spot in one corner.

The bucket he set beside the bench-bed. Then he left.

When he returned the next day for another reading, she answered his questions right the very first time he asked them.

He rewarded her with water and a strip of dried fish, and she understood. As young as she was, she could see that his aim was to make her eager to learn what all Haveners knew and believed, to absorb all that made them Haveners, to become a Havener herself.

She did not resist for long. She was still a child, after all, and children were accustomed to just such training at their parents' hands.

Starvation had never been used against her before, but other things had. She was barely aware of how well her very nature understood and accepted as she did her best to become what they wished of her. It was not long at all before they moved her to the compound where Haven's few other children lived and learned.

A year later, when her courses flowed for the first time, they moved her again, into Delivered of the Lord's own house, where the windows had glass, and the walls had no cracks for the wind to penetrate, and a woodstove like her mother's made the mornings warm.

She stayed until Haven's master decided she could not bear him a child.

#

Her mother cut the chicken into pieces and began the cooking of the stew. Trudy watched until she felt a twinge of pain in her back. Mama had warned her of that, but.... A hand flat on her belly. There was no swelling yet, though she knew she was pregnant.

Her lessons had puzzled her when they came to the next generation after Adam and Eve. They were, said her teacher and the Bible from which he read, the very first human beings. There were no others. Therefore, she had said, they could only have married each other. There had been incest then, just as there was now.

But her teacher had been horrified when she said that.

"No!" he had cried. "Incest is an awful sin! Look--here--the Land of Nod, that's where Cain dwelt, on the east of Eden, and that is where he knew his wife."

"Then Adam and Eve weren't the first people, were they?"

"Of course they were! It says so, right here."

"Then who lived in the land of Nod? Monkeys?"

He had looked shocked, as if she had uttered some horrible heresy, and shaken his head. "They must have looked like people, eh? But they weren't really people until they married Cain and Seth and all the rest. It's like us, the Haveners. We're the ones who will inherit the world. We're the only real people, the only ones that count. But anyone can be a Havener."

"If they're young enough."

"Well, yes. If you're too old, you can't truly accept our beliefs.

You can't truly be one of us."

And incest was a sin. Guilt and damnation, unless she could do something as expiation. Something to serve the Havener mission. Which was, after all, what she was here for.

There was a chair on the narrow porch of their house. Dad had made it from branches so that it looked like something to be found in a thicket of the woods. But it had a seat and back woven of leather strips, and it was comfortable. She put her broad-brimmed hat upon her head and lowered herself into the chair, sighing as the pressure came off her back.

Dad was still making noises in the shed. So were the goats in their pen, bleating and chewing and farting. Chickens scratched in the yard.

"You look pale," said a voice. "You sure you're getting enough milk and meat?" She glanced at the gravestone that squatted askew beside the house a little past the edge of the porch. She could not help her shudder of revulsion, even now, even after all her exposure to it.

Such things, Delivered of the Lord and the Haveners had taught her, were the work of Satan.

Every one of them should be destroyed, and they would be when the Haveners achieved their ascendancy over the world.

Yet she could not destroy this one, not if she were to be a successful spy. It was therefore fortunate that this stone was neglected, denied the full honor of its evil. The Webbs had insisted Dad take it, Mama said, but they couldn't make him mount it properly, like some heathen idol, surrounded by a ring of roof, open in the center to allow sunlight to strike the solar cells that powered the stone's memory. He had put it where it was now, one corner on a rock, and left it canted there.

"You sure? If you don't, you know, the little bugger'll build its

bones out of yours. You'll wind up weak and fragile.

You won't live long."

"Will you shut that thing up!" yelled her Dad from the shed.

"I'm shrugging," said the stone more softly.

"They taught me the truth," she said just as softly. Why was she talking to the Devil? Perhaps, she told herself, she did not believe a stone so concerned about her unborn child's health could be such utter evil. "I believe. I've been born again.

I'm saved. I'm a vessel of righteousness, a bearer of God's own soldier, and God wouldn't let that happen to me."

When the stone made no answer at all, not even a derisive murmur, she thought: Unless God truly thinks incest is evil.

Incest and all its victims and products. But it was God who sent me home again. And He had to know what would happen.

Then how could He condemn her for being a victim of His own commands?

Or had God sent her home, really? When Delivered of the Lord had finally shaken his head and handed her the small bag of her personal possessions and sadly said, "There is a room for you in the second Barren House," she had been crushed. Not because henceforth her life would be a matter of hoes and potatoes and sheep, but because she had failed. Failed to fulfill the mission of every Havener, male or female, to increase the numbers of Haveners and thereby bring closer the day of dominion and the Resurrection.

It had taken her weeks to realize that there was more than one way to strengthen Haven. Hoeing potatoes would do, yes, as would tending sheep. But there was a foe to fight as well, and if they could learn that foe's plans....

She had taken to lingering near the Master of Haven's house, praying that he would notice her, speak to her, give her a chance to tell her plan. But he avoided her. Only Consideration Wiggin, the man who had kidnapped her and thereby saved her soul, would deign to speak with her, and then only to say, "You are making a fool of yourself."

"So be it."

"But why?"

"I want to go home."

"You know you can't do that."

No Havener woman ever left the island. "No one else can do what I can do for us."

"And what might that be?"

"My sisters are with the Webbs, and the Webbs are still visiting that hospital library, aren't they?" When he nodded, she went on. "And my father's place is on the road to the hospital. If a Havener could be

there...."

"You'd be a spy."

"That's right." Was he looking interested despite himself?

"Would you tell Delivered of the Lord?"

He was looking thoughtful as he turned the advantages of her idea over in his mind. Then he nodded once more. "I can't promise anything, but I'll tell him. You'll have to be patient."

"I can't very well just run away. Someone will have to take me to the mainland."

"We'll handle that," he said. "If he decides to let you go."

She had returned to her chores with a lighter heart. How could Delivered of the Lord turn her down? He would surely see the merit of her plan, and soon she would be walking once more into her family's yard. Her mother would be so happy to see her again! And her father....

She had imagined his grin and his lap and his arms around her and the smell of his sweat. She had not imagined what had to come next, even though she knew quite well what he had done with her sisters.

She should have, shouldn't she? She shook her head but told herself it was still a worthy mission, spying out the movements of the enemy. Not that there was much to spy. Since her return, she had seen no one but Mama and Dad. There had been no visitors, no plans overheard, nothing to report back to Haven.

Life was much as it had been before the Webbs came by that first time.

Isolated. Lonely. Yet Mama said the Webbs did go to the city and the library. They even visited, though her father did not welcome them, and they lingered only long enough to pass on word from her sisters.

She should have gone to them, shouldn't she? That was where the center of Webb activity was. That was where she would have something to spy, where she would be safe from her father.

#

Her father was in the woods, cutting firewood. Mama was washing clothes. No one was watching, but just in case she put a shallow basket over one arm. Before she returned, she would pick a few spears of asparagus, and no one would wonder what she had been up to.

\*\*\* The yard of the Inger farmstead narrowed into a trail. The trees to either side were taller than one saw elsewhere, for they grew in healthier than usual soil. As soon as the fold of land that cupped the farm like a palm opened out, the trees began to shrink, and their leaves gained a yellow cast. Only the scattered apple trees were green.

The ancient road was obvious by its cracked and weathered pavement, covered here and there by thin soil, moss, and blackened lichen. Grass

and weeds grew in the cracks except where the occasional traffic kept them beaten down.

Where was Righteous Atkins? He should be here already, just as he was every week. Had her lack of news of Webb activities discouraged him?

Or....

She lifted her head as voices caught at her ear. There was a shout, a laugh, a burst of argument. Someone sang, "Michael, row your boat ashore...."

It sounded like a family strolling down the road, a small army, a band of revellers. She had never heard the like before, and though she told herself to hide or flee, the strangeness of it held her just long enough.

The trundle rolled into sight around the curve of the road.

Beside it walked a single stocky man, one hand stretched out to hold a tiller bar. There was no one else.

The stranger's hair was long, his cheeks round beneath the shadow of his hat, his shoulders thick with muscle. She could see no sign of rash on his skin, which made him foreign to everyone she knew.

Certainly the half smile on his lips made it plain he was no stern Havener.

Yet he looked familiar. "Ox?" he grin broadened, and he raised one hand to his hat brim.

She knew he was not the one who said, "Who's the chick?" but she could see no one else. "Trudy," she answered. "I'm back. I escaped."

The grin was broader still, and this time his lips moved.

"Your sisters will be happy to hear that."

"Are you stopping? There's so much I want to hear."

He looked toward the farmstead. After a moment, he shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Bring her along then!" A burst of animal noises--barks, yowls, and chirps--accompanied the words.

This time she recognized the tops of a dozen gravestones, arranged in two rows in the trundle's bed, each one bearing the solar cells that marked it as the final repository of a mind whose real body had died long ago.

He saw where she was looking. "Most of them were pets," he said.

"Dogs and cats and such. We'll turn them into databanks."

Like the stone beside the Inger house.

"You want to come? Your sisters would be even happier to see you."



Suddenly she felt shy. She had been just a kid the last time she had seen him. He hadn't been much older. Now he was a man and strange.

Her Dad, despite what he was and what he did, seemed familiar and safe.

She shook her head. "How are they?"

Very briefly, he told Trudy that Bella was his wife. Karyn shared Felix with Luanna. All three women had had kids, and Karyn was pregnant again.

His eyes did not miss the way Trudy laid one palm on her belly when he mentioned Karyn's pregnancy. He fell silent for a moment then, and finally said, "Miriam's still unattached."

Miriam was the eldest sister. She lived with Gil, but more as a nurse and housekeeper than a wife.

"I want to see them."

"Then come with us," said one of the stones behind Ox.

"I can't." She hesitated. "You'd better go."

Ox stared at her for a long moment before he shrugged and nodded.

"I'll tell them you're safe." Then he lifted one hand to say good-bye.

She stepped aside to let him pass. A stone began to sing, "Sweet chariot, comin' after me," and kept it up until she could neither see the trundle beyond the curve of the road nor make out the words.

"You should have gone."

She spun. Righteous Atkins stood just behind her shoulder.

He had an ascetically thin face blotched with rash and the scars of old acne. "Where were you?"

"In the bushes. Listening."

"Then I don't need to tell you anything."

"Just how long you're going to stay here. You haven't been much use."

"He'll be back. He'll tell me what's going on then."

His look was skeptical. "I think you'll have new orders next week."

#### CHAPTER 4

On the east a high wall of rock was festooned with wild grapes and other vines. Sparrows and other birds flew in and out of hidden nests and peered at the world. So did other eyes.

Water trickled from cracks in the rock and collected at the bottom to form a narrow stream. When winter turned cold enough, the trickles

froze in cascades of ice that sometimes broke free.

The hidden eyes had been watching the day the Curtises had lost one house to such an icefall. If they had been human, perhaps they would have responded, driven by sympathy to emerge from under leaves and within rocky clefts to offer aid. But they were not human. They did not have human motives, nor human means. They had remained hidden, watching the Curtises as they watched everyone in the region.

When Abner and Tamsin rebuilt, they wisely set back a little further from the cliff and the stream at its base, out of harm's reach but still well within the shadow of the wall. Tamsin had insisted, even though Abner tried to tell her there was still a danger of rock and ice falls.

"No," the watchers had heard the woman say. "We're safe.

We have to be."

"But think of the landslide!" Abner's voice had been angry, frustrated, helpless as he gestured toward the massive pile of rubble that had buried the valley's narrow road long before their arrival.

"We've never seen anything like that." And they never would, said her tone.

On the west of the narrow valley was a hillside covered with trees, together standing high enough to cast more shadow every afternoon. The house received little sunlight, and though that was a blessing when the summers burned hot and dry as now, the Curtises did have to walk half a mile to reach their garden. Yet if relief from heat was all their shadowed cleft of the land offered them, they would not have stayed; they remained because only in this isolated place did Tamsin feel safe.

At the base of the cliff, where a massive boulder would deflect the worst of any fall of ice or rock, a dozen slabs of stone marched in brave array, in three neatly ordered columns.

Tamsin had been pregnant that many times; those few babes that had been born alive had not lived for long.

Beside the little graveyard, Tamsin now knelt before the stone the Webbs had given them. "I want a baby," she was saying.

"Two babies. A son for Abner. A daughter for me."

"Do you have belly aches?" asked the stone. Great-Grandpa Webb's voice seemed weaker than it had been at home, coming from his own stone or the one that had been a dog. This one, Ox had said, had been a pet monkey.

"I used to."

The stone tsked. "Then maybe I can't help. Those old love bugs can scar your tubes beyond anything we can do to fix them up today."

"What does that do?"

"Plug you up. Keep the seed from finding fertile soil."

"But it did," she said. There were tears in her voice.

"They were born dead. Or... they died right away."

"Hmm. What do you eat? Do you get much meat? Milk?

Eggs?"

She shook her head, while her husband made a snorting noise behind her.

"I didn't think I saw any animals," said the stone.

"Too dark in here," said Abner. "They didn't do well when we tried."

"Too dark for me, too. I'll need more sunlight, you know.

Or the batteries'll run down and I won't be any more use than a rock."

Abner shrugged.

"You should move. Get out in the open. You could use some sunlight too."

"No!" Tamsin sounded suddenly terrified. Her husband's hand settled on her shoulder.

"You know!" she cried. "You understand. You came home that day and interrupted him!"

"The bandit," he said.

"Sometimes I wish you hadn't. If he had finished what he was doing and killed me, I wouldn't have to remember."

"If I had killed him instead of letting him escape."

"If I could forget... But I can't. And I'm scared of the open, of sunlight. I'm scared to death that someone else will see me."

"It's okay," said Abner though his face said he knew it wasn't. "I'll do the gardening. You can stay here, hidden away and safe."

"I don't have to, you know. It's an awful little valley, dark and wet and dangerous. But I can leave it."

"When we visited the Webbs."

She nodded. "I want a baby so bad. But that--" She kicked at the stone. "It's no help at all, is it?"

It was so easy to see, the effort she made to force her breathing to slow, force control upon herself. It was so easy for even hidden, unhuman eyes to know how shaky that control was, how close to the edge she was every moment of her life.

"We won't move," said Abner.

"I'll die someday. You can then."

"No." The pressure on her shoulder shifted as he shook his head. She covered his hand with her own. "How could I leave here? How could I leave you even then?"

"I wish I could give you a son."

The silence stretched out for long moments before Abner finally said, "There are other ways."

#

The hidden eyes had been there even when he began the cradle long ago, when Tamsin had first been pregnant. They had watched as he found boards in a ruin, in a corner that had been protected from rain and snow by an intact stretch of roof. They had watched him shape them carefully into headboard and footboard and sides and add rockers carved from naturally curved tree limbs.

He had added a mattress, a bag stuffed with dry moss and pine needles, absorbent and fragrant. Tamsin had crocheted the little blanket. And it all had gone unused.

When their hopes rose again, the eyes had watched him carve a heart in the center of the headboard, another in the footboard.

They had seen him replace the mattress' stuffing.

Later he had added more ornamentation and rubbed the wood with oil until it shone. With each pregnancy, the cradle had gained details and intricacy and luster. If the watchers had been human, it might have gained the status of a myth, an icon, an altar, something to which a childless parent must pray and sacrifice in hope of a living child.

Not that all the prayer and sacrificial effort had ever done one whit of good. The mind behind the watchers knew that, even as it knew that humans were less sensible and that it was really quite a natural thing for Abner Curtis to be carrying the cradle through the woods, panting with the effort to keep it from scratching on trees and rocks, setting it down now, right in front of him, where its polished wood gleamed in the moonlight and the little blanket seemed to glow with a light of its own.

Ahead of him was a small farmstead. Around his neck was slung an ancient pair of binoculars. It was small, and only one tube still held its lenses, but it was enough. He had used it to watch the farmstead for days. He had seen the way the sunlight struck the little house, seen the goats and chickens, seen the thriving garden, seen one small boy racing from chore to chore.

And there had been the woman, the infant at her breast.

He muttered gently to himself, just loud enough for the nearest of the hidden watchers to hear: "Not one of them shows a sign of rash. And they've got kids. Gotta be the stone they've got, right there, just waiting."

The stone he had also seen was in a small circle of upright posts, surrounded by a ring of thatch that would shelter its questioners

against rain and youvee.

The place was quiet. The people and their animals were asleep. He picked up the cradle and moved as softly as possible toward the little shrine.

"Yes?" said the stone, and its voice was much stronger than that of the stone they kept in the shade of the cliff. This family lived in the light.

"Shh." He set down the cradle, wrapped his arms around the stone, and lifted. It was not that heavy, not that hard to do at all, so long as the stone kept silent.

He used one foot to nudge the cradle until it was positioned as nearly as he could tell precisely where the stone had been.

Then he ran, as fast as he could with the stone in his arms.

#

The hidden watchers might have tsked and tutted at what he did, but that was not their task. They only watched and recorded and passed their data on.

## CHAPTER 5

Fewer weeds now grew in the cracks that webbed the crumbling, weathered asphalt. There had been more traffic in the last few years, travellers on foot, carts laden with gravestones or potatoes or shingles or firewood. Occasionally narrower, less used tracks diverged from the road.

"We haven't tried this one," said David Cantor. Short and bandy-legged below his kilt, he was the one who carried the map scratched into a wooden paddle. Now he was looking at one of those narrower tracks while holding a forefinger against the wood. Behind him, a pair of automobiles lay on their sides, their metal rusted into lace, their plastic clouded and split by youvee.

"Are you sure?" Consideration Wiggin thought they had scoured this section of the coast thoroughly in the last few months.

"If God didn't take my memory instead of my soul last night." He waved one hand at the blackflies that surrounded his head as they did everyone's. He ignored the ones that landed wherever his skin was exposed.

Givethanks Hagedorn laughed and scratched at the constellation of bites between the thongs that laced his vest.

He was only a little taller than David, but his legs were straighter.

His arms and shoulders were thick with the muscle of one who had spent many days cutting wood.

"Those are fresh footprints," David added. "This morning."

It was early afternoon. "Small ones. A kid."

"Praise the Lord." Worthy Ferlig squatted beside the entrance to the path and tugged at a portion of brush whose leaves seemed a little dryer, more faded than the rest. The fourth member of their squad, he was the only one who preferred pants and shirt to the more usual kilt and vest. All wore the helmet-like hats that stamped them as Haveners.

They carried long knives at their belts. Givethanks Hagedorn also carried a long-handled sledgehammer over his shoulder.

The brush wiggled more freely than it should; a stem or two had been notched to swing like a gate to block the path while remaining alive and green. "That's what we're here for," said Ferlig.

Consideration Wiggin winced at the thought of the child who must have left the living gate ajar to reveal the family's presence. But he led the squad down the path anyway.

He had expected the path to be no more than a quarter of a mile long.

Two miles later, after twisting past numerous debris-filled cellar holes and chimney stubs, it still stretched on ahead.

"That kid must have been with Mommy," said Worthy Ferlig.

"Or Daddy," added David Cantor. "Unless it's a wanderer."

"Some are," said Wiggin. "Or maybe there's a shortcut through the puckerbrush." He knew from the shadows all around him that the twisting trail had forced them to reverse direction more than once.

For all he knew, they were no more than fifty feet from where they had started.

He paused as the smell of goat and pig dung reached him. In the silence, the clucking of chickens was clearly audible. So was the rustle of something small scurrying through the brush beside their path.

"I can see it," said Givethanks Hagedorn. He was pointing to the right, where a weathered roofline showed between the trees.

Unlike many, the house and sheds had not been built of materials salvaged from the ever-present ruins. Logs had been set upright in the ground. The gaps between had been filled with woven branches and plastered with mud. Slabs of bark formed the roofs. Windows were blocked against the bugs with leather curtains. The shed doors were leather-covered wicker panels.

The doorway to the house was filled by a skinny woman whose mouse-brown hair had been chopped off short.

"I know who you are," she said in a trembling, frightened voice.

Behind her a small girl, no more than three, no bigger than God's Promise's little Ruth, clung to her baggy pants and peered at the strangers. Only her eyes, dark and wide and sparking with energy, hinted that she was not as shy as she looked.

They did not, thought Wiggin, seem the sort of people who could build a

house and sheds and all from scratch. Yet they had done so. So had their ancestors, who surely had seemed no more prepossessing as they had slowly acquired all the knowledge their heirs had lost. Finally he said, "Then you know what we're here for."

The girl tried to squeeze past her mother to the yard. The woman pushed her back and braced her arms against the sides of the doorway.

"You can't have her."

"We can take better care of her than you," said Ferlig.

"Bandits can't reach the island. The mists cut down the youvee.

There's more food."

"You don't look it," said the woman, and everyone knew she was right.

She was not really any skinnier than any Havener.

"There's enough," said Wiggin. "But no extra. She'll be fine."

"No." The child pushed forward once more. One of the woman's hands curled around the small head and hugged it tight against her thigh.

"Not unless...."

Hagedorn snorted. "Too old."

"Kids fit in better," said Wiggin.

"You mean you can brainwash them better."

Before Wiggin could admit that of course she was right, her head jerked up and the child leaned forward. There was a creak as one of the shed doors opened.

"Your husband?" He kept his eyes on her as behind him someone grunted with effort, something thudded, something crunched. She did not scream but blanched and shrank, while the child whimpered, "Daddy," and tried to hide behind her mother's trembling leg. She no longer wished to see the strangers closer.

The spark that had enlivened her eyes was gone.

He knew what he would see if he turned around: a body, a bloody sledgehammer, and a smiling Givethanks Hagedorn. Perhaps there would be a broad-brimmed leather hat on the ground, since that was what most mainlanders wore to shield them from the youvee. "Get the kid," he told Worthy Ferlig.

As Ferlig started forward, hands already reaching, the woman screamed, "Run!" and thrust the girl back, into the house.

"Round the back," Wiggin said to David and Hagedorn. Then he grabbed one of the woman's flailing, clawing arms.

She struggled fiercely, her body a whirlwind of muscle and desperation as impossible to tame as a hurricane's wind in a sail. No matter how they tried, Wiggin and Ferlig could not pin her. She screeched and

gouged and kicked and bit. Both men were soon bleeding from a dozen wounds.

Eventually Wiggin got an elbow around her neck. Ferlig tangled the fingers of one hand in what hair she had and jerked.

There was a snap, and they were abruptly supporting a body whose only trace of life lay in two despairing eyes. They had broken her neck.

Ferlig promptly let the body go. Consideration Wiggin did not, but continued to hold her, feeling the warmth of her flesh, hard here, soft there, staring into her eyes as they flickered and faded. Her head lolled awkwardly over his arm, and he was suddenly stricken by the thought that their posture could have been that of lovers. But she was dying, the light and life going from her eyes.

And then she was dead.

A pair of blackflies landed on her lip.

He felt shamed when he realized how excited her struggle and death had left him. He brushed the flies away, but then he let her tumble limply to the ground and backed off and glanced at Ferlig. Neither man could meet the other's eyes. Both felt relieved when they heard David and Hagedorn coming around the end of the house.

"Got her," said David. "There's a gard...." He was gripping the child's shoulders tightly in both hands. She was facing forward, eyes wide open, mouth a gaping O, neck tendons taut. Her hands were small, white-knuckled fists.

Nothing kept her from seeing what they had done to her mother. She gasped and went more rigid than she was already.

Then she screamed, long and shrill and ululating with pain and grief.

When she ran out of air, she huddled into the smallest ball she could manage. Her body shook with sobs.

"She fought," said Wiggin.

"Of course she did." David squatted, wrapping his arms around the girl, patting one shoulder, doing his best to comfort where no comfort was possible, not from him, not from anyone.

"The kid will be better off with us." Ferlig's voice trembled as if he wished that saying it would make it so.

"She fought us," Wiggin repeated. "And I broke her neck."

"You sure did." David glared at him and Ferlig as if on the child's behalf. When Givethanks Hagedorn dared take half a step toward the house, he glared at him too.

Consideration Wiggin broke the tableau by saying, "We need to check the place."

"Bury them first," said David. He did not let go of the girl.

"Right." Ferlig turned eagerly toward the nearest shed and soon



returned with a pair of shovels. Before long, the child's parents were both safe from scavengers such as the pair of ravens eying the scene from a nearby tree limb. Only then did they search the house and sheds for livestock and tools and other things that might be worth taking with them.

It did not take long to tie the pair of goats and three pigs in a line for travel, or to bind the chickens' legs and fasten them across the goats' backs. The animals would be as welcome as the girl on Haven, and for much the same reason. They needed breeding stock. Someday they would have enough animals to eat meat and cheese and eggs as freely as their ancestors had.

Someday they would no longer be forced to rely on potatoes and cabbage, whatever meager catch the fishermen brought in, and the skimpy gleanings from the shore. Someday their own numbers would be great enough to reclaim the world for God and His righteous people.

The garden was behind the house. Beside it was a circle of upright logs supporting a roof of bark slabs. The center of the roof was open to let sunlight strike whatever lay at the small structure's heart. As Wiggin, Ferlig, and Hagedorn approached the garden, someone said, "I know you."

Consideration Wiggin stopped in his tracks. So did the other two, though where they scanned the edge of the woods, the path that seemed more travelled than the one that had led them here, the berry bushes to one side of the garden, and the young cabbages, and then spun to study the back of the empty house as if that were what had spoken, he kept his gaze on the shrine beside the garden.

He recognized that voice. He had last heard it in the ruins of a hospital where a party of mainland heathens had found a library computer.

"Great-Grandpa?"

"Not to you. Anders Webb, though only a poor stripped-down version, to be sure. There wasn't room for all of me in with all those databases.

Though there's more of me in here than there is in most of the stones they pass out. Later models, more data, not so much room for me."

Consideration Wiggin knew he looked confused.

"But you wouldn't know about that, would you? You grabbed Luanna and ran before we got that far. She's okay, you know.

Felix got her back and now she's his wife. One of two. Got a couple kids too, I hear, though I haven't seen 'em."

Now he could see between the pillars. The center of the roof was open, letting sunlight and rain strike the top of a chest-high pedestal that supported a stone a foot high, about sixteen inches wide, and eight inches deep. The top of the stone was covered with glistening black strips.

"What are you doing here?"

"They made copies, you know?" "They" had to be those heathens. "Wiped a few dogs and cats and packed me in with the databases for an interface. Passed us out all over the lot. The voice of your ancestors! Keep the birdshit off the solar cells, make sure we get plenty of sun, and we'll tell you all you ever need to know about first aid and gardening and nutrition. We've even got a bit of basic engineering. You like the house? They found a guy that remembered how folks used to build, way back. A hobby of his, you know? So they gave us all copies of that too."

Worthy Ferlig made a face, thinking of sermons Delivered of the Lord had preached in the last three years. "Do they really sacrifice their first-borns to you?"

"God, no! I wouldn't have that. None of us would. Though they do bow down occasionally. Ancestor worship comes easily to people."

"It's a demon." Givethanks Hagedorn grimly slapped the handle of his sledgehammer against one palm. Most people would have agreed with him.

When the dead spoke, they could be only ghosts or demons. "An idol.

We know what to do."

"I'll just bet you do. But you don't know how to collect kids without kidnapping and murder."

"It's not murder when it's in God's name," said Wiggin quietly, as if he was reminding himself as much as telling the stone.

"You ought to try trade. Bring in a bale of dried seaweed.

Gardens need it, you know? Lots of minerals, you can compost it or spade it in or just drop it and let it rot. Folks would be healthier, have more kids, probably be happy to give you a few just to get the extras off their hands."

"Heresy," said Hagedorn. He hefted his sledgehammer once more but did not strike. "Blasphemy."

"Yes," said David Cantor. He came around the corner of the house, his hands still tight upon the child. She was no longer sobbing, but her eyes were red and her mouth looked as if it had been hit with a fist.

"Ye shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which ye shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree. And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars, and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place." The words of Deuteronomy were familiar. They had been ever since Delivered of the Lord had first used them in a sermon years before. Hagedorn nodded, all possible doubts removed, and raised his hammer. Just before he brought it down again, Consideration Wiggin told himself to remember to tell the gardeners on Haven about the seaweed. It was about all the sea gave them in abundance.

The stone smashed to gravel and powder and small bits of metal and crystal.

#

Shortly after they left, David said, "One of you hold her for awhile. My hands are cramping."

"Just let go of her," said Worthy Ferlig. "She hasn't anywhere to go now."

But when David obeyed, the child twisted away and dove for the bushes that lined the path. David threw himself after her, got one hand on her ankle, and yanked her back. "Well?"

"Tie her up," said Hagedorn.

"You want to carry her?"

Eventually, they tied her hands and tethered her to a shegoat as if she were just another piece of captured livestock.

She toddled silently beside the familiar animal, her fingers twining in its hair. Occasionally she leaned against it, pressed her cheek against its neck, and closed her eyes. The doe never shied away; indeed, once it nuzzled the girl's cheek and licked her ear as if she were the goat's own kid.

It was nearly dusk when Consideration Wiggin heard the murmur of soft voices to one side of the road. "Shh!"

They stopped and listened. They could make out no words, but it was clear that someone was there, not far away. Wiggin thought he could detect several voices, men and women both, chatting softly, laughing.

The child was listening too. Suddenly she yelled, "Help!

They killed...."

Givethanks Hagedorn slapped a hand over her mouth, but by then it was too late. The voices had fallen silent.

"I want to see who that was," said Wiggin. He studied the everlasting and blackberries and rhododendron beside the road, looking for a path.

"Are you touched?" asked Worthy Ferlig. "That was quite a crowd. And we've got to get back to the ship with...." His gesture indicated the girl and the animals.

Wiggin shook his head. "Just follow me."

Fortunately, they did not have to push through the brush very far before discovering a low stone wall. Beyond it, immersed in a sea of brush and shadowed by scattered trees, were ranks of gravestones.

Most of the stones were simple rectangles of weathered marble and granite. Some were sculpted with gables, finials, and ornamental friezes. The most elaborate were pillars, obelisks, and mournful statues of winged angels. A few had faded photos of the dead embedded in their faces. Names and dates were visible despite encrustations of

lichen and moss.

The nearest stone had in its face a glass panel about the size of an open palm. Beside the panel was a small square marked with what could only be the profile of a thumb. Obediently, Wiggin touched the square.

Light flickered behind the panel, but no image formed.

Crackling sounds became words: "I hope that's you, Frank. I know you always wanted Chad. Well, now you've got him, and now you know what a bastard he is and always was. Are you happy?"

Probably not as happy as I am!"

When the voice scratched to a stop, Wiggin touched the button again.

"I hope that's you, Frank...."

The head of Givethanks Hagedorn's sledgehammer smashed through the glass. "Another demon," he said.

"There's a lot more of them here," said David Cantor. He gestured at the part of the cemetery to their left. There the stones were less weathered, less stained by lichen and moss. The tops of many duplicated what they had seen not long before beside a garden.

"Real ones," said Consideration Wiggin. The one that had wished its wife on Frank was only a recording, dry and lifeless.

These represented the height of mortuary technology, reached in those last decades before civilization had fallen. They were the dead themselves, not just their voices, or their minds, their personalities, copied into electronic storage just before--and sometimes just after--the point of death.

Many still remained in cemeteries, where they chattered eternally to each other, to the wind and passing animals. They had few chances to speak to living humans, for people were a great deal scarcer than they had once been, and very few ever visited cemeteries. When someone did come near, the dead spoke out hungrily, eager for contact and news, for life itself, so vastly to be preferred to their own pale imitation.

But these were silent. They had shut up as soon as they knew anyone was near.

Now Givethanks Hagedorn showed them how right they were to try to conceal their presence. Swinging his hammer, he marched among the stones, smashing everything that bore the tell-tale solar cells on its top.

While he labored, David Cantor checked the child's bonds and patted her shoulder. "What's your name?" he asked her, but she refused either to look at him or to speak.

Worthy Ferlig kicked over a stone, sat, and emptied bits of twig and other debris from his shoes. Consideration Wiggin studied the older stones. He could read just enough to tell the marks on their faces were names and dates and sometimes a few words more.

Hagedorn was now using his other arm to smash the silent talking stones. Ferlig was putting his shoes back on. The child was glaring.

David was patting one of the goats.

He wandered along the nearest row of ancient graves and thought it strange when he found two stones side by side with only roughly chiseled troughs where names and dates should have been. Who had they been? he wondered. Who had hated them enough to erase their memory like this? What had they done or not done?

For a moment, Consideration Wiggin wished these stones too could speak.

But then a panting sound brought his head up once more. Hagedorn stood a few steps away, shaking first one arm, then the other. Both had had enough of pounding stones. "Get the rest next time," he said.

## CHAPTER 6

"Mary, Mother of God, protect our cordage!" Brother Samuel stared at the peak defined by a pair of tree trunks that leaned over the growing wall. A web of grapevines, some as thick as his wrist, anchored the derrick to nearby trees.

The only rope they dared to spare from The Green Isle now ran, doubled, through the block and tackle hung below the derrick's peak. It stretched taut to a slab of granite suspended in a sling they had fashioned from shorter ropes they had found among the ruins. Made long ago of plastic, they were still strong, but none of the monks had wished to trust that strength for the derrick line.

A seagull landed on the tip of the derrick and cocked its head as if studying their progress. It and its fellows were always nearby, in the air or perched or strutting jauntily along some portion of the wall the monks were building, as if they could remember a time when people had food to fling their way.

Brother Samuel slapped at a fly that had come too near his head. He had not broken glass to shave his tonsure since their landing on Vinalhaven. Now his scalp was covered with a lawn of tight black curls. Like the others, he was stripped to his clout. His skin, no darker than Brother Diego's, shone in the sun with sweat, and there was a white rime of salt on his forearms. There was not a rosary in sight.

"Higher!" cried Brother Herman. One hand and both knees on the top of the wall, the other hand on the granite that swayed in the air beside him, he was almost prostrate, eying the bottom of the slab, watching for the first crack of light between it and the top of the wall.

Michael and Diego and Samuel hauled on the high-slanting derrick line.

Samuel prayed again. The others joined him.

Brothers Kretzmer and Jason stood below, their feet on the sill of the window they were framing. Two other slabs, set upright, were the sides. This new one would be the top, the lintel.

"There!" Herman shoved on the slab. Kretzmer and Jason leaned their own weight into the task, and as soon as it was positioned, all three cried, "Down!"

The stone settled into place. As soon as the ropes had been removed, the window would be complete, one of three in each side wall, two in each end. Later, perhaps much later, they dreamed, they would fill it with stained glass. For now, wooden shutters would have to do, and even those would have to wait until they had laid another course of stone and somehow managed a genuine roof, not just a stretch of leather sail.

"Enough for today," said Jason. "We need a break, and someone has to scratch up dinner."

Before he was done speaking, Brother Kretzmer was already heading toward the pile of driftwood and wind-twisted limbs from which he was shaping crucifixes and other ornaments for the abbey they were building. Brother Michael watched him go and shook his hands. Isaac seemed to have energy to spare, while he.... Rope and stone had given him calluses where oars had not, and his muscles were stiff and sore.

But he had earned that pain, he told himself, just as he had earlier earned the hunger of an Atlantic crossing on short rations. The wall now rose above his head; light showed between the stones, but a little clay would take care of that later on, once the roof was on, once no rain could wash the clay away.

Brother Brendan wasn't there. He and the rest of the monks were busy prying granite slabs free of old foundations and setting them on rollers. Later, they would move these stones within reach of the makeshift derrick that would lift them into place in the abbey walls.

"I'm hungry already," said Brother Herman.

"Then go grub for clams."

"Berries," said Brother Samuel. He swung to the window sill and jumped from there to the ground. "On the hill."

"I'll come with you," said Michael, though what he really wished was a hammock, a soft bed of moss beneath a vine and fig tree, whatever that was, and perhaps an angel choir to sing him to his rest.

"Me too," said Jason.

The hill was not the highest point on the island, but it was high enough to give a good view to the west, over the salt marsh they already knew would provide the thatch for the abbey roof and across Penobscot Bay and all its uncountable smaller islands.

When there was no mist or haze, as today, they could even glimpse the mainland on the horizon. Yet they did no more than glance at that panorama until they had gathered enough of the small blue berries to provide each of their fellows with a handful for dinner, and another for breakfast. Only then did the three monks stand, hands on the smalls of their backs, stretching, and stare across the water.

"What's that?" asked Brother Samuel. He was shading his eyes and

pointing a little south of west.

Brother Michael saw nothing. He scanned the islands and the mainland.

There was no smoke, no sign of human life, but he had always been a little near-sighted.

"A sail?" Jason sounded disbelieving.

Michael felt his heart drop within his chest. A sail? Then there were people here, whether he saw their sign or not. And there was no way to tell whether they were friend or foe.

"Can they see Green Isle?"

"Not that far off," said Samuel.

"They don't come here," said Michael as if saying the words could make them true.

"No campsites. No fires. No footprints." Jason was nodding.

"They could stay on their boat." Samuel was already reaching for their bark berry buckets. "If they come near enough, they'll see ours."

"Can we hide it?"

"We'll have to."

#

They found a fold in the shore of the bay that would hold their small ship. Yet there was no way to keep some curious native from spotting it if he but sailed past the cove and turned his head at the right moment. The best they could achieve was inconspicuousness.

That night, they walled their fire in with broken chunks of granite and masonry. Brother Kretzmer walked a little ways away and circled the site of their future abbey. "I can smell the smoke," he called. "And the flames reflect off the walls. But it's not bright. You'd have to be ashore already to see it."

"And then there'd be plenty of other sign to see." Brother Samuel's grunt was resigned. They had fled Ireland in search of safety. They had thought they had found it in a land where people no longer lived, where only their ruins remained. But now they knew. There were others here as well. And there was no way to tell whether they were barbarians or peaceful farmers, foes or friends, threat or boon.

"We could go further north," said Brother Jason. "There's New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Labrador. Other islands, other bays. And even in the last days, the population thinned out up there."

"No," said their abbot, Brother Brendan. "We've come far enough. None of us could stand another long voyage."

"It wouldn't be so long," said Brother Michael. "We'd be near the coast. We could put ashore for food and water."

Brother Brendan shook his head. "Surely God would not ask us to suffer more. These people must be friendly. Thirsty souls awaiting the Word we bring."

Someone snorted. "Maybe. But we should approach them carefully."

"Check them out."

"Send one of us."

Suddenly half the monks were watching Brother Michael. The other half were carefully looking the other way. He sighed, for he knew just why he was now the center of attention.

"You'll need another staff," said the abbot.

He had lost his last one as they were leaving Ireland. When they had seen the smoke of the burning village, just over a low hill and no more than a mile away, and then heard the screams of both the killers and their victims, they had rushed their watertight metal chests of books to the shore. Their boat--it had been called Windharp then, for the sound of the wind in its rigging--lay beached there, unused except when some flurry of seabirds announced the rare presence of fish. They were heaving it across the shingle exposed by the low tide when the barbarians appeared beside the overturned wooden hull they had patched enough to make their last home and abbey on Irish soil. It had not been their first.

The raiders reached the shore just as the monks thrust the boat's prow into the surf. A wave pushed the boat back, grinding it into the shingle. The monks cried out and redoubled their efforts while the raiders screeched, waved bloody swords and axes in the air, and charged. Michael spun to face them with no more than his staff, warding off the blades while his fellows finally got the boat past the tumbling froth and out of reach and began to row. Then, throwing his staff at the nearest swordsman, he dived into the water and swam until he could clutch the gunwhale.

Eager hands had pulled him aboard, and someone had shouted, "Brother Brian!"

Despite the peril of the moment, their abbot had scowled and coughed and said, "He's Michael and no one else. It's them as believes in heroes come again!"

Soon after that, they had pulled up against a knob of rock exposed only at low tide and thrown out the cobble that served them as an anchor.

The barbarians were still on the shore, screaming threats in their direction, laughing, capering. Some of them were torching their erstwhile home.

Michael saw one of them hurl his staff like a spear into the heart of the fire.

The flames were visible until after dark, and the coals glowed till dawn. Soon after that, with final shouts and obscene gestures aimed their way, the barbarians left.



The monks had not come ashore until the next morning. By then, they had been hungry and weary beyond the power of prayer to help. When they saw all that was left of their home--a mound of ashes outlined by the boat-shaped line of stones that had been the foundation, grief was added to their burden. Still more grief bowed them down when they saw the devastation that had been a prosperous small village so short a time before. They had had friends there, people beside whom they had worked, to whom they had ministered, with whom they had shared drink and song when the harvest was good. Now they were gone.

They had gathered the few bodies they could find, given them what shriving they could, and buried them in a single mound of stones.

Searching the nearby countryside, they had found a few empty barrels the raiders had not seen fit to smash. A field had supplied them with potatoes.

And then Brother Brendan had produced his map and said, "Let us go west."

#

"No!"

The shout brought Brother Michael suddenly awake, blinking.

The mists of dawn swirled even here, within the walls of the roofless abbey, softening the light, blurring outlines. For a second he thought he saw a towering figure, a woman in robe and breastplate, her hair an aureole of power, a sword upraised against a foe. Ancient Bridgit, Mother Mary. But no, it was only Brother Brendan standing there erect, every line of his body crying his alarm and one outstretched hand poised as if to ward off....

What? There was only Brother Herman, frozen in his crouch above the ashes of last night's fire. Michael could see the few coals he had uncovered, the fistful of twigs he had been about to lay upon them.

"No," said their abbot more quietly. "We can't afford a fire this morning."

"Why not?" Brother Herman sounded bewildered.

"There's no wind," said Brother Jason from the still-dark shadows beneath the opposite wall. "The natives might see the smoke."

Brother Brendan nodded. "We'll be safe most days, I'm sure.

But not right now. Not until we know a little more." He looked toward Michael.

Samuel and Jason kept watch from the high ground all that day, but they saw no more sails. Perhaps there had been only the one, a refugee like themselves, an explorer from further south or north. Perhaps the natives were few and scattered and no threat at all. Perhaps they simply stayed closer to shore most of the time, on-a look at the abbot's map suggested this--perhaps they lived up the Penobscot River, where once there had been the towns of Bucksport and Prospect Harbor, Frankfort and Winterport, and protected harbors safe from storm.

No one believed the one sighting had been a mirage or hallucination.

Michael spent the morning searching through the thickets outside the ruined town until he found a straight oak sapling as thick as his wrist. He trimmed it to a six-foot length, peeled its bark, smoothed its surface. When the wind picked up and they could dare a fire, he charred its ends and ground one smoothly rounded against a rock. The other he shaped to a blunt point.

Then he held its shaft above the flames to begin its drying. He wished he had a season or a year to let it cure, but it was oak.

It was already limber and strong enough to serve.

Others fetched The Green Isle from its sheltered cove and bailed out the water in its bottom. By dark, all was ready.

"We should have replaced the mast," said Brother Diego.

"There won't be any tacking against the land breeze with no more rig than a robe and a pair of oars."

"Then we'll row," said Brendan. "And the robe will bring us home, God willing."

"Who's going?"

"All of us. We'll need every hand on those oars."

"The boy can't walk, after all. We're on an island."

"Do you mean we wait for him, to bring him home?"

Their abbot shook his head. "We can't do that."

"Then how...?"

"God will guide him."

"I'll find a boat," said Brother Michael.

"You can't steal!" said Herman.

"I'll confess when I get back. Or maybe I'll build a raft."

#

The land breeze was steady but not strong, and they made good progress.

What slowed them most was the quarter moon behind them, for they knew it must reveal them to anyone who looked their way. They therefore kept small islands between them and the mainland shore as much as possible, and when there was no lee to conceal them, they prayed for brief clouds or native inattention.

"We must be nearly there." The voice was barely as loud as the creaking of the oars in their oarlocks.

"Shh."

"That gap." A chin pointed toward an opening between rounded masses of wooded land. "The river?"

"Too narrow."

Michael dipped a hand into the water beside the boat and flicked a few drops into his mouth. "As salt as ever."

A few moments later they were through the gap and facing a broad expanse of water with more land beyond and a glint of yellow light among distant trees. To the right the bay seemed to narrow to a point.

"That way," said Brother Brendan.

They clung to the shore, rowing steadily against the breeze, until Michael pronounced the water merely brackish and said, "The other shore. That's where I have to be. Where that light was."

As soon as they began the crossing, they felt the current of the river, strong, sweeping them back toward the sea. Someone gave a whispery chuckle. "You'll just need a log, Michael. The river and the tide and the wind will bring you back to us."

"I'll need a little more than that."

"A sail!"

The beat of the oars faltered as Brother Jason pointed.

Michael saw it too, then, distant, glowing white, flickering as clouds interrupted the dim moonlight.

"Row!" cried the abbot.

"There's two of them," said Michael. "Coming toward us."

The monks bent and pulled, bent and pulled, mindless now of the creaking they might make or the wake they might leave. The Green Isle leaped ahead and dove into the shadow cast by a point of land and stopped where trees overhung the water and wrapped them in a deeper darkness. Panting, they watched the ships sail by, oblivious to their presence.

"Fishing boats," said Brother Diego softly. "That's all they are."

Low in the water, broad in the beam, gaff-rigged.

Not fast, but....

"Beats rowing," said Michael, and the others chuckled very quietly.

All knew what he meant.

"We can't go any further," said the abbot. "Not with them ahead of us."

"This is fine," said Michael. "I'll get out here."

"But where will you go?"

His shrug was barely visible. "Upstream or down. Where they're going, or where they came from. It depends what I find for trails."

"Good fortune, then," whispered the abbot. "May God go with you." He crossed himself and made a gesture of blessing.

Michael repeated the crossing before picking up his staff.

"Come back safe," said a soft voice.

"I'll try. God's will."

#

The shore was a tumble of granite blocks much like those they were borrowing from Vinalhaven's ruins to build their abbey.

Among them grew thickets of long-thorned wild roses, cat-claw briar, and stiff-stemmed brush, festooned with tangled vines.

Something made dead leaves rustle. When he moved, the rosary around his waist echoed the sound.

Michael used his staff to test his footing, probe shadowed hollows for snakes or other beasts, and push brush aside. He picked his way from stone to stone, avoiding the worst of the thorns but still having to stop occasionally to free his robe from their grip. Some of the thorns drew blood from his shins and hands and feet, and that in turn drew clouds of insects. He swatted and muttered and remembered how once he would have cursed. And when he finally broke free to a shelf covered with long grass and gentler shrubs, he breathed a prayer of relief.

A moment later, he was standing on a circle of cracked and mossy concrete in whose center squatted a cylinder of corroded iron. He soon found more of the cannons, as well as empty mounts. Behind the rampart was a brush-grown courtyard surrounded by stone and brickwork walls pierced with empty doorways and windows.

He knew he had a mission, but he could not keep himself from exploring.

These ruins were older, much older, than most of those he had known all his life. The antique cannons told him that. They must date all the way back to the American Civil War, perhaps even to the war the colonies had fought for independence from England. They had won, too.

Ireland had gained its own freedom only when there was no longer an England to defeat, and hardly an Ireland to declare the victory.

The blackness behind most of the old fort's windows and doors told him their ceilings still barred moonlight from whatever lay beyond. Some were dimly illuminated, and he could see the fallen masonry and roots outlined against the sky.

Behind many openings, dark or dim, he could hear the scratchings of tiny claws, oddly metallic, quite offputting.

He stayed in the open until dawn gave him light enough to survey the intact portions of the fort. He found worn stairways, narrow corridors, rooms of many sizes. There were no furnishings and no scents to help him identify what he found, no lingering odor of ancient food or gunpowder, only damp soil and his own sweat and an occasional trace of animal dung. Scratchings in the soil reminded him of the noises he had heard in the night, but there was nothing to say what had made them.

He guessed that those rooms whose large windows overlooked the courtyard had been officers' quarters. Underground chambers with isolated entrances had to have been storerooms or armories.

The largest rooms with the smallest windows must have been dining halls or barracks.

He wondered briefly whether he and his fellows would do better to make this place their abbey, but then he leaned on a brick partition and felt it sway, rotten mortar crumbling onto the floor, and he shook his head. No. The masonry here had lasted for centuries, but its decay was far advanced. Better they should build their own. Better they should stay on their island, well away from the hazards of neighbors.

A stairway--its worn stones loose beneath his feet--led him to flat ground above the fort and a faint trail that wound away to the south and west. He followed it until it joined an ancient pavement.

There were more signs of traffic here, where feet had beaten down the grass and weeds and wheels had left their mark in patches of dirt and sand. Yet still it hardly seemed a busy road, nothing like the strips of bare and rutted dirt that linked the scattered villages of the Ireland he thought he would never see again. He touched his beads as if they were wood he could knock.

Then there could not be many natives, could there? Perhaps not enough to be a threat. Yet he dared not make such assumptions and turn back right now. He looked left, toward the sea he could only glimpse through trees, and admitted that was what he wished to do. Going on, searching out the natives and spying round their campfires frightened him. But that was just what he had to do.

Only then did he notice the granite monolith beside the path. Easily ten times the size of the foundation blocks they were using to build their abbey, it lay on its side, broken near its midpoint as if it were indeed a toppled menhir. Yet he stubbed his toe on a pedestal leg that had once held it off the ground.

When he leaned over it, he saw that its patchy crust of dark lichen almost obscured letters carved into its surface. There was also a moss-green plaque of long-weathered copper or brass, apparently added after the stone had broken. Its legend identified the ruin behind him as Fort Knox and said its construction had begun in 1844 in order to guard the Penobscot River during a boundary dispute with Canada.

## CHAPTER 7

The sun was a white disk in a yellow sky, shimmering in the heat it poured upon the land. It had been two weeks since the last small storm, and leaves hung limp from the twigs of every tree and shrub.

Even the apple trees, which usually splashed the woods with green, were yellowing and dropping fruit.

Uncle Alva was running his fingers over the wood of the cradle. Hidden eyes carefully noted the delicacy of his touch, the softness of the sound that revealed how smooth the finish was. "Nice work."

"I don't care if he made it out of solid gold," said Absalom Dinkins.

His teeth showed, stark white in a dark face, scowling fiercely.

Fingers like claws clutched a small boy to his side.

"He's not getting my kid!"

"He doesn't want Malcolm! He wants my Anna! My baby!"

Calla, his wife, shrieked and rocked within the long leather cloak she wore despite the summer heat. Her arms convulsed around the infant she held to her breast, and it whimpered.

Tears streaked her cheeks.

Malcolm twisted in his father's grip and stared toward the stoop where Leo squatted, intently watching, struggling to obey his mother's order to stay out of the way.

"It's not bandits," said Great-Grandpa from the colonnade.

Pa roused himself enough to peer at the woman from beneath his hat-brim and say, "They'd be more interested in you. And they wouldn't dick around trying to arrange a swap."

"They'd just grab," said Absalom. "I know that. So would the Haveners. So who could it be?"

Felix shook his head.

So did Hussey. Everyone, even the watchers, knew he knew more than any of them what bandits did. He had been one, though he had had no real choice when the predators who slaughtered his family chose to take him with them.

Absalom was quite right. Like bandits, the Haveners raided the farmsteads they came across. But their motives were not lust and greed. They did not burn and slaughter for the sheer joy of wanton destruction. They seized small children and young women with whom to increase their numbers on their island home. Only if there was resistance did they kill. Even then, they did not rape.

Great-Grandpa made a snorting noise. "They used to call it the protection racket. Extortion. Pay up, or we'll smash your windows.

Though they wanted money, not kids."

"What are you going to do about it?"

Felix's start said Calla's words surprised him. "Do about it? What do you mean?"

"We need another stone," said Absalom. As he let go of his son to gesture, the boy shifted out of reach, hesitated, and dashed toward the house and Leo.

"No," said Calla. "He'd just come back, wouldn't he? And next time.... You have to stop him!"

Maddoc suddenly laughed. "She's just appointed you cop!"

Felix spun. It had been generations since there had been such a thing as a cop, but he had listened to the stones tell of what the world had been like when they had been alive. He knew what a cop was. "But why me?"

"Because you're the man," Maddoc answered.

"The pivot of what's left of the world," said Great-Grandpa.

"Not the guy in charge. Not just the guy who makes things happen, but the guy around whom things happen."

"You're the ones who make me do it all!"

Maddoc laughed again. "We're just voices. You're the one who does it all!"

"You'll need a magnifying glass, you know. A houndstooth cape and a double-billed cap."

"Huh?"

"Gotta track this guy down, Sherlock. Get the Dinkins' stone back.

Convince him not to...."

Two small heads appeared behind the stones. "What's a Sherlock, Grampa?" asked Leo.

"Not now, kid."

"Is it a story?"

"I'll tell you later, okay?"

Leo nodded happily. Absalom Dinkins reached toward his son as if to pull him back to his side, but the boy had already turned away.

"Don't worry about 'em," said Pa. Hussey had turned to watch the boys scamper off. "Lots of stones around this place.

Any trouble, we'll hear about it in plenty of time."

Calla sniffed. "Our stone didn't say a word."

After a moment's hesitation, Felix said, "These stones are live. Not databases."

"It seemed alive enough."

"Just a pale imitation of life," said Great-Grandpa.

"Not all there," said Maddoc. "Not all at all. Not like us." But the stone's tone was strangely wistful.

"Put it back," said Uncle Alva. His fingers were still stroking the wood of the cradle, following the lines of the elaborate carving.

"Right where you found it. He'll get the message."

"I'd rather smash it," said Absalom. "Or fill it full of...."

Alva shook his head. "That would make him mad. There's no telling what he'd do then. So...."

"And we'll find out who he is," said Hussey. He sounded determined.

Whatever his past had been, he was now a defender of what passed in this age of the world for civilization. "We do know where to start."

"No kids." Luanna nodded in agreement. "That cradle's never been chewed or banged."

#

The region surrounding the Webb compound had been only thinly populated for as long as living memory stretched. Hardly ever were families closer than a mile to each other, though the ever-present ruins were mute testimony that once people and their buildings had been much thicker upon the ground. Unfortunately, those witnesses to history had nothing at all to say about the reasons why. Only the stones knew the answers, and only those few of them that had received their tenants not long before the end. Disease, they said. Famine, war, and weather.

An overburdened Earth rejecting the species that most infested it.

What kept the population thin was clearer. Soils were no longer fertile, leached of nutrients by youvee and acid and erosion. There were diseases and infections, and vaccines and antibiotics seemed no more than fantasies of the stones, despite all the signs that a preserved doctor, mad or not, might know whereof he spoke. There were bandits, too, wandering the roads until they found isolated families on which to prey.

Yet people still settled near those roads. Grass and weeds and small trees thrust through the cracks in the ancient pavements, fracturing and crumbling, but the roads remained more passable than not. The pavement and the compacted gravel beneath did not really favor the growth of plants, so many roads were still, even generations after the collapse, only thinly overgrown. They also provided firm footing uninterrupted by ruins or swamps, and bridges still crossed many streams and rivers.

Felix and Luanna and Hussey knew all the roads for miles around the compound. They knew where every family lived, and they knew which ones they had already supplied with stones. It was therefore only a matter of tramping those roads, visiting farmstead after farmstead, looking for anyone with two stones or no children, looking for anyone who seemed wary or suspicious.

"We haven't found a thing," Felix said. "No one's heard a thing. I



don't feel very useful tramping around like this."

"There's still a few left," said Hussey, though he did not sound hopeful. They had visited nearly every farmstead within ten miles of the Webb place. "And there's really no reason why everyone should be next to a road."

"There'd still be a path."

"If they made one. Maybe they're hermits."

"They knew there were stones. There's some contact."

Hussey was nodding when Luanna held up a hand as if to stop them. "I smell something."

"Dead," said Hussey. He shook his head and sniffed, but there was no wind, no faintest breeze, to tell him the source of the stench. "The Sawyers?"

"There's no one else near here." She was already taking her bow from her shoulder, an arrow from her quiver, as if the stink ahead of them were the stink of something newly dead.

They moved forward once more, but they clumped more tightly on the trail. They also slowed their pace, even though there could be no danger now. Whatever had happened had obviously happened days ago.

They stopped when they saw the side trail ahead, and the light of a clearing just a little way down it. They looked bleakly at each other, mute affirmation that they all knew what they were about to find.

"There were three of them," said Luanna. "Right? Meg and Zeno and...."

"Polly," said Felix. "I hope they're not all dead."

"No smell of smoke," said Hussey. "Bandits would have burned the place."

"Unless they're still there."

Felix glanced at the others, and Hussey squirmed. "It can take a while to finish up."

"I'm glad Ox and Felix interrupted you."

There had been no watchers in this vicinity at that time, just a few years before. But they had heard the tale several times since their advent: Hussey had been the youngest of three bandits, Luanna had been struggling to escape the fate her parents had already met, and Felix and Ox had come upon the scene.

"I don't hear anything."

"Except birds," said Luanna, and birds there were, their caws and screeches suddenly obvious. The three humans began to move again. In a moment they could see that the post-and-wattle house and sheds were intact. They took a few more reluctant steps, and wings were bursting clamorously into the air and they could see....

Luanna was in the lead. Now she looked back at Felix and Hussey. Her face was grim, her eyes haunted. "They buried them."

But....

Felix gripped her shoulder with one hand and pulled her back against his chest. "Don't remember," he said though his face said very clearly that the stink of death roused memories in him as well.

"Not deeply," said Hussey.

"There must be a dog or two around." There was nothing else with a taste for carrion and the strength to exhume even a shallow burial.

What had obviously been a grave was now a disordered crater, its rim whitened by the droppings of crows and ravens and seagulls. An arm, detached from its parent body and stripped of all its meat, lay on the ground a few feet away from them. The bones were yellow splotched with red and pink, the ligaments and scraps of cartilage were white. The fingers were missing.

Ravens and crows lighted on branches overhead, waiting patiently for them to leave once more. The seagulls wheeled above the scene.

It did not take long to see that the grave held only two bodies. "Zeno and Meg," said Felix. He was breathing through his mouth.

The woman's head was still recognizable. His was not. The eyes were gone, the nose was only a hole, bone showed where cheeks and forehead had been.

"But not Polly. Poor kid."

There was no smaller skull, no child-size bones.

"They smashed the stone," said Hussey. He was standing beside the small, bark-roofed shrine. The fragments of what had been a repository of ancient knowledge lay scattered by his feet.

"Haveners."

"At least they'll take good care of her."

They checked the sheds. "The animals, too."

The house was as empty as the sheds, though there were numerous signs that it had not been empty long. The vegetable stew in the pot on the stove had only begun to grow a layer of mold. Dirty dishes were not quite crusted dry. A few simple toys--a doll crafted of wood and birchbark and scraps of cloth, a birchbark box, a handful of antique glass marbles--lay on the floor.

They threw out the stew and washed the dishes. "The place is fine," said Luanna. "We'll find someone who can move in."

"There'll be a fire," said Felix. "Or someone new will show up. Or a kid will want a place."

His wife was nodding, but Hussey seemed more interested in the

present.

"We can't leave the bodies out there. Nobody'd want a place with a skull on the doorstep."

"Not much choice." Felix patted the wall behind the stove.

It was reinforced with a sheet of plywood that had once been part of an older house. "These houses are skulls."

They dug a deeper hole as close beside the grave the dogs had disturbed as they could. When they were done, a few strokes of their shovels were enough to tumble Zenon and Meg Sawyer to the bottom. Then they searched out the bits that had been moved--the arm, a few fingers, even a piece of ear--and threw them in as well.

They were almost ready to fill the hole in once more when Luanna suddenly began stabbing at the base of a bush with her shovel.

"It moved!" she cried.

"What? A snake? I've never seen one." Snakes were rare.

Keeping a tight grip on his shovel handle, he rushed toward his wife.

Hussey was close behind him.

There was a flurry of movement beneath the bush. Whatever it was, it seemed to have too many legs.

Luanna stabbed again. There was a crunching noise, and she said, "There!" with great satisfaction.

Felix was already on his knees, reaching for the churned up soil and leaves and twigs.

"No!" Hussey's shovel shot past his hand to rake all the loose material into the open and spread it out across the ground.

"What is it?"

"A machine," said Felix.

"A bug," said Hussey.

"No." It wasn't moving. It was dead. Felix pawed at it now without interference. "I've never seen anything like this before."

"It's metal," said Hussey. It had a body as long as his hand, dented and crushed and almost cut in three pieces. The legs that fanned out to either side were even longer, though some were missing. Wire-like projections from what had to be the front looked much like the antennae of ants and moths.

"The tanks," said Luanna.

"At the hospital." Felix was nodding. He too remembered.

"They were slow and creaky and old. But this...."

"It doesn't look old," Felix agreed.

"It was moving pretty fast."

"Like it was new?" asked Hussey, and she nodded.

#

"Not new," said Maddoc. "No way."

Uncle Alva made "Hmm" noises and prodded at the machine's remains with a screwdriver. When he pried off its carapace, he revealed a crowded array of cylinders and plates and wires. Near the base of each leg a lump of pale, fibrous jelly extended strands down the limb.

"Looks like meat." He pushed Leo's hand away from the strange jelly.

Then he touched a finger to it himself, and then to his tongue. "Not much taste though. Like salty machine oil."

"Some kind of robot?" mused Great-Grandpa. "I never saw one, though I think I might have seen pictures somewhere. You wouldn't think they'd last so long."

"You did," said Leo.

Great-Grandpa laughed. Luanna said, "The tanks, the libraries."

"They're not as spry as this was," said Hussey.

"I wish you'd captured it alive," said Maddoc. "It has to be the last of its kind."

Uncle Alva's "Hmm" turned doubtful. He poked at a tiny knot of silvery solder with his screwdriver. "Looks pretty fresh."

## CHAPTER 8

Music woke him. Slow and stately, a processional played on a single flute with a simple drumbeat laid down behind it to time the fall of feet.

He blinked and stretched and stared at the stone blocks over his head, the open doorway, the brambles and brush and apple limbs laden with half-ripe fruit, his small pile of dry wood, the stones he had arranged for a fireplace. The shelter he had taken as his own was hardly more than a cave, a stone cube mounded over with earth.

He used one of the corroded steel bars that jutted from the walls to pull himself to his feet. The shelves they had supported had long since crumbled. So had the coffins. The bones he had swept to one side when he moved in, and if something made a scratching, scrabbling sound among the relics, that something was surely nothing more than a mouse or beetle.

Not that he hadn't said a little prayer for them, but they were long past caring what he did, and surely heathen to boot, remnants of those generations that had nearly slain the world.

He crossed himself and thought of the Valley of the Shadow of Death and

the psalm. He ran the palm of his hand over his scalp; he hadn't shaved in days, and the bristle was already softening.

He felt the dark beard that covered his cheeks and chin and throat; still sleek, not getting shaggy, no need to hack anything away with his knife. He licked his lips; it was time for breakfast, and a table and cup would suit him nicely. But they were nowhere to be seen, not even when he stepped into the mausoleum's doorway.

The stones marched away before him, to either side, behind, light and dark, stained with lichen, awash in waves of brush, only their heads in the air, and so many of them glittering with solar cells. Some were knee high, some breast high, some towering above his head. Some had been vandalized, smashed into a thousand crumbs of stone and mortar and bright bits of metal and plastic. There were blocks and slabs, obelisks and angels.

His was the only crypt.

He was alone here, as he had not been when he was with the other monks.

For that matter, as he had never been before.

Always there had been other people nearby. Now all he had was....

"Good morning!" he called to his congregation.

"No better than usual," someone grumbled.

The music changed. It was still the same tune, but now it sounded tinkly.

"Shut up, Albert. He's here, isn't he? And we haven't seen anyone since the kid brought Amelie back." Amelie was the musician. "I still miss Vanya and Andy, though."

"Drop dead, Danny."

"Too late."

Michael smiled. Talking gravestones. They were hardly new to him.

Ireland had them too, and he had seen villages that worshipped them as they did not worship God. Brother Brendan thought that blasphemous.

Michael did not entirely agree, for the stones were not idols but the memories of the dead, memoirs, much like the books the monks preserved in their treasure chests.

"Where you going' today?"

Where was his staff? There, just inside the doorway, and he would need it to knock down a pair of half-ripe apples, their green giving way to yellow and pink but still hard and sour.

They would be more filling than the berries he had found the day before. "I still haven't found any people."

"They're around, they're around."

"Just go out the gate and follow the trail."

"It isn't used very often any more, so it's not much of a trail, but...."

The gate was corroded wrought iron, its halves leaning tipsily against a pair of masonry pillars. He turned his back on it and pushed his way through the brush until he was among the stunted trees on the other side of the cemetery. Behind him, he heard: "Fellow doesn't want to meet people."

"Antisocial."

"Crazy. Hasn't got the sense to wear a hat."

"A spy. If I had legs, I'd report him."

"Talks funny, too."

"That's Irish, idiot."

"So what's an Irish idiot spying on?"

"Looking for Protestants."

"Catholics."

"Englishmen."

Amelie did not interrupt her music.

#

No, he thought. He did not really want to meet people. Not yet. He would rather walk the trails, crouching in the brush whenever he heard footsteps or voices or the creak of a cart, circling about every wisp of chimney smoke until he knew something about how many people lived in each small farmstead and how they lived there. He had seen one cluster of smokes that made him think of a larger settlement, but he had so far avoided that.

He did not approach it today, either. He let his feet carry him back toward the shore, to the crest of a hill that gave him a view of the bay and its islands, perhaps even.... No.

Vinalhaven was too distant, the air too hazy, other islands in the way.

Two miles of water, maybe three, separated him from the nearest, but he could see houses among the trees along its shore, a white line of boulders just above the water, a long dock, and a high cross, painted white, its arms and peak tipped with golden, sun-glinting balls. A sail moved across the waves not far from dock and cross. He could not be sure, but he thought it likely that the two belonged together. And the people he had found avoided the shore, staying inland. He thought of raiders, and memories made him sigh and run his fingers over the seeds and polished stones of his rosary.

Was that where the sailors lived? If not, he would have to move on,

roaming, searching. Or he would have to walk into some farmstead's yard and get acquainted and ask. Surely the locals would know the answers to his questions. Indeed, he was willing to bet those answers had something to do with the locals' avoidance of the shore.

He knew nothing, but he was already guessing that he and his fellow monks were right to be wary of any sail they saw.

#

That afternoon he came upon a farmstead that had burned a year or two before. Rain had already washed away most of the ashes, leaving charcoal fragments small and large, rusty nails, and broken crockery embedded in a mass of vines and stems and leaves. A single shed remained, a bit of fence, a square of ground marked out by erect slabs of shale, makeshift gravestones.

There was also a patch where the weeds grew three times as thick and high as elsewhere.

He combed through those weeds with his feet and staff until he recognized potato leaves. Not large, not when so overshadowed by competitors. But they were there, confirmation that the weeds did indeed mark the fertile soil of a one-time garden. He dug with the pointed end of his staff and soon turned up enough potatoes to feed him for several days.

He was using lengths of vine to weave a crude basket when he heard a rustling in the brush. Instantly he was on his feet, staff held across his front, hands well spaced. His mouth was dry.

That sound could not have been an animal. He had seen nothing larger than a squirrel, a seagull, a raven. Though there had been tracks that looked like dog, and he had heard distant yipping in the night.

Not that a pack of wild dogs would be any better to encounter than a pack of bandits. Or stranger-fearing natives.

He had avoided those natives so carefully, but now... He licked his lips, but that did no good. He had no moisture in him. Even his eyes were dry and stinging. His heart was hammering. His knees were shaking.

He was afraid as he had never been before. Not even when he and his fellow monks had been fleeing the barbarians and he had turned around to fight them off just long enough to launch the Windharp. With nothing more substantial than a staff, a staff no better than the one he held right now.

He hadn't had time to be afraid then. But now, just a rustling, a rustling that might not even be a human being. And he was terrified.

So that was where his moisture had gone. His palms, dripping with sweat, slippery on the staff. He breathed deep and adjusted his grip.

A dead twig snapped beneath a foot. There, on the same overgrown path he had followed to this place. Someone coming. A native who would wonder who he was. A survivor of the family that had lived here once, ready to accuse him of trespassing or looting. A barbarian like those

he had left behind in Ireland.

A sailor.

A woman. A small pack slung across her shoulder. A leather cloak. A broad-brimmed hat shadowing a face as surprised to see him as he was to see her. A thin face, cheekbones and brows and nose all sharply etched. Chin almost pointed. Frozen taut.

Wary. Frightened.

Young, wasn't she? And pretty, if only she weren't so scared.

What was she seeing? A man, of course. Hatless and robed and armed with a stick and a string of beads. Danger to any woman, especially if she was alone.

He relaxed and smiled and lowered his staff. He wiped his palms on his thighs. "I'm alone."

She did not seem reassured, but neither did she turn and run. "Who are you? You sound funny."

So did she to him. Though she looked fine, her hair dark where it showed, her skin clear except for the rash. "Michael.

We rowed all the way from Ireland."

"Is that an island?"

He knew what she meant. He nodded and began a gesture with his staff, but stopped when she ducked away from him as if she feared he was about to strike her. He finished the gesture with a hand, pointing toward the sea. "But not one of those. It's across the sea. We had to flee."

She nodded at that, as if she understand fleeing, but she did not say anything more. He sank back to his haunches, laid the staff down, picked up the basket he was making, and hoped he seemed safe to her.

"What's your name?"

She hesitated, still wary. He could see her decide to trust him with that much. "Trudy." Then she looked at the small pile of potatoes beside him. "There's probably more than that in the garden."

His hand said, "Go ahead." Her rapid step across the yard said she had come here hoping to find something to eat. While she poked through the garden weeds, bending, grubbing, harvesting, he said gently, "We're looking for a place to settle.

Someplace safe."

"We? Your family?"

He shook his head even though her back was to him. "Sort of. We're monks."

She straightened, long yellow roots in one hand, a round red one in the other. Before she could ask him what he meant, he added, "Almost



priests. We worship God and preserve His word.

We'll be very happy if we can share it with others. Do you live nearby?"

She shook her head as she scrubbed dirt from a carrot with her hand and took a bite.

"We don't kill," he added. Was fear of that what still made her so tense? "We don't rape. We don't even have wives."

"Then how do you continue? How do you expect to save the world?"

Ah. The question was enough. "If we have the chance, we'll teach.

We'll persuade. We have no wish to conquer or rule. We call each other Brother, not Father."

"Then you're not like Delivered of the Lord."

Now it was his turn to feel confused. "Is that a name?"

She nodded, and he understood. Militant crusaders. A dangerous attitude. "The sails."

She nodded again. "I escaped from them."

He thought she did not sound quite convinced of her own truthfulness, but he said nothing while he worked the last of his vines into the edge of his basket and gave the loop of its handle a testing tug. He thought it would do. He began to fill it with potatoes. "What are they like, Trudy?"

She was putting her carrots and the beet in her pack. "They take children. And young women. And they try to breed more Haveners. They want to take over the world."

He was glad he was just one lone monk, trying hard to be inconspicuous.

He was glad his fellow monks were safe on an island far from shore and trying hard to put no tell-tale smoke against the sky. Yet his fellows were all men. They had no women, no children. Perhaps they were safe after all.

"They live on the island," she said, and her tone made it clear that there was only one island she could mean. The big one, the one closest to shore. Brother Brendan's map called it Islesboro. "They call it Haven."

"But they come on the mainland too?" When she nodded jerkily, he added, "And you're looking for someplace safe."

#

By nightfall, Trudy was calling the stranger Brother Michael as if she had grown up with him. She knew of the overturned hull that had been an abbey on a distant shore until raiders had burned it. She knew of the long voyage, the loss of a mast, the rowing, the whale Brother Herman had claimed he saw, the home the monks were building. Yet she

had shared little of her own past.

Certainly she had told him nothing of her pregnancy, nor of how she had become pregnant, nor of her mission to spy upon the Webbs. Nor had she told him that Righteous Atkins was following her, perhaps a mile or two behind her on the trail, perhaps even closer.

The watchers knew, just as they knew Righteous Atkins had wanted to carry a large pack of clothes and food for her, but she had said no.

She needed very little, and if she came to the Webbs with too large a pack, they would know she had had help.

If that help was not visible, they would grow suspicious. And if Righteous Atkins were visible as her help, she had said, they would know instantly that she was spying for the Haveners.

His nod had been a grudging one. "You have a point." He had touched his tell-tale hat, fish-skin on a round wicker frame.

He had touched his vest and thongs. "They could tell, couldn't they?"

A rough laugh had interrupted them. "Anyone could tell you're one of those baby-thieves." Her Dad had found them. "But who's your 'they'?"

Trudy had turned and tried to run, but Caleb had seized one hand and Righteous Atkins the other. "Don't you turn your back on me! It's those Webbs, ain't it? You're going to run away again."

She struggled against their grips until the Havener let go.

Her Dad pulled her against his hairy belly and held her tight.

He stank of sweat and applejack. "I never ran away!"

"What difference does it make?" One hand patted her belly.

"You all left me. Left me all alone. Now you're going to do it again."

Righteous Atkins' lips twisted with disgust, but he made no move to pull her away from her father. "She has orders. From Delivered of the Lord. He wants her to visit her sisters, to move in with them and learn every evil plan the Webbs dare to make. Then we can counter them."

"Then I'll go with her!" He seemed delighted with the thought.

"Haven't seen the grandkids yet. And I bet they'll all be happy to see me."

Trudy jerked against his hand and this time pulled free.

"They'd be happier to see their mother!"

He ignored her. "Why, I could even wander off and meet with someone to pass on whatever we find out!"

Righteous Atkins' smile seemed forced. "That's my job. I'm to meet her every few days."

Caleb glowered. "You've been doing that right here, haven't you?" He turned on his daughter. "Spying on us!"

She thought she should feel embarrassed at that accusation.

Spying was not honoring her mother and her father as the Haveners' Bible said she should. But all she could do was feign the feeling by looking at the ground. "I thought they'd visit here sometimes."

"But they don't." He looked at Righteous Atkins. "Never thought of asking me, did you?"

Nobody answered him.

"Course not. I don't like them, but I'm not one of you."

His tone turned grim, and his jaw muscles clenched. "So now you're leaving too. Can't stand us any more than your sisters could."

She froze, her posture declaring that she didn't dare nod.

"What if I forbid it?"

"You can't," said Righteous Atkins. "She's ours now."

"But she's car...." Caleb abruptly fell silent, as if he realized the folly of finishing his sentence. The Haveners' thin face had already turned cold and stern and damning. He knew.

"I'll get my things."

Righteous Atkins' hand had kept Caleb from following her, and she had been grateful, even though before she was out of range she could hear the Haveners saying, "The child goes back to Haven."

The determination in his voice was enough to tell her Caleb's inadvertent revelation really was no surprise. But how long had he known? Was it so obvious when she touched her belly?

Could he smell it on her? And had he taken word back to Haven and Delivered of the Lord?

His task, she knew, was not just to pass on whatever she learned, but to watch her and return her to the island as soon as her loyalty and piety seemed to waver. Had he also been told to claim the child as soon as...? Surely not as soon as it was born. But as soon as she chose to wean it.

He had so much more latitude than she. After all, he was a man.

At least he had sense enough to stay out of sight now.

She hoped Caleb had not followed them.

#

When Brother Michael opened his eyes the next morning, he found her

watching him. She was still wrapped in her cloak, but her eyes were bright in the dim light of dawn, her face at peace.

He hoped she had decided he was no threat early enough to get some sleep. She had still been watchful, edgy, fearful, when he had tucked his robe close around himself and closed his own eyes.

The cold ashes of their fire lay between them. He closed his eyes for a brief morning prayer. Then he reached for the last potato and held it up. "Want it?"

She shook her head. He cracked its charred skin and ate.

When he looked up, she was gone.

Behind a bush? No. He could hear a crackling of brush, too far away to be explained so simply, growing fainter. He hesitated only long enough to refill his basket with potatoes and a beet before he followed her. He knew where she was going, and it was time to meet the other natives.

And she had waited till he woke before she left. She must know, he thought, that he would follow. Perhaps she even wanted him to do so.

#

A thread of music in the distance told him he was not far from the cemetery and the mausoleum he had made his temporary home. The trail was broader, better traveled, ancient pavement showing, dirt marked by feet and wheels. There were ruins to either side: walls of brick like jag-topped curtains, foundation stones, pits half-filled with charred debris, rusted, youveerotted cars. Occasionally a house stood intact or nearly so, its windows broken or removed, its roof sagging.

"Stranger!" The cry rang out almost at his side. He jumped, heart hammering, and spun, his staff held ready to parry or attack.

"Another stranger on the road!"

A stone. That was all. Hiding in the bushes beside the trail, or not really hiding, just set to one side, its glittering crest of solar cells not hidden at all if one was just paying attention.

Now it made noises like trumpets and bells. "Stranger on the road!"

A guardian. A sentry. No one could sneak up unannounced on the settlement he was approaching.

The alarum was repeated a little further down the trail, and then again. By the time he could see the rough circle of houses and sheds, the people were all outdoors. Several held bows in their hands.

A canopied wagon was parked beside one of the sheds. In the pen attached to another, three goats stood stock still, staring toward him, ears laid back. The moment shattered when they turned and bolted into their shed and drew his eye to a weathered doorway in which stood another, smaller wagon.

He recognized Trudy standing with three other women. The sisters she had mentioned? One of them was shooing children into a house.

One man lay sprawled in the shade of a circular colonnade that surrounded a trio of stones.

Three other men were on their feet, leaning toward him, their faces wary. The largest held an axe. The other two were armed with bows.

He tucked his staff beneath one arm and showed his palms, but only Trudy seemed to believe he was truly peaceful. She smiled and said, "I met him yesterday. He says he's a priest."

"A monk," he answered. He lifted his rosary in one hand as if it were his badge of office. Was she still breathing a little hard? Then she had not been here long. "A harmless monk. A new arrival on this shore."

"You're an Irishman!" cried one of the stones beneath the colonnade.

"I recognize the brogue. Where are you from? Galway or Kilkenny?

Cork or Ulster? It's been forever since I was there."

"We called it Trally, though that was just the closest of the old cities. Just ruins now, of course."

"Of course," said another stone. He thought this was the one on the right. "Everything is ruins."

"Are you alone?" asked one of the men.

"That's Felix," said Trudy. "And Ox." She pointed at the largest of the men. Both were still bristling despite her words.

"Karyn and Bella, my sisters." The family resemblance was obvious, as it was in the pair of children peeking out of the nearest door. The larger was a boy, the other a girl.

"Luanna," said the third woman. She wore her hair in braids that swung well below her hat, and their color was lighter.

"And Alva," said the man she had not mentioned. "She didn't know me before."

"Are you alone?" Felix repeated.

"I'm the only scout." He turned to point toward the ocean no one could see from here. "The rest are out there, on an island. We got worried when we saw a sail, and they sent me to learn who else was here."

"A sail!" Luanna spat. "They wanted to steal me!"

Bella lowered her bow and faced Trudy. "How did you get loose?"

"When I didn't get pregnant, they stopped watching me so close."

"So you made it home."

"And now I'm...." She laid one hand across her tummy.

Silence. No one spoke, though the sisters looked at each other as to

say they understood, it could have happened to any of them. "Men!" said the glances they shot toward Michael and even Felix, Ox, and Alva.

And then, "He would!"

"But it's a child," said Luanna. They would love it, she meant, and rear it. No matter who the father was.

"Me too." Karyn touched her own tummy, and the look she sent toward Felix now was anything but condemnatory.

"How many have you got?"

"Marjy's mine," said Bella as the small girl dashed out of the doorway.

"And Ox's."

"Leo," said Luanna. The boy grinned at Brother Michael as if they shared a secret. Michael had no idea what it might be.

A second girl appeared beside Leo. "And Trudy," said Karyn.

"We never thought we'd see you again, so...."

The older Trudy leaned toward the doorway. "You're Trudy, too." She sounded delighted at the thought that one of her sisters would name a child after her.

"Too-too, Too-too," chanted Leo. "Call her Too-too."

Someone laughed, and Brother Michael almost cried. Once, a long, long time ago, he had been part of a family like this. Not as large, but as loving. As safe and secure. But there had been barbarians then, too.

And famine and plague. All the perils of a fallen world. He had thought himself fortunate years later, when he met Brother Brendan and the other monks.

"What the hell is all the racket?" The man beneath the colonnade was struggling to sit up. "Can't a fellow take a nap?"

Where's my jug?"

Felix shrugged apologetically. "My Pa."

The man pushed his hat aside and scratched at a dark spot on his neck.

"You could cut that out."

Felix saw where he was looking. "That's what Maddoc was telling me."

He pointed at the stone on the right. "But I can't...." He spread his hands helplessly.

Brother Michael nodded. He understood. "It'll spread if you don't."

And it'll come back if you do. But if you do, he'll live longer."

## CHAPTER 9

When Trudy woke the next morning, she was alone. Vaguely, she recalled hearing Ox and Bella moving about the small house's other room, Marjy crying and being hushed, and then silence. A closing door. Distant voices. The raucous cry of a crow or gull or raven.

Her hand found the floor beside her thin pallet. Her hat, her cloak, her small pack. Everything just where she had set it.

Sunlight came through a small window that had been salvaged from some older building and showed her a table and a stove of brick and sheet metal. Under the table was a doll made of wood and scraps of cloth.

Something scuttled in the shadows behind the doll.

She was in the kitchen. They must have gone across the yard to Karyn's place for breakfast. Left her to sleep.

She did not want to leave her bed. She felt as if she belonged here, in this place, surrounded by these people, more than she had ever belonged anywhere else. Home and Haven had each asked her to pay a price for acceptance, to submit to the wills of others. Here she felt freer to be herself. Even the strangers she had never met before--Alva, Brother Michael, Felix's Pa--even they seemed to hold no threat for her. No possessiveness, no violence, no demands. No Delivered of the Lord. No Caleb.

But she had to get up. Her womb was pressing on her bladder. She was hungry. And the day before had barely begun the process of catching up with her sisters' lives.

She was returning from the outhouse when she saw Alva-Felix's Uncle Alva, except he wasn't really, just as Ox was not really his cousin, and no one had said what they really were--opening the door of a long shed. "It's nearly finished," he was saying to Brother Michael at his shoulder, and the light struck a trundle larger than the one she had seen Ox driving.

She stopped and said so. Alva glanced toward another shed, and for the first time she noticed a boxy shape and a wheel that had to belong to the older trundle, parked out of the way. "We need a spare. They break down, you know. We're making it bigger while we're at it."

Bella joined them, holding a plate of eggs and fried potatoes toward her youngest sister. "Tell her about the expedition."

"Tell who?" The newcomer was of middle height and thin, his nose a prominence surrounded by hollows, open mouth, worn-down cheeks, sunken eyes.

"That's Hussey," said Bella. "He used to be a bandit."

"A neighbor before that, before they took me."

"Any luck?" Uncle Alva was leaning toward Hussey, who shook his head and said, "Not a sign."

"Of what?" Trudy was quickly growing confused.

"Who is she?" Then he looked at Brother Michael. "And him."

"My little sister."

"A scout."

"For bandits?"

"Irish monks. They rowed all the way across the ocean."

"You believe that?"

"He's got the right accent," called a voice from the colonnade.

"So you believe him, Great-Grandpa. But what about her."

"She's little sis. She's family."

"A baby thief." Uncle Alva was looking at Trudy as he answered her last question. "That's what he was looking for."

Someone swiped a family's stone and left a cradle. Nice one, too."

"It seems pretty obvious." Luanna appeared with another plate of breakfast, and Hussey accepted both it and the change of topic, though his tone was grudging. "They're supposed to put their baby in the cradle. Then they'll get the stone back. I've been trying to find the bastard first."

"But why...?" Trudy shook her head. Who was the baby thief? Not her, and Righteous Atkins hadn't been anywhere near here. Had he? Then who else could it be? Only Haveners stole children from their parents.

"You know about the stones." Ox and Felix had joined the growing crowd. "Your folks have one."

"But they wouldn't trade a kid for one!"

"They wouldn't. Some folks use them more."

"Is she the one the Haveners swiped?"

Felix nodded. "But she escaped."

Hussey's face twisted into a dubious scowl. "Don't you believe it."

"She's a spy."

"How can you say that?"

"Have you ever heard of anyone escaping from that island?"

"That doesn't mean no one ever did. Or can."

"Don't tell her anything."

"It's no big secret," said Uncle Alva. "Or it won't be as soon we start off."



"Don't tell her anything."

"Don't tell me what?"

"You know about the hospital." The face Felix made at Hussey was incredulous. He clearly was impatient with paranoia and suspicion.

"The library. That's where we found out about sunscreens and vitamins.

Then we put everything we could in stones so everyone could have the knowledge."

She nodded. Hussey gave an exasperated sigh but never took his eyes off her face, as if he hoped she would give herself away by her reaction to the news.

"But there are other libraries," Felix added.

"And we want to find them," said Uncle Alva. He pointed at the new, large trundle. "As soon as that's done, we're going to go look for the university. It's north of here."

"Don't tell her another word," said Hussey.

"What else is there?" asked Felix, but not as if he expected any answer.

Trudy thought she should not seem too interested in the trip to the university. Felix was surely right that he and Alva had already said all that really mattered. Anyone who knew of the earlier expedition, when Felix's and Ox's search for the hospital and its library had brought them past the Inger farmstead, must now also know what they sought at the university. What was left of the hospital library had held knowledge of nutrition and gardening and medicine that living people had long forgotten.

Whatever remained of the university library must hold a thousand other fragments of ancient knowledge. Knowledge that had led a world astray.

The Haveners believed that Delivered of the Lord had the only knowledge of any real value; all else was illusion and snare and delusion, the devil's bait to tempt souls from heaven's path. Perhaps he was right.

She looked at Hussey and tried to make her voice sound conciliatory.

"Tell me about that cradle. Isn't there any way to tell who made it?"

"Absalom and Calla got up one morning, and there it was."

He stepped a little aside from the others, who had heard it all before.

"Their stone was gone."

"There wasn't any note?" asked Brother Michael.

"That's no surprise. There aren't many of us who can write or read."

"I can," said Brother Michael. His fingers touched the corners of a diamond in front of his face, chest, and belly. "We all can."

"But you monks weren't anywhere around at the time. It can't be you."

Trudy shook her head. She hadn't known the monk long, but it hardly seemed possible that he or his fellows--if they were anything like him--would steal children. "How are you hunting for the thief?"

"Well, we think he must not have any kids of his own. Him and his wife. Maybe they lost one not long ago. Or maybe they never had any."

"Then you're looking for...."

"Childless families. Fresh graves in the family burying ground."

Hussey's eyes flicked to one side of the Webb compound, where seven round stones dotted the ground. Four had been chiseled with names Trudy could see from where she stood: Zek, Jo, Liz, Ma. The last was the largest and newest.

Felix joined them. "Folks with extra stones, too."

The problem with that seemed obvious to Trudy. "They'd hide it, wouldn't they?"

Felix nodded grudgingly. "Probably not far from the Dinkins place.

But we haven't found it. So we keep on looking."

"Where's the cradle?"

"Right where the stone was," said Hussey. "The Dinkins hope he'll get the idea and bring the stone back. They put a cloak over it to keep off the wet, to show they meant no harm."

"Is anyone watching it?"

"Why? It's either there or it isn't."

"But," said Brother Michael. "He has to come check to see if they've finally put the baby in it. And he'd have to check every day."

Hussey looked at Felix. "Could we use a stone?"

"You'll have to hide it. Or he'll steal this one too."

"Not a database. A real one. It could holler."

"Then he'd smash it."

"I heard that," called Great-Grandpa from the colonnade.

"But I swear I'll just take down his license number."

No one knew exactly what he meant, but the gist was clear.

"Let's try it, then."

#

Righteous Atkins watched her stomach while she spoke. Quite unconsciously, she covered it with both hands, fingers spread, and bent slightly forward to make her skirt fall away from her thighs.

At his back stood the remnants of a stone wall with an arched opening, a window that still held fragments of colored glass amid a twisted tracery of metal. One of the fragments seemed to be part of a bearded face. All around them was tangled brush and vine, as if the trail to a small stream did not pass \*\*\* just a few feet away. He had met her there, while she was on her way to fetch water for Bella, and led her here.

He had liked the thought of stealing stones to ransom babies, although he had had to say, "We could never do it. We couldn't give the stones back, could we? And as soon as they learned that was so, no one would ever give up a kid."

"They're not giving them up now."

"That's true." He paused as if thinking over the scheme and finally shook his head. "Is there anything else?"

She told him all she knew of the planned trip in search of the university.

"What are they looking for?" he asked when she was done.

"The secret of plumbing?"

"Maybe," she replied. Plumbing seemed a simple thing, hardly more complicated than gardening. Yet running water, for all that the pipes it had once required jutted from ruins everywhere, was no more than a myth of ancient times. People had forgotten more than they were willing to admit. "Or electricity."

"Old knowledge," he growled. "Forbidden knowledge. Or God would never have destroyed a world that used it."

"The Webbs think people destroyed the world."

He shook his head and made a sweeping gesture. "The whole world?"

"They're foolish."

"They say there were more people then."

"There couldn't possibly be enough. Only God can do such mighty things."

"They don't think so." If they even thought there was a God. Brother Michael did, of course, but his God was not much like the One worshipped by the Haveners.

"We can't let them succeed."

"They just want to make things better for themselves. They want more food, better protection against the weather, more kids, healthier kids."

"That doesn't matter." For a moment, he looked as stern as Delivered of the Lord ever did when he preached.

"Why not?" How could he say that health and safety did not matter?

"If they succeed, they will never listen to us. To the message of salvation."

"Ah." He might even be right, though she thought they were not very ready to listen even now, without all the improvements in their lot they sought. The difference was much more one of attitude.

"We have to stop them," said Righteous Atkins determinedly.

"Is there anything you can do?"

She shook her head.

"Then...." He shook his own head. There wasn't any point in spelling out what was so obvious to both of them, just in case someone was listening.

#

The small eyes hidden within the cracks between the stones did not flicker at the words that sounded before them. Ears did not twitch.

Legs did not even tremble, for there was no intelligence, only senses and reflexes and a very simple pattern of behavior.

Voices drew these creatures--if that was what they were--as a gull's cry could draw other gulls. Light repelled them, so they stayed hidden. Damage and restraint and the sudden approach of large objects made them frantic to escape. When their memories were full, they felt a powerful urge to find a certain hidden place.

They therefore remained still as long as the two humans remained nearby. But once they were gone, the creatures scurried over the stones and under fallen logs and beneath the most tangled briars.

Their small bodies gravitated to a single boulder and a burrow beneath it and a chamber where there waited....

Another creature. Larger. A collector of data, organizing, winnowing out redundancy, condensing, and finally reporting. It and its fellows had already sent on reports of a boat from across the sea, of murders and stolen children and smashed gravestones, of a stone taken away and a cradle left in its stead, of missions decided and equipment prepared.

Now it could confirm and warn. The time was near. Others were interested and would surely try to interfere.

It gave the message to a long, thin messenger that now left chamber and burrow, clambered up the side of the boulder, spread four gauzy wings,

and leaped into the air.

Its destination was another place many miles away, where everything had once been known or was already known or would someday be known.

## CHAPTER 10

"We cannot let them succeed," said Consideration Wiggin.

"They will unleash heresies and demons. They will uncover secrets God long ago decided were not for Man to know. They will...."

"Isn't he dear?" God's Promise was paying no attention to him at all.

She sat on the lowest step of the bleachers from which the Haveners three times each week heard Delivered of the Lord preach the Scriptures and exhort his flock. Beyond his pulpit stretched Haven's dock, the high gold-tipped cross at its end.

A girl no older than Ruth leaned against one of the dock's long row of bollards and stared toward the mainland shore. Her shoulders slumped, speaking sadness and grief, but her wide eyes seemed to glow with a suppressed vitality.

A few feet away, an older woman kept watch on the child.

Like God's Promise, she was dressed in black.

But God's Promise was not watching woman or child, pulpit or cross, dock or sea or mainland beyond. She was not even watching Ruth, who squatted a few feet away, arranging pebbles in the dirt and glancing from time to time at her mother and the man who was not her father yet sat near her mother, leaning toward her yet not touching, poised as if he pressed against a transparent wall.

Ruth also glanced at the girl by the bollard. "What's her name?"

Consideration Wiggin shook his head. "We don't know. She won't tell us."

"Does she have a mommy?"

He shook his head again. He did not dare to say that the child's mother had died in his arms, her neck broken by his hands. Or that her father too was dead. He wished she were old enough for Applicant's House and lessons in the beliefs of Haven, lessons that would take her mind off her losses. But....

God's Promise's pose was decorous, her eyes cast down, focused on her lap, where her baby sprawled. Her hands moved to keep his tiny fists in the shadow of her winged hat and thus protected from the youvee.

"Isn't he dear? So new. So sweet. Delivered of the Lord named him this morning."

"He's my brother, Mommy."

"Yes, Ruth." Her hand hovered over her daughter's, ready to seize if the child seemed about to pinch or poke an eye. But Ruth only petted

the infant's forehead, smoothing his downy hair, and then returned to her pebbles.

"Isn't he a dear?"

"Mmmm?" Consideration Wiggin knew the child's name already.

Everyone did. But if she could not listen to him, well, he could listen to her.

"End of Exile." Her voice cracked as if the words she spoke hurt her mouth. "My husband said he will lead us in victory."

Ruth got to her feet and stepped onto the dock. She walked carefully, softly, as if she did want to alarm the other girl, but not so softly that the other did not hear her coming, glance at her, and turn away.

A tear showed on her cheek, but it glistened no more brightly than the eye above it.

"What's your name?"

Only silence answered her. That and a defensive hunch of the shoulder.

"Want to be friends?" Ruth touched the hunched shoulder.

It twitched.

"I'm Ruth. That's my Mommy over there."

When the other girl looked quickly at God's Promise, however, she burst into tears and choked out, "I hate him!"

Consideration Wiggin tried desperately not to think of why the nameless girl hated him. He was not proud of what he had done, and he was intensely grateful when God's Promise spoke again: "He said he will achieve the Kingdom, and in his time will Judgment come."

Did she sound the least bit skeptical? He shook his head, and then he said quite softly, "You don't think so."

The woman he had loved since they were both children, the woman he could never have because Delivered of the Lord had found her fertile, she jerked up her head. Her eyes met his, and he was astonished to see tears. "I dare not...."

Her voice was no more than a whisper now, and of course she was right.

Someone might be close by but hidden, listening for disloyal or heretical words. Now he whispered too: "Think otherwise? There aren't enough of us. There never will be. And the Webbs are intent on rebuilding as much of the old world as they can. They seek knowledge and comfort and security, not salvation."

She looked back to the infant, touched its cheek, let its fingers curl around her own.

Not quite to his surprise, he found that the wall between them did not

keep him from touching the baby's other hand. When it looked at him and smiled, he felt his heart turn over. He could barely hear God's Promise say, "They already have...."

"What?" But he knew. They had no wall. No Delivered of the Lord.

Nothing to stand in young lovers' ways.

"It'll be okay, Polly." Somehow Ruth had learned her name when no one else could do so. Now she was patting the other girl's shoulder, just as adults did when they comforted children and each other.

But nothing could stop the bright cold glare of hatred little Polly sent his way.

Haven's wall again. It was not only what separated himself and God's Promise. It also called for soldiers who did not march onward in the words of the hymn but stood guard and in its defense committed horrors.

If he and God's Promise had only grown up without Delivered of the Lord, if Delivered of the Lord and Haven did not exist, little Polly would not hate him. She would still have her mother and her father.

And he and God's Promise would have married long since. End of Exile would be their own son. Ruth would be their daughter.

They could touch.

He suppressed the thought. He had to, or surely he would go mad. He also resisted the almighty urge to look at her again, to put his hand on hers and not the baby's--End of Exile!--to pull her into his arms, to enfold her as if he had a right to call her his own, to call himself hers. It was far safer to center his attention on the baby, to look at Ruth to be sure she was not wandering off any further than Polly's side, to touch End of Exile's soft, soft cheek and watch the round head turn, mouth open as if he expected to find a nipple there. If anyone was watching, they would surely not think him guilty of coveting Delivered of the Lord's wife, though that was always the sin at the center of his heart. He was only admiring his leader's child, that was all, such an innocent thing really. Not treachery at all. Not heresy.

For a moment just long enough to quash the frightening thought, he wondered if they really fooled anyone at all.

"We have to stop them," he said. "Delivered of the Lord has already decided. I am to take a dozen of our best. Righteous Atkins knows their direction. We know where to meet them and destroy them. Then we will find this university ourselves and destroy it and all the demons it shelters."

"Do you have to?"

"There isn't any choice." He told himself he really believed that.

"If we don't, we will never accomplish our-God's--mission. End of Exile will never leave this island."

She touched the infant's palm with a fingertip. His hand closed, tight

enough to whiten his fingernails. "He could flee.

We could flee." Her words were almost inaudible for fear of being overheard.

For a moment, Consideration Wiggin was tempted. "He's too small."

She nodded. A tear fell from the tip of her nose and landed on the infant's forehead. He blinked and rolled his head from side to side and let go her finger to wipe awkwardly at the spot.

Consideration Wiggin's heart ached and his chest felt full and his throat closed off.

At the same time, he felt relieved. What would he have said if she had refused to accept his judgment that End of Exile was too small for flight? What could he have said?

That though he loved God's Promise, he could not abandon Delivered of the Lord? That he had to stay and continue the fight to make the world a righteous place, to replenish the Earth with a holy people, to prepare the way for the Resurrection and the Judgment and the Glory?

That if she somehow found a way to flee alone with her children, he would have to hunt her down and bring her back to Haven?

How could he say such things?

How could he betray God's Promise if he truly loved her?

How could he survive the tearing of his heart between the two loyalties that had always ruled his life?

He thought of Abraham, torn between love and duty, aching as he prepared to sacrifice his son. But there was no one to relieve him of his dilemma.

He looked once more at Polly. The child whose mother he had murdered.

Nor of his guilt.

## CHAPTER 11

When Brother Michael emerged from his corner of the goat shed, Felix's Pa was still where he had collapsed the night before. He lay half beneath the roof of the colonnade that surrounded the stones, his hatless head pillowed on an elbow, his neck exposed to whatever sun might strike him. His scalp was spotted pink and gray and brown. The tumor on his neck was plainly visible. Michael wished Brother Isaac Kretzmer was here as well. He was the one who wielded the scalpel whenever a Brother failed in his prayers and God lifted his hand enough to let the youvee strike.

His Brothers must be wondering if he had learned what he set out to learn, if he had fallen prey to whoever lay behind the sails, if he still lived. He had learned all he needed, of course. These people, with whom he now lingered, had been eager to share what they knew. And still he lingered, while the days passed quickly. Why? Was it the pull of the university they sought? Of knowledge like that the monks



sheltered within their treasure chests, but in vastly greater quantity?

He envied them their stones and prayed that he would find a way to fetch one back with him.

Or was it Trudy, who now avoided him but would be on this expedition?

It hardly mattered, did it? Either way, he was going. He could not turn his back upon their quest. And he would not return to his Brothers until he first returned here.

#

"Line 'em up!" cried Great-Grandpa. His voice seemed to echo, for there were two of him now and they were not speaking quite simultaneously.

"Shut up, you goddam blockhead," muttered Pa. His eyes were screwed shut; he could not see that there were now four stones beneath the colonnade. The fourth bore on its face an engraving of a cat, curled up, sleeping. "I've got a headache."

"Should sleep indoors," said Luanna.

"If you didn't guzzle so much 'jack.." added the GreatGrandpas. This time the match of voices was less precise. Where one said "'jack," the other said "'shine." They were already becoming separate personalities with a common memory.

Felix disconnected the Hudson cable through which he had just copied his ancestor. He passed it gently to Luanna, who put it in the leather sac Brother Michael was holding open beside her. There were three other cables of the same kind already in the sac, and the four were all there were. They had found them at the hospital library. Someday, perhaps, they would find more, but for now they could not afford to damage or lose even one.

"Roll 'em out!"

Pa made a sound of agony and staggered to his feet.

Luanna tied the sac with a thong and set it on top of the stone.

"Almost time." Felix grinned when he saw the expression on the monk's face. The man knew what a hangover was. "Want a drink before we go?"

Michael shook his head. "It's been a long time." Indeed, his last hangover had helped convince him to join the other monks in their abbey and put booze as well as women behind him. So why had he joined so thoroughly in the farewell party the night before?

Trudy was looking at him. Before he quite knew what he was doing, he was squatting, wrapping his arms around the cat-stone, and lifting, trying to make the strain look effortless. He stood, feeling his expression color with surprise at the way he was showing off, and for a woman at that.

But no one seemed to notice that he was doing anything unusual. Trudy

looked away, and Felix said, "Right up front."

Michael obeyed, making the new trundle lurch on its six wheels.

It stood in the center of the Webb family's compound, finished, its canopy tilted toward the morning sun.

"Hitch up the mules! Snap the whip!"

"You watched too many old movies when you were alive," said Maddoc.

"This isn't any mule train."

"It'll do until something better comes along," said the Great-Grandpa still under the colonnade. "Which I don't think will happen. Haven't seen anything bigger than a goat in a long, long time. No horses, no donkeys, no mules. No cows either."

The door to Pa's house slammed and Uncle Alva came up to the new trundle. A moment later, it opened and closed more quietly as Hussey emerged.

"What's a movie?" asked Alva.

"Tell you later," said Maddoc.

Uncle Alva grunted and continued checking the canopy, the batteries beneath the trundle's flat bed, the electric motor that would turn its wheels. He tugged at wires and bolts. He leaned the heel of his hand against the tires that had been salvaged from the trunks of ancient cars. Two spares were fastened to the trundle's rear. Finally, he said, "She's ready."

"Have we got everything?" asked Felix. He leaned over the side of the trundle, checking the half-dozen empty stones lined up behind the copy of his ancestor. Beside Great-Grandpa lay a pair of long knives or small swords. As he tested their edges with his thumb one last time, Trudy added another sack of provisions. Luanna brought a bundle of arrows. Bella held a covered pot.

Felix straightened and looked at them each in turn. Then he said to his wife, "You're not going. Not this time."

She bristled and turned toward Karyn, who was holding onto both Leo and Too-too to keep them out from underfoot. Marjy was sitting quietly on a rock. Karyn nodded and said, "I can handle the kids."

"I'll help," said Bella. All their words sounded rehearsed, as if they had had this discussion before, though not in public.

He shook his head. Then he noticed Bella's pot. "What's that?"

"Stew. You can hot it up for supper."

He nodded and shoved a box of replacement cells for the canopy aside to make room.

"Why not?" asked Luanna. "Because I'm a woman?"

"I don't want to risk you."

"What's the risk?" asked Trudy. "You haven't objected to me going."

"That's...." Different, Michael thought he wanted to say.

But the only difference was that Luanna was Felix's own. Trudy was practically a stranger, and he did not feel that losing her-or the baby she carried--would hurt him as much as losing Luanna or Karyn, Leo or Too-too.

But Felix did not say it. Losing her would certainly hurt Karyn and Bella and Miriam. Just as losing Trudy would hurt Michael.

Both men sighed as Felix muttered, "Okay."

"Line 'em up," cried the Great-Grandpa on the trundle once more. "All ashore who's going' ashore, and let's get this boat sailin'. All abooo-aard!"

"Where're those cables?" Felix grabbed the sac from the top of the stone and tucked it safely among the rest of the cargo.

"We'll need them later." If the expedition really found the university, and the university's library were still functioning, the cables would be essential to downloading databases into the half-dozen empty stones on the trundle. It would be GreatGrandpa's job to direct the downloads.

"Where's Ox?"

"Right here." Felix's cousin was pushing a wheelbarrow full of firewood.

"I can do that," said Bella.

Ox parked the barrow beside the door to the house and said nothing.

"'Course you can. But now you won't have to, at least till you've gone through this load."

"You will," said Felix. They would surely be gone long enough for her to need at least two more loads.

"We're ready," said Luanna.

"Good luck," said Hussey.

"Good luck yourself," said Felix. As soon as the sun was a little higher, the other would visit the Dinkins place to see if the copy of Great-Grandpa they had hidden near the cradle had seen anything. So far, it hadn't.

Luanna shifted from one foot to the other. Ox and Michael and Trudy were poised beside the trundle, ready to leave. Felix grasped the trundle's tiller bar and flipped a switch on the simple control panel.

The motor hummed. The six wheels began to turn.

The children yelled and waved. The other adults simply waved.

They were on their way.

Brother Michael wished he knew--just as he knew the others wished they knew as well--what they would find. Or that they would find anything at all.

#

The monk touched his rosary with one hand and his staff with the other when he recognized the trail they followed. He looked for footprints he might have made when he had come down it from the ruins that once had been Fort Knox. But weeks of rain had washed them away, leaving only dim impressions that might or might not have been his own.

Fresher were the slots cut by narrow wheels, smaller prints, the tracks left by coons and skunks, mice and birds. One broad expanse of silt even bore the brush marks of an owl's wings, where it had seized some hapless mouse or vole.

The weathered pavement that still underlay the trail had once been broad, smooth, uninterrupted. Now there was only the narrow strip of exposed asphalt and silt, moss and lichen and occasional patches of grass. To either side grew brush and small trees; the edge of the pavement showed as a sudden jump in height of the trees, though they remained stunted here just as they did almost everywhere else. There was also the shallow remnant of a ditch in which rested a few toppled cars, their metal rusted, their plastic youvee-clouded and cracked.

Once those cars had rolled the length of this road and many others, carrying hordes of people to and fro. Now the hordes were gone, the world that had supported them poisoned by their excesses. Their vehicles remained, crouched on their wheels, tumbled in the ditch, nuzzling each other's crumpled flanks as if seeking their mother's milk, or comfort after long abandonment.

The land rolled around them, hills and hollows, rocky knobs, up-thrust chimney stubs and broken walls. Black crows and ravens perched and flew. Gray pigeons wheeled in the air. Gulls soared and cried. To the right, breaks in the trees let them glimpse from time to time the glitter of Penobscot Bay, golden under the dust-yellowed sky. Once they saw a pair of sails, paralleling their course, drawing even with them, pulling ahead. The hulls beneath the canvas were not large, not much more than fishing boats, but that was large enough to carry a larger force than their own.

"Haveners?" asked Brother Michael.

"I don't know who else it could be," said Felix.

"They want the ocean for their own," said Trudy. "I've heard them talking. If they find an old boat, or a new one someone's made, they either smash it or take it."

Michael hoped his Brothers were keeping The Green Isle safely hidden.

He had thought them safe enough because they had no women or children to draw the Haveners' raids. Now, in a sudden rush of cold down his spine, he knew better. If these militant crusaders found the cockleshell that had come all the long, long way from Ireland, they

would maroon the monks on their island.

Both sails buckled and shrank as they lost the wind.

"They've seen us," said Luanna. "Trudy and me. They're going to come and get us now."

"They couldn't possibly." Ox's tone was unruffled.

"They're too far off, and we don't have a sail to catch the eye."

"We've got the trundle." Luanna patted its side, and indeed it was large enough with its canopy to be seen from a distance.

"Binoculars," said Great-Grandpa's copy, sounding precisely like the original. "Or a telescope. They could be counting the hairs in your nose."

Brother Michael wasn't sure he believed that, but he said nothing.

Felix snorted and started the trundle moving again.

They passed behind a tangled grove of apple trees, their fruit yellow even against their heat-yellowed foliage. When they could see the water again, the sails were once more full, though they seemed smaller and they were no longer drawing ahead.

"They saw us," said Brother Michael. He clutched his staff tighter in his hand and was pleased to find that his palm was not slippery. Not that he could do anything to fight off a foe at this distance, not all by himself. All he had was a stick, after all. "They're following."

High ground let them see the coastline curving to the left where the sea met the river ahead of them. But before their trail came to any shore, they struggled over the ruins of a fallen overpass and left the path Brother Michael already knew.

Their new road climbed a hill from which they had their last sight of the water. Just before they lost sight of the Haveners who had been pacing them, they saw the sails snap full against the wind.

"Hurry," said Brother Michael. "They'll take the river and try to get ahead of us." To himself, he muttered an Our Father and a Hail Mary even though he doubted they could help even if he said them in Latin or Greek. Not that he knew either tongue beyond their names and a smattering of phrases. Pater noster.

Ave Maria. Ego te absolvo. That was Latin, wasn't it?

But the trundle's speed was limited, and they had already drained enough of the batteries' power to slow it further. They leaned against its flanks and back, lending it their own muscles until they topped each hill. On flatter ground and downslopes, they trotted, still pushing. An hour later they could see the river.

"They're not here," panted Luanna.

"Not yet," said Great-Grandpa. "Or they're ahead, waiting for you around the bend."

Once the road had run on the flat between a cliff-steep hill and the river. But the sea had risen and pushed the river back in its mouth to cover the pavement with mud and water. Where the road rose enough to be exposed, it was shattered, eroded, impassable. They had to backtrack, straining to push the trundle up the hill, and take an almost completely overgrown inland path past ranks of ruined houses and other buildings. When it finally descended from the higher ground, it too ran beside the water.

"Be glad it's not high tide," said Brother Michael. Water lapped only inches below the edge of the road, and the lowest spots were puddles.

"Mud!" Luanna shook a foot disgustedly.

"It's not deep." Michael prodded with his staff. In most places there was no more than an inch of muck.

"Where are those ships?" asked Felix.

"Ahead of us," said the stone.

"Waiting for us to get mired."

But the mud was never deep enough to cover their shoes past their ankles. It did not stop them, and when the ground rose enough to be dry, the ships still had not appeared.

They came to a bridge, its concrete deck intact enough to let the trundle pass to face another hill. Felix leaned over the control panel. "The batteries are down. We'll have to stop soon."

"We'll be here half the day tomorrow," said Ox.

"Longer if the sun don't shine."

"One more hill," said Luanna. "I don't want to be near the water."

The hilltop was a plateau, the road clear for a mile ahead before it dipped once more out of sight. To either side was a field of brambles and brush through which poked the heads of gravestones, row upon row, every one of them topped with the telltale glitter of solar cells.

Sometimes, Brother Michael thought, the entire world seemed to have become a cemetery. Once it had been crowded with humanity. Now there was nothing left but ruins and gravestones and a few stubborn souls who clung to life despite every sign that the world was done with them.

Perhaps they simply had not yet found their own graves. Or perhaps, like the Webbs, they dreamed of reversing the decline, of raising the world from its ashes.

"Visitors!" someone cried, and Michael jumped. He was still not used to being accosted by talking stones.

"Burglars?" asked a guttural, hopeful voice.

"It's getting dark, so stop right there."

"Just what we're planning," said Felix.

"No, over here. There's moss and a bench, though you'll have to clear away the wild roses. Thorny things, I recall.

Doesn't bother me now, of course."

"If I'd known you were coming, I'd have baked a cake. If I still had a kitchen."

"Gravy," said the guttural voice. "Want gravy. Want bone.

Want chase cat, catch ball...."

"Shut up, Shep."

"Or arms, Maudy. You couldn't boil water without hands to turn the stove on and turn the tap and lift the kettle."

"The thought's there, Jill. That's what counts."

"Over here," said a more masculine voice. "By the mausoleum. A stone wall for your back, and a clear view of your enemies. Did I say I used to be a general? I was, you know.

Good at it, too. I mean, I died in bed. Or so they told me when they set me here. I don't remember, since I recorded years before...."

"Shut up, Ralph." Brother Michael could read the name on the stone: Rafael Marzano. "They don't have enemies."

"Didn't you see them looking behind? Of course they do."

Great-Grandpa laughed. "Sounds just like home."

#

Many of the stones had turned to chatting with each other.

More had fallen silent. The remaining few had fallen silent when Felix said, "We need guards," and then cried out, "You do have enemies! Who are they?"

The late general had been more to the point: "Where are they now?

Where will they come from?"

"On the river," had said Great-Grandpa. "But they know we know that.

They'll circle 'round, and...."

But nothing had happened. It was as if the Haveners had not been shadowing them after all, had not surged ahead to lay an ambush, had had something else on their minds all along. The landscape had continued to drowse beneath clear yellow skies.

The sun had poured youvee and heat upon the cemetery and their camp even as it sank to the horizon and below. Night fell, and the only sounds that broke the silence were those of night birds and crickets, the only odors those of soured soil and struggling vegetation.

The travelers relaxed a little. Luanna set her bow aside, though she

kept an arrow laid across wood and string, and more arrows close at hand. Brother Michael kept his staff within reach. Felix and Ox tended long poles, keeping their ends in the fire, burning, ready for use as torches. Their own bows lay on the trundle, unstrung. Luanna was so much better with the weapon than either of them that they generally left it to her.

Trudy rose to her feet beside the campfire.

"Where are you going?" asked Felix.

She grimaced. "I need a bush."

Luanna gathered herself. "I'll go with you."

She shook her head. "Uh-uh. There's no one out there."

"I'm nodding," said Great-Grandpa. "Those stones would say."

"Well, then." She turned her back on the fire. A moment later she was past the fringes of the cemetery and looking back, her feet wet with dew, a line of Revelations coming to her mind: "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God."

Why did she think of that? No mystery, really. The context was not Delivered of the Lord's, but here was a cemetery, a last echo of a world God indeed had found imperfect. The Haveners would not argue with that. Guards had been posted, too, watching for enemies, and they hoped for the strength to survive the night and an attack that might never come.

John wrote Revelations, didn't he? The line came from his message to the church in Sardis. And she had so much of scripture driven into her head while she was on Haven that the next line came quite unbidden to her mind: "Remember therefore how thou has received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee."

"Trudy!"

"Don't look!" She could feel herself turning red with embarrassment at being caught as she was, her skirt high around her waist, so startled by the hissing voice that her shoes were now even wetter than the dew had made them.

"Shh!"

"You are here!" She could say it now, she could realize who they were--Consideration Wiggin, Givethanks Hagedorn, Worthy Ferlig, David Cantor, more. Despite the dark, she could see clubs and knives in their hands.

"They're here!" cried a stone behind her. She had not been quiet, and her voice had been heard. "They have her! They're comin' for to carry you off! Fear! Fire! Foe!"

Another stone let cry a noise of horns and bells. Another blared a



bugle call.

Givethanks Hagedorn roughly pushed her aside. As she tumbled in a bramble clump, she heard someone snap, "Stay here!"

The Haveners rushed past her.

#

The stones' warnings gave them just time enough. Brother Michael leaped to his feet, his staff in his hands. Luanna seized her bow, nocked an arrow, and let it fly even before she stood up. In the darkness that had swallowed Trudy, someone yelled.

Felix and Ox yanked their torches from the fire and waved them in the air while they leaped to the trundle for their knives. When the Haveners appeared, they were ready, and not one of the four felt that their foes' greater numbers gave them any real advantage.

The Haveners had no Luanna, whose bow launched arrow after arrow. Nor had they a Brother Michael, whose staff slammed arms and legs and skulls with great impartiality. Nor did they have the torches, from which they flinched despite their every intention of slaughter.

Yet the fight was hardly one-sided. The Webbs had an advantage, but the last thing Brother Michael saw before something hard slammed against the side of his head was a club spinning through the air to strike Felix's arm and force him to drop both his torch and his sword.

He could not have been unconscious long, for the next sound he heard was a frustrated growl. "Let's go," said a voice that was no Webb's, and then came enough rattling of brush to convince him that half their attackers had to be helped to their feet before they could retreat.

As the Haveners' sounds vanished in the darkness, Ox cried exultantly, "We beat them!"

Michael opened his eyes. His head hurt. A dense mass of leaves overhung his face and blocked the dim light of the night sky. More leaves surrounded him on all sides. He tried to move, but his body would not obey his will. Nor would his voice. All he could do was pray in silence and imagine his fingers on the beads of his rosary.

"Where's Trudy?" asked Luanna.

"I didn't see her," said Felix. "She disappeared just before the fight."

"Did she lead them to us?"

"No," Brother Michael tried to say. She could not be a traitor.

"I hope not," said Felix. "But she's gone now. Maybe they caught her and took her back."

No. No. Something sharp twisted in his breast, and he wished, oh how he wished, he could stand and turn his body to look toward the river and the sea where she must have gone.

"Your elbow?" Luanna sounded worried. "You're rubbing it."

"Just a bruise. Where's Michael?"

Right here, said the monk. Practically under your feet.

"Gone," said Ox. "They took him too. Or he's dead."

"The trundle!" cried Felix.

"It's okay."

"No, Ox! They smashed it. The canopy...."

Yes. Michael had seen them crashing their clubs against the fragile solar cells. He wished he could see it now, and the others leaning over it. But all he could do was pray.

"It's not going anywhere, is it?" asked Luanna.

"Not unless we push."

"Oh, shit," Felix swore.

"What now?"

"Great-Grandpa hasn't been saying much."

"I see."

"They smashed him too. And the other stones."

Brother Michael could imagine the wreckage, the expressions on the others' faces, the despair they felt. Their quest was doomed before it had hardly begun. There was no way they could continue, and if they could there was no way they could accomplish what they hoped at the end. And he could not move to help.

Or could he? Was that a tremor in his neck? Could he make his finger twitch? Or was he only fooling himself? His voice was useless. His body refused to obey his will. He could not call out, not help push the trundle home. He would remain here forever unless someone stumbled over him.

Soon he would be no more than Great-Grandpa. A scatter of bones. A silenced voice. Not even as much. At least the stone could still talk.

Who would mourn him as Felix had to be mourning his ancestor? His only ancestor, now that his Ma was dead and as soon as his Pa finished his surrender to the grave.

"You still have Uncle Alva," he heard Ox say.

"You know he isn't any uncle."

"No other stones?" asked Luanna.

Felix said, "Not with the Webb name, not Ma's Robinson. I never found one; they never mentioned any. Great-Grandpa never did either." He

sounded astonished at the discovery of how alone a man could be in the world.

"Here are the cables," said Felix, relief in his tone. "They didn't hurt those."

"Then you can make another copy," said Ox, and Brother Michael would have looked astonished if he could twitch. Of course they could. Or they should. He was--had been--too new an arrival to the Webb community to understand all the difficulties that might exist. Yet surely, he thought, it would be much harder to replace Trudy Inger.

There was a moment's hesitation before the relief crept into Felix's voice. "Of course I can," he said at last. "And Uncle Alva can build another canopy. But we'll have to go back, get more stones, start all over."

"Ought to take me with you," said the stone that held the mind of General Rafael Marzano. "You were lucky. Could use a few lessons in basic tactics. So could they, of course. You need more men, a few mines, a tank or two. Nothing could stop you then."

"What are mines?" asked Luanna. When General Marzano explained, she added, "We haven't got any of those."

"I could still help. Ever heard of tiger traps and punji sticks?" He explained those too, but Luanna made a disgusted noise. So did Felix and Ox.

"We couldn't do that," said Felix. "Could we?"

"Wait till morning?"

"We have to, Luanna."

"We can lighten the load now, though."

The fragments of the stones went, of course, a few of them narrowly missing Brother Michael where he lay among the bushes.

So did the remains of the canopy.

"Still heavy," said Ox. "The trip home's going to be a struggle."

#

This cemetery, like so many other places in this part of the world, had its corps of secret watchers. As elsewhere, they hid in the tangled grass stems around the bases of bushes, in the dense brushes of twigs, witches' brooms, that a virus induced in fir trees, under stones, in burrows. Some perched on the limbs of trees, to every eye quite indistinguishable from sparrows, crows, pigeons, or gulls. None hovered on the air.

Nor did any emerge from their hiding places, even when the Webbs had left. Instead, they watched, perhaps ready to strengthen those things of the past that yet remained, and listened to the chatter of the stones around them and the grumbling of General Rafael Marzano: "Haven't seen folks like that for a long, long time."

"Want gravy."

"I may not have arms, but I'm not alone, you know."

"Shut up, Maudy."

"Haven't seen any folks for a long, long time."

"Want bone."

"Not many left, eh?"

"Burglar? Mailman?"

"Where d'you think they're going?"

"They mentioned the university."

"Can't be much up there."

"Gang of old-fart intellectuals. Airy-fairy boneheads. No idea of the real world."

"Goddam redneck."

"Working man! I know what's what."

"Didn't help you much back when."

"Nor them either."

"Who were the bandits?"

"No idea."

"They need a military man," said the General.

"They did well enough, Ralph."

"But the enemy got away. If they'd listened to me, they wouldn't have."

"You don't even know which side's the good guys."

"Doesn't make a bit of difference. I've worked for everybody. Money's money."

"Goddam mercenary," said the voice that had cursed rednecks a minute earlier.

Worthy Ferlig grinned when he heard that. They were stones arrayed before him, gravestones, bickering away like a classroom full of children. The work of prideful Satan, fit only for destruction.

Yet perhaps destruction could wait a little while, at least for the General.

He stood up among the bushes that had concealed him. The stones fell silent. Hands on his hips, he surveyed them. "Which one's the General?"

A hesitant voice guided him: "Three stones straight ahead, four to your right."

He put his fingers to his mouth and whistled. When Givethanks Hagedorn appeared, he said, "We're taking that one."

"Can I smash a few?" Hagedorn was hefting his hammer in his hand. He seemed eager.

"Later. Give me that." A light tap cracked the mortar that held General Marzano to his base.

## CHAPTER 12

Not far from Delivered of the Lord's own house, yet far enough that the cries of prisoners need not disturb his peace of mind, was an enclosure shaped of rough stone pillars too massive for any single man or woman to budge. There were gaps between the stones, but none were wide enough for a prisoner to slip between. The only exception was the entrance, which was blocked by a gate of rough-hewn planks. Both the stones and the gate were too high to climb, and the posts that supported the gate bore iron brackets for a heavy bar. The bar itself now leaned against the gate and held it open.

Inside the enclosure was a small hut, its roof thatched thick enough with salt-marsh hay to offer shelter from the sun's deadly youvee or the rain promised by the thunderheads building overhead, its walls hardly proof at all against wind or cold.

Outside the gate, a similar hut offered shelter to guards when they were there.

The guardpost now held only a blanket spread upon its shadowed floor, and a baby, End of Exile, sleeping. Outside it, God's Promise sat on a low stool and watched Ruth building walls of pebbles to surround iridescent beetles. When a beetle refused to stay within the bounds she set, the child pouted, used a twig to push the beetle back, and built the walls a little higher.

The mother smiled. From time to time she adjusted her daughter's hat.

The only voice was Delivered of the Lord's, echoing within the ring of stones: "There are no big battalions any more. God is on the side of His chosen people."

"Ha," said the quiet voice of the stone that claimed to hold the mind of General Rafael Marzano. "And every people that has ever been has said it is the chosen people."

"I know." There was the sound of a hand slapping the cover of a book: the black Bible Delivered of the Lord never let get far out of reach.

"He has spoken to me."

"That's what they all say."

"Satan! Demon! You speak even though worms ate you long ago!"

"They'll eat you too."

"No! I believe in the Resurrection and the Glory! I will be lifted into Heaven, and I will sit upon the right hand of God."

"Just like Jesus, eh? You won't take the left hand?"

"Blasphemer!"

"But I'm your blasphemer, if you'll have me."

"I should pound you into rubble now."

"Then you'll never lick the Webbs."

God's Promise marveled at the silence that fell within the enclosure.

Once he had a tirade going, Delivered of the Lord rarely paused before exhaustion claimed him. Yet, to be honest, this tirade did sound less like genuine rage than a ploy, a tactic designed to sway the stone to Haven's side.

Ruth, her daughter and Delivered of the Lord's, was beating a beetle with a grass stem even as she shook one finger of her other hand and mouthed a stern lecture about the folly of defying the authority God had set above it.

End of Exile uttered a single brief cry and rolled over on the blanket.

God's Promise bent to check his diaper. He was dry.

"God still helps those who help themselves," said the stone when it was finally clear that Delivered of the Lord would not ask, "What do you mean?"

"We understand that." And yes, thought God's Promise. That was why Haveners did their best to keep a monopoly on boats and stole women and children wherever they found them.

"Not well enough," said the stone. "Your boys wouldn't have had to retreat if they'd had me to teach them a bit about military organization and tactics."

Delivered of the Lord ignored the boom of thunder. "That's what Worthy Ferlig said."

"Smart fellow. He'll catch on fast when I start telling your boys how to win. They charged in like a bunch of savages."

"Yahoos!" The general's tone was contemptuous. "They need discipline, chain of command. The group is always more effective than the individual."

Was that true? God's Promise asked herself. It made sense, and both the Haveners and the Webbs gained strength from their groups. Yet shouldn't any struggle between groups be settled by the rightness of their ideas, their beliefs? The General seemed to be saying that the winner must be determined by organization, by strength. She shook her head and grabbed for End of Exile's blanket as a gust of wind lifted

its corner. He was right, of course.

"I can tell you how to make swords, too. Used to be a hobby of mine."

"We already know how to do that."

"Those toothpicks? Hah! I mean blades as long as your arm.

Foils and sabers. Cutlasses and broadswords. Give you some reach when you're up against someone with an itty bitty dagger.

Though bows would be even better."

"We know about those."

"Then why don't you use 'em?"

"We've never fought this kind of battle before."

"Just raided farms, eh? Grabbed the women and kids and ran away. But you still must use them for hunting deer."

Once more, Delivered of the Lord was silent, while God's Promise laughed to herself. Deer? No one had seen such a beast in generations. It was as extinct as lions and unicorns, known to exist only because Scripture mentioned it.

The first drops of rain struck the ground and God's Promise's skin and gown, but she dared not run for shelter yet.

Her husband was emerging from the enclosure, nodding at her, barring the gate behind him. He was an imposing man, his beard and the long gray hair that escaped his fishskin helmet a flamboyant frame for his high forehead, his mouth a stern, stern line, his right hand clutching his Bible so tightly that his knuckles were white.

She bowed her head, awaiting his command. But he said nothing, neither to admonish her idleness nor to urge her indoors. He knew that she was not idle, that her job was precisely what she was doing, tending his children, and he trusted her to shelter them from the storm in time.

She watched him go and wished desperately that the children were not his.

"Where'd you come from?" asked the voice of the stone general.

"Between," said Ruth's piping voice, and God's Promise jerked, startled. Where was her daughter? The beetle pen was abandoned, a pair of beetles circling within it, a third clambering over the wall on its way to freedom. End of Exile still lay on his blanket, protected by the guardpost from the shower that was already only scattered drops.

His little arms and legs jerked as if he dreamed of running. Ruth was nowhere in sight.

"Did you understand what I was telling the preacher?"

The stool toppled as she stood and spun toward the gate.

But she could not see through the planks. A few hasty steps to the side, and there was a gap between two of the standing stones, and no, it was far too narrow for even a child as young and slender as little Ruth to pass. But there she was, inside the enclosure, staring at General Rafael Marzano, a finger against her upper lip as if she were about to pick her nose.

A few feet past the other side of the enclosure, Polly was running to join her only friend on Haven, slipping between the stones, stopping just before any other child might have spread her arms for a hug.

Among the trees on the hillside, a voice called, "Po-o-l-l-l-y!"

Polly hunched her head at the sound, and silent tears began to pour down her cheeks. God's Promise's heart ached for her, for the dimming of her once-bright eyes, for the suppression of the energy that still quivered beneath her skin and only occasionally leaked out.

"You didn't, of course," said the stone. "You just got here." When both children ignored him, he said, "Does either of you know what discipline is?"

"They're young for that," said God's Promise. Didn't the stone have any kindness left in whatever remained of its soul?

Any sense of or consideration for another's pain? Then, as gently as she could, "Come here, Ruth. Someone's calling you, Polly. We don't belong in there."

"You're not too young," said the stone, while little Ruth glanced at her mother and refused to budge. "Do you know what discipline is?"

Polly stared at God's Promise. "I want my mommy. And my daddy. I want to go home."

Now Ruth wrapped her arms around the other child, as if they could merge to form some heroic individual no one could drag between the stones or out the gate, no one could force to do anything they did not agree to, nor could deprive of mothers or fathers or homes. It was more than clear that they both refused to budge.

God's Promise had to smile, even though she could feel Polly's pain almost as if it were her own, even though she yearned just as desperately to escape Haven and its strictures.

The stone general laughed. Then it said, "I was talking to you, lady.

You're the preacher's wife, right? Do you know what discipline is?"

As raindrops began once more to spot the soil, God's Promise sighed.

"Far too well. Come, Ruth. It's raining."

The stone laughed again. "They already know the basics, you know. The group is stronger than the individual. But the members of an army or a society can't just cling together. They need to be harnessed, organized, taught to follow orders without asking questions. It's the only way. I'm not sure your husband understands that."



"Polly!" The woman whose job it was to care for Haven's latest recruit was now close enough not to shout. Rain marked the fabric of her gown, black spots on black.

"Ruth! Ruthie!" Thunder rolled overhead. At last the children separated. Polly sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Ruth pushed her friend toward a gap between stones, one perhaps a little wider than the rest. Then she followed. Her mother never called her Ruthie unless she was getting mad.

#

God's Promise lay awake in her room, listening to the rain drumming on the roof. End of Exile's crib was beside her bed, Ruth's pallet across the room. Delivered of the Lord had a room of his own on the east side of the house, flanked by two chambers occupied by her husband's newest brides. Her side, the west, belonged to those of his wives who had proved their fertility.

Her children would stay with her until they went to the school.

He would summon her again. He always did, once a wife's latest babe was weaned. But--she looked toward End of Exile and could just make out his little face, dark against the sheet--that time was months away.

"Discipline," the stone had said. It meant obeying without asking questions.

Why was that important? Wasn't obedience the point, even if one was not happy? Even if one questioned?

Did she question? No. She complained, but only to herself.

She wished her life were different, that she lived with Consideration Wiggins, that Ruth and End of Exile were his children, not Delivered of the Lord's. But she did not question her husband's right to rule her life.

What would happen if she did? Such a strange thought! It made the world seem to tremble beneath her, her breath catch in her throat, her heart beat harder.

If she could question such a basic underpinning of her world, why...

She had never even thought of doing so. It had been unthinkable. But now a dead man had given the unthinkable a name. She could think it.

She could ask herself: If she could question those things she had always known were basic truths, things she had taken as much for granted as the air she breathed, then....

Then she could answer the question, couldn't she? She could say, "Yes," or "No."

And her world could change.

She saw that though Delivered of the Lord held power over her, it was a power that existed only as long as she accepted it.

If she withdrew that acceptance, the power would vanish.

Delivered of the Lord might not see that. He might try very hard to force her to renew her acceptance.

He might starve her, beat her, take her children away from her.

He might even kill her.

But even then she would be free of his rule.

And if he did manage to force her to submit once more to his will, that would only prove her own weakness. The principle she now saw almost as a shining object against the ceiling above her bed would gleam on, untouched: There is no dominion without the consent of the dominated.

She breathed the words aloud: "There is no dominion without the consent of the dominated."

#

"Stone!" God's Promise called through the cleft between the gatepost and the nearest pillar even before she had fully spread the blanket in the guardpost. Then she lay End of Exile down and handed Ruth her favorite doll, plain carved wood dressed in bits of cloth. "Watch him," she said, but before she turned away it was already plain that her son would be the one to watch, his eyes intent on his sister, whose attention was only for the small doll.

"Stone!"

Did she expect it to turn toward her? Did she expect some slight change in the band of glitter that crossed each side? But it was only a stone. It was enough of a miracle that it spoke: "You ran away pretty fast yesterday. Was it just the storm?"

"You made me think." She found a gap between two stony pillars and leaned into it until she was as close to General Rafael Marzano as she could get. The ground at her feet was still wet, and a puddle spread beside the general.

"Bad idea. It hurts, and it makes trouble for everybody."

"Is that why discipline means not asking questions?"

"Nah. Mostly, it just wastes time. If you tell some kid to go get the sniper who's got the squad pinned down, you don't want an argument."

She was silent, watching her children. Ruth was making faces at the baby. The baby was laughing. "It didn't sound like you were saying that."

"What did it sound like?"

"Like you were saying that authority lasts only as long as people accept it. If people question it, it dies."

"Nothing wrong with questions, if you can count on the answers."

"Then I was right."

"Right about what?"

"Last night." She paused, struggling to remember how she had phrased the idea in her mind just before she fell asleep.

"There is no dominion without the consent of the dominated."

The stone laughed. "You're brighter than I thought, to go that far from such a small start."

"That's right?"

"It's the old idea that rulers gain their powers from the consent of those they rule, and people have a right to withdraw their consent, to change rulers. You've rediscovered the social contract, baby."

On the other side of the enclosure, a shadow moved across the gap between two stone pillars. God's Promise sucked in a breath and tried to draw back, to hide behind the stone beside her. But it was too late. The stern and bearded face of her husband glared at her.

"Sedition." The word was ominously soft. "Sacrilege." His face vanished from the crack as he moved toward the enclosure's single wooden gate.

"Daddy!" Little Ruth was dashing from the guardpost, but when he failed to smile, she stopped and drew back.

"That is what you have discovered." He removed the bar and opened the gate. He kept the bar in his hand. "Rulers gain their authority from God."

"Even the Bible says the people can choose new rulers," said General Marzano. "The Israelites and Aaron...."

"And Moses threw down the golden calf and slaughtered the idolators among his people. The strength of God was on him, and the rebellion failed as it always must."

"It did not fail when Elisha had Jehu anointed king of Israel to replace the wicked Joram."

"Elisha was a prophet, the voice of God. He was not the voice of the people."

"There are other...."

Delivered of the Lord did not let the stone finish its sentence.

"Enough!" he roared, and he raised the heavy bar over his head. "The Devil can quote Scripture, too."

In the distance beyond the enclosure, God's Promise could see Polly, coming as before to join her friend but frozen now, her face white with the fear of Delivered of the Lord's holy rage.

"Asshole! She has a truer sword than thee! You don't know what you're...."

The bar came down. The stone shattered, and its fasttripping words cut off. Fragments splashed in the puddle.

God's Promise did not say a word.

Nor did Ruth, though her eyes were wide and frightened.

End of Exile, startled by his father's roar and the crash of breaking stone, began to wail.

"This," said Delivered of the Lord, "is why we must lay these talking dead to rest forever. Smash them all."

Finally, little Ruth said, "But he wanted to help."

He looked at her, and for a moment his expression softened.

"Their kind of help we do not need," he said, and his tone was no softer at all. Ruth ran from him and hid her face against her mother's leg. "I will tell Mr. Wiggin never to pollute the soil of Haven with one again, no matter what temptations it offers.

They are evil. The spawn of Satan."

When he turned his attention on God's Promise, his glare was back. "Do you have any questions?"

She shook her head and tightened her hand on the back of Ruth's head.

Polly had disappeared, fled.

"Then clean up this mess." He gestured peremptorily at the remnants of the shattered stone. "Throw it in the sea."

#

The emblem of Haven was the high, gold-tipped cross at the end of the long wharf, so high and brilliant that it could be seen from the mainland, a beacon unto the heathen just as it was unto Delivered of the Lord's own congregation.

"Satan himself is abroad in the land!" cried Delivered of the Lord.

God's Promise split her attention between the children and that congregation. End of Exile was studying his thumb. Ruth was hiding behind a tree while an older girl and Polly pretended to search for her; all three were quiet in their game, for they knew how Delivered of the Lord would react to noise while he was preaching. Polly's quietness was something more as well, but at least she was playing.

God's Promise hoped she would be able to emerge from her grief.

The congregation was men, all men, almost all the men of Haven. Once women had been able to join them, but then Delivered of the Lord had called them, "Distractions." Now they were barred from the bleachers that faced the wharf and cross during services. They had to be content with the slope and the soft carpet of pine needles and leaves and moss beneath the trees, the scent of pine.

"He has deceived us! The talking dead are not just his work, but fragments of his very self! When he fell from Heaven to Earth, he most truly fell!" Delivered of the Lord tossed his head and waved his arms in gestures that underlined and emphasized and exhorted. "He became part of the Earth itself.

Stone to fit his stony, flinty nature! Praise God!"

A rumble of amens rose from the bleachers. God's Promise took a pebble away from her infant son. Ruth tripped over a root, and another woman picked her up and hugged her.

"Distractions," he had said more than once, because they could not sit still but were constantly moving and twitching, shushing and murmuring.

There were several of Haven's woman among the trees, and more on doorsteps and near windows where they too could hear the sermon. Many were as far from the shore as they could be.

"Now he tempts us with knowledge. He called himself a general and said he could help us defeat our enemies. I was tempted! I struggled! But with God's help, I prevailed! I crushed that stone with a single blow." With one hand he held aloft his large black Bible as if it were the weapon he had used to strike the blow. With the other, he slapped its cover; the sound echoed.

"Amen," muttered God's Promise to herself alone.

"So must you! Smash every stone you find. Smash them all with mighty blows!"

"Praise God!" screeched Givethanks Hagedorn from his seat.

"Yes! Praise God! Suffer not the least of these stones to live! And praise God again for our foes! They have shown us that greater temptations exist as well! Greater incarnations of Satan!"

The congregation murmured.

"I mean that university our spy says they seek. It and its memories of the past, like unto those held by the stones. We must destroy it too."

Ruth wailed and threw herself into her mother's lap. God's Promise hastily quieted her, for she wished to hear what her husband was saying.

"Idols! They venerate the past and its pretensions of knowledge! They bow down before stones and worship them! Before the Devil himself! We must destroy them all if we wish to save the world for God!"

Little Ruth clung to her mother as Delivered of the Lord's voice turned softer and more reasonable. Polly hesitated just a few steps away before approaching, before touching her skirt, before.... "We have already destroyed dozens of libraries along the coast. We have smashed hundreds, even thousands, of stones."

"Amen," said Givethanks Hagedorn.

"But there are thousands more, and their numbers grow and grow as we look further from our Haven. The task ahead of us is huge. But it is not impossible. God is on our side! He will strengthen our arms! He will bring us allies!" He paused, surveyed the bleachers, and then nodded as if what he saw pleased him. "But we cannot wait for allies.

We forced the Webbs to turn back, but as soon as they have repaired the damage we did, they will once more set off to seek the university and its remnants of the wicked past."

God's Promise almost laughed. What would the Webbs think if they could hear Delivered of the Lord? Surely they could not think the past and the knowledge they sought were wicked.

Surely, in truth, they were not, not unless it were wicked to ask questions and to have new thoughts.

But how could that be so?

"They will be readier for us now," said Delivered of the Lord.

"Therefore we must go before them. We must find the university and its library first and destroy it. And then, when they finally arrive, we can defeat them utterly."

He stepped down from his pulpit and approached the bleachers.

"Consideration Wiggin," he said, pointing. "Worthy Ferlig...."

Polly was suddenly so rigid that she quivered. Her face was frozen, her eyes full of tears, her hand clutching desperately at God's Promise's skirt. The woman could guess what disturbed her so. They were the men who had brought her to Haven, seized her from her parents, perhaps even slain them before her eyes. She put one hand on the child's back, one on Ruth's, patted both, tugged, gathered them protectively closer. Her own eyes were suddenly wet as well.

"Righteous Atkins, Givethanks Hagedorn...." One by one, he named almost every man there. "Waste no time," he said. "Go in the name of God, and when you return triumphant, we will praise God and celebrate."

#

"You don't have to do this," she insisted. She held Ruth on one hip, End of Exile on the other, and struggled to keep the wings of her fish-skin hat out of their reach.

When she was not successful, Consideration Wiggin reached to straighten her headdress. As he did so, one finger brushed her cheek, and she shuddered.

"Of course I do," he said. "He's the voice of God, isn't he? And he wants me to lead the raid. He...."

She wondered if she could explain it to him, that he need not grant Delivered of the Lord dominion, that he could refuse, that he could choose a new leader, a new voice of God. Perhaps even, her mind whispered, a new God. But her thoughts jerked aside from that

treacherous thought, and all she said was, "Stay with me. Be my husband." She bounced the children in her arms.

"Their father."

"He would never permit that."

And Delivered of the Lord was offering to feed all his dreams of ambition and pride. All she could offer was love.

Fortunately, she knew, that fed another dream, one rooted in the days before Delivered of the Lord had tested her fertility.

"Then we must flee. Me and these babes. Will you help us?"

Will you come with us?"

There was a long silence, and the tears came to her eyes as she watched the torment on his face. She was forcing him to choose between two powerful allegiances, and for a long, long moment she was not sure which he would choose.

But at last he nodded.

### CHAPTER 13

The trail was just wide enough for the man to pass, winding inconspicuously among the trees and clumps of brush. The surface over which it passed was not hard beneath a thin layer of dirt, dead leaves, moss, and grass, but soft. From time to time, a trickle of water crossed it. Occasionally it dipped into and then out of a marshy spot.

But the man hardly seemed to notice as he scrambled through the woods, muttering to himself at every step: "They ain't going to do it."

Nope.

I was an idiot. Wanted to make Tamsin happy, but no. No. Ain't going to work. That cradle's just going to sit there. Empty. Rottin' in the rain. Ain't like it was one of those stones. No sir. Not at all."

He did not notice the many-legged things that scurried through the brush to either side of his path, or the birds that hopped and flapped above his head, moving just fast enough to stay even with him, to watch his every move and overhear his every word.

"Fucked up, didn't I? Made a mistake. But now I'm stuck with it, same as Tamsin's stuck with hiding. I wish to hell she'd stop that. But she can't, can she? And I can't either."

Gotta stick with it. Maybe someday."

He paused to extricate his pantsleg from a tangle of wild rose stems.

"Think they'll change their mind? Hell, no. I wouldn't. But maybe."

It's a nice cradle, yes, I put a lot of time into it, carving and polishing, again and again, every time we thought...." He coughed and

wiped at his eyes with a sleeve.

"And they showed it around, didn't they. I thought sure they were stealing it, just the way I did the stone. But no. Just showing it around. Brought it back the very next day. Probably laughing at the poor idiot who thought it would make good babybait." He spat. "Maybe someone'll decide they have a spare baby. Hah."

When the ground turned hard beneath his feet, he immediately froze. So did his followers, ahead and beside, behind and above. "Pavement." He scanned carefully to either side, studying the thinner growth. "No traffic, though." He nodded as if relieved and moved on.

"At least they brought it back," he repeated half a breath later.

Careful to be quiet, he stepped over a fallen log he had left in the path to make it seem less like a path. "So they take it some serious, don't they? Maybe. And maybe the sky's blue.

Hah. But I can't give up hope. Gotta keep an eye on it."

He stayed as much as he could on soft ground, where the soil had never been covered over, where people had once grown lawns and flowers and garden vegetables, even if that meant he must run the risk of tumbling into one of the thousands of empty cellar holes that pocked the land and hid in tree-shadows and tumbles of honeysuckle, wild rose, blackberry canes, and other brush.

"Everything's lush here. Out of the damned shade. But that's what Tamsin wants. So fuckin' scared. Even that bow don't help." Luanna Webb had given it to them; it hung by the door beside a quiver full of arrows. "She used to get out and work in the garden. She even went and visited the Webbs that once. Now she just goes out to talk to that damned stone."

He stopped and searched the undergrowth all around him. The light was growing dim. "Almost there. Almost where I can see it. They wouldn't leave a baby there alone, not for more than a few hours. If it's there--hah!--I'll grab it right away for Tamsin. Get the cradle too.

And get their stone back. Gotta do that too."

He paused, panting, sweat darkening his shirt, his face invisible beneath the wide brim of his hat. Insects hovered, landed on his skin and tickled. He tried to brush them away, but they came back.

"Can't just walk past every morning. Nod all polite and peek at the cradle and say are they airin' the baby. Not every morning. They'd catch on real fast, wouldn't they? Sure. Of course. I would. Can't come by at night either, or sure there'd be an ambush. What would Tamsin do then? Had to find that tree, didn't I? Had to make my own trail too. But I did that, didn't I?"

Three of the birds overhead, large and black, flew ahead to land in the topmost branches of the tree he had mentioned. They followed him here every day. They knew the way.

"Not that it's done any more good than the fuckin' goat.

Thought it'd be a baby for her. But it turned sickly on her, just like



the babies. Not that she didn't love it hard enough.

Swaddled it and cooed to it and rocked it. Chewed potato and egg for it and spat into its mouth through an elderberry tube. And it might even be dead the next time I get home." Two steps later, he added, "And think she'll let us eat it? Hell, no."

The ground was less soft now. He had trodden the path too many times and the dirt was already hardening. "Could follow me now, couldn't they?" The signs were there for those who knew what to look for.

When a stem of catclaw briar clutched at his sleeve, he swore and cut it near the ground just as he had trimmed away most of the other branches and vines that had blocked his way. Small branches which he could brush aside he left to fool the eye.

"But it won't fool a soul," he muttered.

His path ended on the brow of a small hill. There he climbed an old and sturdy oak until he could see, perhaps a quarter mile away, a thin thread of smoke. The house and chimney were hidden by other trees, but there, near the garden, was the clearing and the ring of posts and the circle of thatch that marked where a talking stone had been. He bent his head, strained to see between the posts, under the thatch. He wasn't high enough or close enough to see down the hole, where once a stone's solar cells had received the light they needed to power memory and voice, where now the cradle--his cradle--sat exposed to weather and neglect. "Still there."

There was no hint of a child or bedding within the cradle.

"If only they.... They have to know what it means. They have to know someone's hurting."

From under his shirt, he extracted a battered pair of binoculars. Only one of its tubes still held lenses, as bright and shiny as the eyes of the many-legged thing that clung to the treetrunk above his head, but that was enough. He ignored the strange creature and put the useful tube to his eye.

"Light," he muttered. "There's enough here. Enough everywhere. But not in our valley. And the stone said that's it. That's why it's weak. That's why the plants and the babies die. Why that goat's going to die, and then Tamsin. Maybe."

He scanned the woods nearby. "Saw that Hussey out here once. Looking for me. But he never came this far from the Dinkins' house. Never found this spot. But maybe he will, any day now. Right now, maybe, sneakin' up on me."

When he saw nothing suspicious in the woods around him, he turned his attention to the cradle. "Empty, yes. Not a sign.

Ought to give up. But the light'll be better at dawn. No. They wouldn't leave the baby there all night. And I wouldn't dare go get it and the cradle in broad daylight. They'd catch me sure.

What would Tamsin do then?"

He struggled to adjust the binocular's single working tube.

"Gotta be dusk. Just like now, even if it is hard to see. Full moon would help. But it'd help them catch me too."

He strained against the shadows almost as if they were physical objects he could shift aside with his will. "Is that...? No. Just something in the shadows. A squirrel. A branch. It's empty. Still empty. And they have to know what it means."

He took a deep, angry breath, almost a sob, and froze. The woman was approaching the circle of posts, the ring of thatch, the cradle, and she carried a bundle folded in her arms.

"The baby?"

She unfolded the bundle. "Shit." It was just an old leather cloak to spread over the cradle, protection for its wood against dew and rain.

He sighed. "They understand something, then." He looked upward as if he wished to share that thought with the many-legged creature he had ignored when he first climbed the tree, but the creature had retreated, vanished.

He sighed again and put the binocular tube back to his eye.

It was full dark when he came down from the tree at last.

The stone he had taken was not far away, its top covered by a sheet of bark to keep the sun on which it fed from its cells.

He spoke softly, "Why do babies die?" and when its "Symptoms, please" reply was nearly inaudible, he added, "You'll never betray me, will you? Never cry alarm." He seemed reassured.

"I should put you back, shouldn't I? Here I am trying to steal their baby, and they're covering up my cradle to keep it dry."

He shook his head. "Should tell Tamsin we just gotta make do. No kids. No matter how much I piss her off."

#### CHAPTER 14

"Bastards." Ox said the word quietly, almost as if it belonged to some bloodless abstraction.

Neither Felix nor Luanna answered him immediately. They stood on the slightest of slopes, the mudflat behind them, ahead the first long hill they must climb to avoid the shattered river road. Neither seemed able to speak, for they had used all their breath forcing the trundle through the muck left by the tide.

Now they were panting, turned like Ox toward the river, watching the white sails slide down the current toward the sea and ignoring the gulls that circled overhead, the crows in the nearby trees.

"They got what they wanted," said Felix. "Stopped us."

Smashed the stones. Great-Grandpa and all the rest."

"The trundle, too," said Ox. He shook each arm in turn and worked his

shoulders, mute complaint that his muscles were already weary and a long, long road was ahead of them. The trundle was powerless, its canopy shredded and its wires torn.

"Got Trudy back," said Luanna.

"Maybe she's dead."

"Michael, too."

"I think she'd rather be dead," said Luanna. "She was glad to get away from Haven."

Felix nodded sadly. He hoped Trudy and Michael still lived, but the hope felt futile. Perhaps they had been seized and carried off by the Haveners, perhaps they were only injured. But he thought that Brother Michael at least must have fallen in the battle, and even now his body must lie among the brambles for the ravens to eat. As far as he could tell, they three were all that remained.

The Havener sails were full of the downstream wind. Froth creamed at their bows. Rigging creaked. And Felix felt the beauty of the sight despite the damage it had to stand for in his mind, despite the threat it boded for the future.

"They have a stone," said Luanna at last.

Felix could see it too. "They never...."

"That general," said Ox. "He'll help them instead of us."

"We have stones of our own. My Great-Grandpa was a soldier."

"They killed him."

For a moment, Felix's chest ached as if the Haveners really had killed his ancestor, but then he remembered. "He was already dead. And this one was just a copy."

"They've all got those round hats," said Ox.

Felix peered toward the river, and his cousin was right. He could see no one with a bare head, like Michael. Or a broadbrimmed leather hat like his own and Ox's and Luanna's. And Trudy's.

"Then they're tied up out of sight."

"Or they're dead," said Luanna, and the restated possibility struck him as almost a relief, though he wished he did not have to tell Trudy's sisters that. On the other hand, it would be worse if he had to tell them she was with the Haveners once more, and apparently a traitor.

He and Ox leaned into the trundle and began to move it up the hill.

Clots of mud fell from its wheels and their feet. The trail bent, and a screen of trees came between them and the river. Felix felt safer then, though he knew it was far too late for safety. The Haveners had already defeated them, stopped the expedition, turned them back, and at a cost of two of their number.

"It's moving well," said Ox, and Felix grunted. Yes, the trundle rolled fairly easily. Uncle Alva had built it well. But neither of them had any illusions about how long it would be before they craved a working motor. It was a heavy vehicle even with much of its cargo left behind.

"Maybe she's still back there." Luanna struggled to steer the trundle around a sapling. "Injured. Or maybe she ran when the fighting started, and now she's lost."

Ox looked behind as if he hoped to see someone following them, calling for them to wait. "We can't go back, can we?"

Felix shook his head. "If either one of them is still alive, they're on their own. The Haveners may have left someone behind, or more may come soon. We have to run while we can."

"We'll come back this way as soon as we can." Luanna slapped the side of the trundle. "Alva can fix this up."

Felix nodded. Of course he could. It was hardly imaginable that he couldn't, or that the Webbs and their neighbors would ever be without his talents.

Though there had to be limits, didn't there? To Alva's skills, to his life, to all their lives.

"Maybe we'll find them then," Luanna added.

Ox muttered something inaudible, and then: "If they last that long."

#

What had taken them only a day--less, in fact--to travel when the trundle's motor was working, it took them three days to cover using only their own muscles against hills and downpours and mud. When the stones that surrounded and guarded their home cried out their approach and they finally rolled into the Webb compound once more, they were so weary that they could hardly stand up straight.

It was nearly dusk, and the smokes and steams of dinner preparations made Felix's mouth water. He and Ox and Luanna had had only traveler's fare for days now. Yet he was so tired. If Karyn were to step out of the house with a roast chicken in one hand and a pillow in the other, he would choose the pillow.

But they could not rest quite yet. Friends and kin were bursting out of their houses to surround them, and then: "You're back so soon!"

"What happened?"

"The trundle's a wreck."

"Where am I?" cried Great-Grandpa from the colonnade.

"Smashed as Pa," said Maddoc. Pa was nowhere to be seen, and Felix thought he must be indoors, safe in bed, a bed he craved for himself.

Or no, not that bed. There was Karyn.

There was his own house, with little Leo and Too-Too peering out the doorway. His own bed. That was more like it.

"Wanta bet?" added Maddoc.

Where was Hussey? Before Felix could ask the question aloud, Bella said, "Where's Trudy?" She had Margy in her arms and was staring at Ox with a mixture of relief and happiness and anxiety. Where was her littlest sister?

"And the monk?"

The three survivors of the expedition could only stare stupidly until the questions died down. Finally, Felix was able to say simply, "Haveners."

"Followed us up the river," said Ox.

"Attacked at night," said Luanna.

Silence fell as the others absorbed the condition of the trundle and the absence of Trudy and Brother Michael. Bella's and Karyn's eyes filled with tears.

"She's dead." Bella's words were almost a moan. "She'd just got free, and now she's dead."

"Maybe," said Luanna, almost as much pain in her own voice.

"We can't be sure. She went off in the bushes, and then they attacked.

We didn't see her again."

"She might be hiding," said Felix. "They may have captured her."

"She wasn't on the boats."

"We saw them later," Ox explained.

"But why did they attack?" asked Karyn. "The kids are here.

And more women. That's what they always want."

"Someone should go tell Miriam," said Bella.

"Me!" said Leo, but Karyn grabbed his arm before he could disappear into the growing darkness.

Uncle Alva shook his head. "They can't like what happened after you found the hospital." Then he turned toward the trail.

"I'll do it."

"You're stronger," said Great-Grandpa. "We're stronger.

They don't want us learning any more at the university. So they stopped you."

Maddoc laughed. "Ignorance is their greatest weapon."

"We won't...." Felix felt himself swaying on his feet even as Karyn grabbed his arm and pressed against his side. No, he didn't need her support. But.... "We won't quit," he managed to say. "We can't be stopped."

"Supper's almost ready," said Bella.

He never did remember what--or whether--he ate that night.

#

The bent and twisted struts of the trundle's canopy lay on the ground.

Uncle Alva, busily bolting new ones into place, looked up at the sound of Felix's footsteps. "They used to use a lot of this stuff," he said.

He held up a strut; it was a tube of metal through which he had drilled holes for bolts. "Lots of it around. Easy to replace. And I've already spliced the wires."

Felix blinked and yawned and took another bite of the sausage in his hand. He was not yet fully awake even though he had slept late. The sun was already high in the yellow sky, its heat enough to make Uncle Alva's exposed skin glisten with sweat.

"You're almost done already?" He was frankly incredulous.

Uncle Alva was a builder, yes, and he knew every tiniest detail of what he built, but the damage had been so extensive!

"No." Uncle Alva shook his head. "We'll need a whole new set of solar cells."

Luanna emerged from the house, a sausage in her hand as well, in time to say, "You got those from an old roof, didn't you? And there's plenty more roofs in the ruins."

Alva shook his head again. "They're fragile. A house collapses, and if there were any cells on the roof, they shatter.

Usually. Not like this." He tapped the nearest canopy strut.

"Lasts forever."

"But you stockpile everything," said Felix.

"I used every cell I had for this trundle. And then some of them wouldn't work. Had to redo a lot of it." He began fastening lengths of perforated angle-irons to the canopy struts.

Later, he would fasten to them panels of solar cells. For now, his voice fell to a mutter as if he were talking to himself. "I could strip the other one, but it's too small. Wouldn't do.

Have to go hunting. Maybe across the stream. I think I saw something a few years ago. Didn't need it then. Didn't have the room to store it. I hope it's still there."

"We'll need more stones, too," said Luanna. "Petstones or volunteers for downloads. A new copy of Great-Grandpa."

"Plenty of 'em out there," said Great-Grandpa from the colonnade.

"What you really need's a steam engine. Not so fragile, and it runs on coal or wood, anything that'll burn."

"You know how to build one?" asked Uncle Alva.

"I'm shaking my head," said the stone. "Not a clue. No idea. Nada.

Not internal combustion engines, neither. All we used in my day was electrics and fusion packs. But that's your thing, making things."

"I don't know either."

Maddoc laughed. "Gotta get to the university for sure, then. There'll be all sorts of obsolete technologies in the library there. Blueprints and engineering specs. Even designs for the tools you'll need."

"I hope so," said Felix.

"There," said Alva a little later. "That's all I can do for now. Ox still in bed?"

Luanna nodded. At least he had not yet emerged from his small house.

"We'll see about cells when he gets up."

But Uncle Alva and Ox did not leave the compound that afternoon.

Miriam and Gilbert showed up, and even though they could not be sure the missing Trudy and Michael were dead, the sisters and Luanna searched the nearby ruins for a pair of suitable stones and carried them to the family burying ground.

Pa emerged from his house, a bottle in his hand and his gait telling anyone who wished to know that he had already consumed at least one other. He wore no hat on his bald head today, but he still had the sense to head for the colonnade and slump in its shade. The tumor on his neck was plainly visible; Felix thought it had grown a little even in the few days he had been gone.

Pa held up his bottle to the light. It had been made long ago of clear, colorless glass, and the liquid in it was only slightly clouded.

"Almost gone," he said sadly. His forehead was creased as if he were in pain. "Most all gone. But the barrel's fulla cider. Gotta fire up the still."

No one answered him. Felix bounced Too-Too on his lap and let her down when she wished to play with Marjy. Alva was showing Leo how to whittle a chain from soft wood, even though the boy was too young to try the task himself. Ox and Gil watched all the children by turns, and all the men kept returning their gaze to the burying ground and the women.

When Leo said, "I liked her-Brother Michael too," they all agreed.

The Haveners had cost them far too much.

"In my day," said Great-Grandpa. "We'd have carried the fight to them.

Blown 'em away. Exterminated 'em."

"We can fight," said Ox, but he looked no more comfortable at the thought of war than Felix felt. There were not so many people in the world that they could afford to kill any of them, no matter how unpleasant they might be.

"No boats," said Gil. As usual, he had a stick to lean on, but today he grimaced with pain at every step. "And they're on that island."

"I could make one," said Uncle Alva. "I'm sure I could."

Great-Grandpa's laughter echoed beneath the colonnade.

"They'd sail rings around you. You need a steam engine for that too."

"For what?" Hussey appeared from the other side of the workshop. He looked curiously at the women in the burial ground.

"Who's dead?" Then he looked at Ox and Felix. "What are you doing back already?"

As soon as they had explained, Hussey's expression turned frustrated.

"Shit," he said. "Then nothing's going right."

"What do you mean?"

But Felix knew. "You haven't found the guy who made that cradle."

Hussey shook his head. "It's still sitting there. The Dinkins cover it up at night. And Great-Grandpa's hiding in the bushes."

"Not me," called Great-Grandpa from the colonnade. "Must be some other guy who looks like me."

"A doppelganger," said Maddoc.

Little Leo laughed. "Boppel! Boppel-banger! Copy me too!"

"He has to be checking out the cradle," said Felix. "He wouldn't just leave it there."

"Unless he's given up on getting the baby," offered Gil.

"That could be."

"Or he's watching from a distance."

"He'd need a telescope," said Hussey. "The stone hasn't heard a thing."



"Maybe he's got one."

"Then you need bait," said Great-Grandpa. "Get him to come closer."

"You mean put the baby in the cradle?" asked Ox. "And then jump him when he comes to get it?"

Hussey shook his head. "He might get away. But something that looks like a baby...."

"From a distance," said Uncle Alva.

"A blanket," said Gil. "Roll it up. Put it in the cradle just before dark."

Now Hussey nodded. "I'll have them try that."

## CHAPTER 15

Brother Michael closed his eyes while his Webb friends were still pitching rubble and wreckage into the brush. Consciousness fled into a darkness that gave him no glimpse or sense of the world around him. He never heard the expedition of which he had been a part turn back or Worthy Ferlig crack General Marzano free of his stone base and lug the old warrior off to the shore and the Havener ships.

How long the darkness lasted he never knew. When he became once more aware of the world, it was light. Even through closed eyelids, it was bright enough to send sharp splinters into his head, but when he tried to tighten his lids even more, that was worse. The muscles around his eyes tugged on his temples, and on his right that awakened pain like thunder and shouts and whole armloads of crockery dropped off a roof.

He winced and whimpered. His right arm jerked, crashed into brush, and dropped across his forehead. The impact made him whimper again, but then he twitched his wrist and his forearm covered his eyes.

"You've got an awful bruise, but I don't think they broke anything."

"T...?" Enough light made it past his arm and closed lids to let him sense the shadow over him.

"That's right." Her voice was soft, worried.

He cracked one eye open. Yes. Trudy. Hair and face and broad-brimmed hat blocking out so much light. Her lips pinched as if she could not stop biting them. Her eyes tight at the corners. "Trudy." Getting that one word out hurt like taking another blow on the side of his head, but saying it was essential.

"Yes."

"Why." He swallowed, and when that sent a bolt of pain through his head, he whimpered. With his left hand, he clutched at his waist.

Yes, it was there, that string of tokens that marked him as what he was. For a second he wished that he and his fellow monks had a better idea of the faith they espoused, of what it meant beyond mere tradition and retreat from the hurlyburly and preservation of a few scraps of paper or ancient parchment to be a monk. He struggled to speak and

panted with the effort. "Why, you here?"

"Why didn't I leave with the Webbs? Why didn't I go with the Haveners?" She rocked back on her heels and fell silent.

Her face took on a reflective cast.

"You ths...." He winced, and that made the pain even worse.

She nodded. "I was behind that bush, you know. That's when they showed up, and I thought they wanted me. But they just pushed me into the brush." Her voice broke. "I was still pulling thorns out of my skin when they started retreating. So I ran until I got to the shore and found a hiding place just in time. When they finally left, I came back up here."

"Ah." Something in her voice insisted he believe her. She had not betrayed them. Indeed, the Haveners had spurned her.

She was as abandoned as he.

"They had a stone with them. They never do that, you know?"

Must be something special."

The words meant nothing, almost nothing. Her hands were touching him here and there. He twitched when she found tender spots, bruises where he had been thumped and banged. Once he gasped, but he never screamed.

Not once did she arouse the sort of pain that would have signalled broken bones or deeper organs.

"Don't talk." Her fingers were light on his lips, and he wished he had the strength to kiss them.

He sighed, and when he woke again, the light was dimmer.

"It's almost dark," she said. "I found a few berries." One by one, she placed them gently between his lips, and he was able to mash them with his tongue. The juice was sweet and tart and his body drank it like it was life itself. It hurt to swallow, but not as much as it had before.

It was summer, but the nights could still be cool enough to make her body welcome beside his--and presumably his beside hers, or she would not be there, stretched along his side, her cloak an inadequate cover for them both.

Not very monkish, was it? It hurt to move his face. He dared not smile or laugh, though it had been a long, long time since he had last slept beside a woman.

That one had tried to kill him. She had found out he had been sleeping with her sister too, and that night, once they had done what they always did, she had said as much. He had laughed and offered to tell her how she compared.

That had been a mistake, though not his first one. He had seen her knife coming through the darkness just in time to ward it off, gaining

no worse than a nick on his wrist. He still had the scar. He had hit her then, knocked her unconscious, and left her hut.

He had been quite drunk when she came to and raised the hue and cry, but not too drunk to flee. He had met the monks the next day in another town.

Now he could not even remember her name. Nor her sister's.

Only his sin. Now, as he always did when he thought of that moment, he prayed for forgiveness.

Thunder woke him just before dawn, and he was finally able to sit up and huddle with Trudy beneath her cloak and hat while the rain poured down around them. His head still hurt, but his arm around her back felt good, good enough to compensate, good enough to make him feel at last redeemed in a way the monks and their faith had never approached.

When the rain gave no sign of letting up and the wind began to gust, she said, "Can you get up? We need shelter."

He struggled and made it to his knees. She tugged at his elbow, and he was standing. "Where?"

"There's ruins everywhere."

Fortunately, they did not have far to go to find a masonry corner wall someone had once roofed over with a piece of sheet metal; head-sized rocks held it down against the wind that whipped spray under the roof.

At least it was a little dryer than outside, he thought as he collapsed on the bare, damp earth.

"Not good for much," he said. He wanted to shake his head but it was pounding so badly he feared it would come off if he tried.

She gently touched the side of his head where it was still soft and puffy and tender. He gasped and jerked away and gasped again at the pain the sudden motion shot through his skull.

"They hit you awful hard," she said just as gently. "It's a wonder you're alive. It's bound to be a few days before you can travel."

Her side warm against his. Her flesh solid when his began to shake.

Her hand on his shoulder, her fingers against his cheek, somehow able to tell what was tears and what was raindrops yet wiping both away with the hem of his own robe.

Later, embarrassed by his weakness, he shrugged her off and bent forward to study the floor of their shelter. There was light enough despite the clouds and rain to see that it was not just dirt. There was dirt, of course, but embedded in it were dozens of plastic cases with numbered and lettered buttons. He grunted as he dug one out. A talking book. No label, and no response when he touched the button that should have made it speak. No way to tell whether it had been a Bible or a manual on how to operate an automobile.

"Useless," said Trudy. "Just rubbish."

"Lifeless," he added, and he was surprised when speaking now hurt so much less that he could dare to contemplate a conversation. "Lifeless as...."

"A stone?"

"Some stones are pretty lively."

"Gravestones. Is the rain letting up?"

It seemed to be, but he wasn't going anywhere as long as he still hurt like this. "They mark the dead."

"Remember the dead."

"Hold a copy of the dead. And it talks."

"Something lives on," she said. "The Haveners don't like that."

"I'm not surprised."

Soon after dark, the rain finally stopped entirely. The clouds above them thinned and parted. They could see stars, and there was the thin bright line of a shooting star.

That reminded him: Something was missing. He groped around him, his hand touching Trudy's calf and jerking away as if burned, his voice saying, "Sorry! But.... My staff. Where is it?"

She captured his hand with her own and held it still. "I'll look for it in the morning."

He subsided, but his thoughts refused to quiet. Now that he realized his staff was missing, he felt as if he had lost a leg.

Yet it was only a stick of wood. He knew that. He reminded himself of it with every other thought even as he wished he had the strength to crawl across the ground in the dark, searching for it with his fingers.

Before long, that lack of strength struck down even his thoughts.

Leaning against Trudy, his hand still in hers, he slept. When he woke, the sky was light in the east, orange bands were marking out the hours to come, steam was rising from leaves and tree trunks and the ground.

Trudy helped him to his feet, but he managed to walk on his own, one hand on the wall, around the corner to the back side of their shelter.

She sought her own privacy, saying, "There should be some more berries."

And maybe I'll find...."

He was fastening his trousers when she screamed.

He did not pause to ask himself whether he was able: He spun, pushed

himself off the wall with one hand, and began to run toward the sound.

He winced and moaned when the impact of his feet on the ground sent bolts of lightning through his head. He stumbled and tottered. But he moved, and he moved fast enough to call it running.

Just as he rounded a clump of brush and saw Trudy, he tripped. Flat on the ground, all he could do was stare at the arm around her throat, the arrow still jutting from a dark red crust on the Havener's thigh below his kilt, the other arm braced against a gravestone, the white, bloodless grimace.

Not far from his face was a fist-sized chunk of freshly broken stone.

Embedded in it were bits of shiny metal and colored crystal. He raised his head and saw broken gravestones on every side.

Yet not every stone had been smashed. Here and there they stood intact, their solar cells glittering in the light. A cluster was nearby, and from its nearest member came an eerie laugh. The name on its face was Percy Corman. "Took a thunderstorm to wake him up."

"Lightning bolts stabbing through his neck," said the remnant of Bruce Carlov.

"We need a castle, though," said the first stone. "And an Igor."

"Call him Frank?"

"I'd rather have a beer."

"Don't move." The Havener's voice was strained and shaky.

"I'll break her neck."

Despite her earlier scream, Trudy did not now seem worried.

Perhaps his grip was not that tight. Perhaps she could feel how weak he was. But Brother Michael could not be sure. The Havener looked desperate, and he might have just enough strength left to kill her.

"What do you want?"

"Go home." The voice trembled with weakness. Angry, red streaks radiated from the arrow wound and said he could not live long enough to get what he wanted. "She'll help. Right? She's one of us."

Trudy did not say a word.

Nor did Michael. He did not even permit a whimper of pain to escape his lips. He was intently working his fingers through the grass. He had made it this far, stumbling and tottering but staying on his feet until something had tripped him. What was it? Where was it?

"Where's a peasant mob when you need it?" asked a stone with a bright, young voice. Its name was Mary Walkraft.

There. His hand closed around the familiar shape. His staff.

He used it to climb back to his feet. Then he lifted it like a spear.

Trudy twisted in the Havener's grip, slammed an elbow into his gut, and was free.

The Havener sat down.

"Kill him," said the stone he still leaned against. "He's blocking my light."

For a moment, Brother Michael thought of doing that. But Trudy did not seem injured and in fact was looking at the man with more than a trace of sympathy.

"Did you know him?"

She nodded. "Nicodemus."

"Tsk," said the Carlov stone. "I liked Frank better."

"Can we get him back to the shelter?"

"Why bother?"

"Maybe he can tell us something."

"Idiot," said the Mary Walkraft stone, which had wished for a peasant mob.

Nicodemus passed out when Trudy tried to get him on his feet again.

She wanted to leave him then, saying he would die soon no matter where he lay. But Brother Michael grabbed one of the man's wrists and began to pull. The body slid a little way before Michael gasped and let go.

Then Trudy said, "You'll kill yourself too. Let me."

He let her. It was all he could manage to haul himself back to the shelter, and then he fell asleep almost immediately. When he woke up, the Havener lay a few feet away, his eyes open. Just beyond him, Michael glimpsed something that might have been a large insect if it had not seemed made of metal and glass. It vanished before he could point at it and ask Trudy to examine it more closely.

"Who are you?" asked Nicodemus in a weak voice. "Where are you from?"

Brother Michael introduced himself and added, "We're monks."

"Catholics. Papists. Idol worshippers." For a moment, his voice strengthened with surprise. "Delivered of the Lord warned us of such as you."

"And what are you?"

"Christians. True Christians. We believe in the infallible Word of God...."

When he broke off to wheeze, Michael sighed. He had met such people before. To them, any Christian who did not agree with them was at best a false Christian, at worst one of Satan's dupes or even minions.

Non-Christians were hardly better than beasts of the field.

"Scripture," he said. "It's out-of date, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"It was written down two thousand years ago, after all.

Times change, and it needs adjustments."

Nicodemus looked thoughtful for a moment, but then he closed his eyes.

His voice when he spoke was even weaker than before.

"Delivered of the Lord does that for us."

"Brother Brendan for us. Our abbot. And the Pope, if there is one any more." His fellow monks had told him of Popes, but they too knew of the supreme and infallible chief of their church only by hearsay.

Brother Brendan was the highest authority they knew, and they all knew he was not infallible. He didn't even know Latin, though he was certainly able to lead them in a small boat across thousands of miles of open ocean to a safe harbor.

Trudy cleared her throat. "Why did you attack us?"

But all Nicodemus could manage was the one word, "University," almost too weak to hear.

Brother Michael knew what he meant. To some religious minds, all knowledge that was not revealed directly by God was suspect or anathema, satanic, leading only to apostasy and damnation. He had heard it said that it was such knowledge that had destroyed the world.

He had also heard it argued that all knowledge illuminated God's creation and God gave man intelligence in order that he could gain that illumination.

He did not waste his breath trying to share that view with the Havener.

Nicodemus was no longer conscious, and if he had been, he would hardly be able to absorb the idea.

When dark came and he could no longer see her face, Trudy said quietly, "It's my fault, you know."

"What?"

"I didn't escape from Haven. They let me go, to be a spy, and I told them where we were going."

Had someone said no one--certainly no woman--had ever escaped from

Haven before? Then her words could not surprise him. Yet her tone said something else. He sighed. "You're not happy with that."

"No." Nothing else, until a little later she lay down beside him once more, and once more he treasured her warmth beside him. When he woke, his headache was nearly gone. The side of his head no longer felt soft. He got to his feet almost without effort, and he found that he could lift his feet when he stepped. Trudy no longer had to help him to the corner of the shelter.

"Nicodemus!"

There was no answer, no twitch. When Trudy tugged at one shoulder, his whole body rocked as if it were carved of wood.

Michael knelt to say the few necessary words. Beside him, Trudy bowed her head.

"He's dead," he said when he stood again. "Let's go."

## CHAPTER 16

Felix winced every time leaves rustled and twigs snapped beneath his feet. He wanted desperately to be quiet, for if their quarry noticed, they might as well turn around and go home.

Yet no matter how he tried to avoid the leaves and twigs, there were too many of them. It seemed that every step shouted their presence to everyone within half a mile.

The sky's dim glow filtered through the leaves overhead to make Hussey's sunken cheeks and wide pupils seem to glow. He moved in a half crouch, his legs and back both bent, his arms extended to intercept and bend aside whatever stems and branches might be in his way. He was still only slightly less noisy than Felix, even if he had been a bandit once. Bandits, it seemed, were neither sneak thieves nor spies. They lay in wait, or they beat down the door. They killed and looted.

Felix swore under his breath as a twig stabbed beside his eye. The Webbs didn't do such things, he told himself. They looted, but not their living neighbors, only the dead past that surrounded them with broken pavements and rusted-out hulks and crumbling ruins. They were not bandits but miners or hunters, exploiting their environment for whatever it held that they needed.

He had heard Uncle Alva mourn the fact that so much rotted into uselessness before they found it, or before they learned that it was useful and how to use it. So much had vanished, and still there remained more than they could use in a dozen lifetimes, if it could last so long. Most vulnerable of all were the ancient computerized libraries. The one at the hospital had been useless until they cleaned and repaired the solar panels on the hospital's roof. And once they had it working, its memory had quickly begun to fade. They had had to improvise quickly to save anything at all. He hoped the university was not in worse shape, that they would reach it in time to gain something useful, that....

The trail they had just left was not a major trail, but it still saw enough traffic to wear away all the brush and most of the grass and



moss. Its surface was bare dirt except where cracked, eroded pavement showed through. To either side lay the occasional hulks of ancient automobiles that testified that once it had been a broader, clearer thoroughfare.

"We leave it here." Hussey's gesture had indicated an almost invisible cleft in the wall of blackberry canes and nettles and cat-claw bramble vines that ran beside the path.

Felix had objected. "We're nowhere near the Dinkins'."

"We don't know if he's watching, or where he's watching from. So we stay out of sight as much as possible."

"Won't he hear us?"

Hussey had shrugged. "Some things we can't help. But be as quiet as you can, eh?"

Felix had laughed when he realized that, of course, bandits were not really different in their need to exploit an environment. It was just that their environment was likely to object to being exploited. Hulks and ruins were as silent as apple trees or garden soil. The fruit they bore existed for the picking.

Ox and Uncle Alva would only have to find the solar cells they needed.

They had taken the small trundle, the old one, in a very different direction, toward the stream and a bridge and a neighborhood where some of the old houses remained almost intact.

Their walls of brick and stone still supported at least partial roofs, though doors and windows were long gone and the floors were rotted out within. Alva hoped to find at least one roof that still supported a panel or two of cells.

He and Hussey were more like bandits, weren't they? They stalked live prey, concealing their approach like the hunters his battered copy of Swiss Family Robinson had told him of, leaving the obvious trail, striving for silence.

Not that silence was actually attainable. Where Hussey had led them off the trail was no path. The ground was littered with debris they had to step on. Stems got in their way, and though many had already been bent aside or stepped down, the thorns and nettles were still thick enough to resist human passage. The two men fought their way through a chorus of rattling, crushing, tearing stems until they were among the stunted trees that were all the land could support in most places. Yellow leaves, except where the apples grew. Ferns and moss.

Easier, quieter going, if only by comparison.

Very soon Felix could smell the Dinkins' outhouse and the chickens and the pig. The stinks quickly grew stronger. An open patch appeared on the right, the Dinkins' garden. Beside it sat a circle of posts and thatch, the cradle, pleading for posterity, ominous threat, silent extortion.

"Don't get too close."

"Of course." They both stayed back, away from the edge where they might be seen, hidden in shadows. A few more steps, and there was the house, a wisp of smoke coming from its chimney, its door open.

There was no sign of activity in the yard, near the pens, by the garden. There were no sounds from within the house.

"Where are they?" asked Felix.

"There's always someone here." Hussey pointed at the telltale smoke with his chin. "Maybe he's cutting wood. Or hunting for...."

A young boy peered out of the house's doorway. Behind him, a suddenly strident voice yelled, "Malcolm!"

"The kid's got good ears." Hussey stepped into view. A heartbeat later, so did Felix.

When Malcolm did not move, Calla Dinkins appeared behind him and grabbed his arm. "I've told you and told you, don't go...."

When he pointed, she froze. Her face went white.

"It's only us," said Hussey, and she relaxed.

"Have you got him yet?"

Hussey shook his head, and a little of her tension returned.

Felix thought he understood in a way he never could before he had become a father himself. Leo and Trudy were more precious to him than anything else he had ever known, and he would guard them as zealously as Calla Dinkins clearly wished to guard her own.

"Where's Absalom?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "Asleep. He was up all night, hoping he could spot the bastard."

Felix tsked. "That's what the stone is for."

"But it isn't working."

"He just isn't coming close enough to spot. He's got some way of checking the cradle from a distance."

"A spyglass?" asked Malcolm.

"The stone's been telling him stories," said Calla Dinkins as if that were something for which she should apologize.

"Great-Grandpa's like that," said Felix. "And if you were out there by the garden too, you were both safe enough. The man we're after doesn't seem to be violent. I don't think he wants to face people."

"I should think so," she said, but then, inside the house, the baby began to cry. Footsteps sounded. Calla shook her head furiously. "I want him stopped!"

Her husband appeared beside her, the baby in his arms. "He ain't even around anymore. Not a sign of him." He bounced their daughter and could not keep a surprisingly tender smile from his face. "We should just bring that cradle inside. For this one."

Felix winced. "That might make him decide to kidnap her."

"Then catch him," said Malcolm. "Set a trap!"

Hussey looked at the boy. "Okay. Got a spare blanket?"

"Huh?"

"Or some rags?" Everyone had rags. That was why Felix and Hussey had brought nothing with them. "Something we can bundle up to look like a baby?"

"Of course!" cried Calla. "Make it look like we put Anna in the cradle. Then he'll come close enough."

#

Calla Dinkins was the one who had made a habit of visiting the empty cradle at dusk and arranging its protective covering.

Tonight she approached it carefully, carrying the oblong bundle in her arms as if it were fragile, and when she laid it in the cradle, she hovered as if she were reluctant to leave, reaching out as if to pat a head, stroke a cheek, arrange a swaddling cloth. When she finally left, her head was bowed.

"I pretended it really was Anna," she said when she rejoined the others among the trees beside the garden. Her husband handed her another bundle, and she parted its cloths much as she had the other's, as if to check that she had made no mistake. A tiny face blinked up at hers.

"I was even crying."

"You'd have made a great actress," said the copy of GreatGrandpa that had been keeping watch so fruitlessly ever since the cradle had appeared.

Felix made a hushing noise, but Hussey said, "It's not dark yet. He won't come anywhere near till later."

"We don't know how far away he is."

"We don't even know he saw," said Absalom. "Maybe I scared him off last night." He sounded like he wished he had.

"I've got to go," she said. "Come, Malcolm."

When she was gone, Felix once more said, "Shh."

The three men found concealment as near the circle of posts and thatch as they could, just a step or two away but still behind a thick clump of everlasting and honeysuckle. Silence fell and lasted. Dusk became darkness, and the darkness deepened. The scents of green and growth, of dust and spice, the sun had drawn from the earth during the day were

replaced by cooler, damper, mustier night scents. A sliver of moon appeared in the east and quickly acquired a halo. Wisps of cloud crept across the sky.

"Rain tomorrow," said Absalom Dinkins very softly. His dark face was almost lost in the night and its shadows. "Or the next day."

"Ssshh!"

Felix shifted his weight. Something crackled beneath him.

Someone else also said, "Ssshh."

More cracklings, more quiet shushing sounds.

A long spell of silence as utter as it ever is outdoors: the only sounds ones of breeze among the leaves, of crickets and frogs and small scurriers in the brush, of something scritchng on a tree trunk overhead or rustling in the thatch of the shrine, of patient breathing.

The stone's whisper was almost too soft to hear: "Someone coming...."

The three men froze quite motionless, straining for any hint of the approaching villain.

A crunch of twigs. A crackle of leaves. Steps. Two, three, pause as if listening for any hint of ambush.

More steps. Two and three and pause again. Did the steps seem heavy?

Was there labored breathing behind them and in the gaps between and in the pauses? Was there no snag of thorn on cloth or skin, no hiss of rubbing branch or stem, no crunch of leaf or twig? Then he--whoever he was--must now be on the main trail, cautious, fearful, laden down with something weighty.

They shifted their postures until they could see the trail as well as the cradle beside the garden. Felix was pleased that he managed not to move his feet, not to crunch dirt or leaf, not to brush against the branches that surrounded him. The shift was one of neck and torso, a twisting, and when his joints cracked and popped and gas rumbled within his gut he was sure he could be heard half a mile away.

But neither of his human companions reacted. There was no twitch of startlement, no hissed reproach, and he heard nothing of whatever noises their own bodies might be generating within them.

The moonlight was just bright enough to show them a figure on the trail. A man, carrying a boxy object. Whoever he was, he must have seen Calla putting what seemed to be a baby in the cradle. Now he believed the time had come to trade. He had brought the stone.

Just a few feet away, he took the fork in the trail that led to the garden. He set the stone down just inside the circle of posts and sighed audibly as he leaned over the cradle. "Did they give in?" he murmured very softly.

Felix blinked, but made no other sign of how the whisper tantalized his

memory. If only the man would say something in a normal voice, he was sure he could call him by name. But....

"It looked like a baby from the tree," the murmur continued.

"I hope they did. She'll be so happy." One hand reached to pull the bundle's wrappings aside.

Before the man could discover the truth and flee, Absalom Dinkins screamed, "NO!" and leaped onto his back. Felix and Hussey were only a heartbeat behind him with their own wordless screeches.

Great-Grandpa's copy produced a cacophony of horns and whistles and bellows intended to stun and confuse.

The stranger stood and twisted as his ambushers' weights struck his back. Absalom flew aside and grunted as he struck one of the posts.

Disintegrating thatch showered down around them.

Something made a crunching sound. Felix slammed a fist into a muscular gut. Hussey clung to an arm. Absalom returned to the struggle, charging in with his head down like a ram. The stranger fell. There was the sound of breaking wood, and then he screamed as loudly as Absalom had at first: "NO! NO! NO!"

Felix and Hussey and Absalom tried to hold him down, but he twisted and flailed, punched, clawed, and bit. Despite their best efforts, he threw them off, got to his feet, and ran.

Felix wanted to follow him immediately, but Hussey said, "No. Wait till we have some light. I bit his ear."

Absalom Dinkins laughed. "He'll be drippin' for an hour then."

"Did you get him?" There was a light on the path, and there was Calla, the infant Anna in her arms, Malcolm at her side. She was not leaving them alone.

Absalom's laughter died instantly. "What are you doing out here? Get inside! Lock the door!"

"He got away," said Felix. The light came closer, and he could see shiny spots on the ground.

Hussey was working something out of the flesh of his thigh.

"Splinter," he said.

Calla held her candle closer. All could see that the splinter was a dagger-like shard of wood with one carefully polished surface. When she said, "The cradle," Felix immediately saw that she was right. In the struggle someone had fallen against the cradle, and the bundle of rags that had stood in for little Anna now sat undamaged on top of a pile of kindling. A few feet away, the stone the stranger had been returning also lay in fragments.

"Will he come back?" asked Calla. Her voice was tremulous, worried.

"We can track him in the morning."

"We could do it now," said Great-Grandpa's copy. "I can see the blood."

"You're too heavy to carry," said Felix.

"You used the trundle when we went looking for the hospital."

"Ox and Alva have it, and it'll be light before we could get it anyway."

"Hmmpf."

#

By dawn, Hussey's wound was so inflamed that he could hardly walk.

Like the stone, he had to stay behind while Felix and Absalom Dinkins pursued the trail of blood drops down the path and through the woods.

Absalom tried to reassure Felix: "She pulled me through one like that.

I was splitting wood, a branch overhead." He gestured to show what he meant. "My axe caught it and bounced, and 'WHANG!' See?" He parted his hair to show a long white scar. "Hot compresses. Spiderweb. Herb tea. He'll be okay."

Felix hoped he was right. He could not help but remember that when they had first met, Hussey had been one of three bandits. One had died immediately, in the fight. The other had suffered for days from an infected wound that would surely have killed him if one of Luanna's arrows and a Havener's club had not claimed him first. It would hardly seem fair if a similar fate overtook the only one of the three who had been able to reform.

The drops of blood grew smaller and farther apart, but the trail remained obvious. Their quarry had not been cautious in his plunging flight through the woods, and the scuffed moss and ground litter, mashed stems, and broken branches left no doubt about his path. Even after the blood trail vanished entirely, they were able to follow the man easily.

Absalom Dinkins snorted disgustedly. "I'm no woodsman, but I'd know enough to double back once in a while."

"Or to follow a road for a ways."

"He panicked. He's terrified. He's heading home the astest way he knows, and when he gets there he'll mess his pants. Just as soon as he realizes what he's done."

"Too late then," said Felix. "We'll be right there."

Only several miles from the Dinkins farmstead did their quarry finally take to a public path, and that was a small one, rarely used, its pavement rarely showing through the years of debris and accumulated soil. Fresh footprints pointed them to the left, where a pair of steep-sided hills stood against the sky, the valley between them like a cleft in the ground. As soon as they entered the shadow of the rocky

cliff on the east, the trail that had once been a paved road disappeared beneath a landslide, but a footpath picked its way up the pile of rock and earth.

The trees and shrubs that covered the surface of the landslide were taller and more vigorous and their leaves greener than any that Felix had seen in years. "Fresh dirt," he said, and it was immediately clear that whoever lived in this vicinity had also recognized the virtues of the soil exposed by the landside. A fork in the path led to a narrow garden shaded against the youvee by the trees.

The main path led them deep into the cleft between the hills. The shade was more pronounced there, even midway through the morning, and the vegetation seemed sickly. Grasses vanished almost entirely, and ferns and mosses thrived. The air was faintly musty. Absalom shook his head. "Not enough light. And too wet."

"But somebody lives here."

There was a small brook, a house, a massive boulder and beside it a burying ground and one of the talking gravestones the Webbs had been giving to every household they could find. There was also a small house.

"Hussey said he checked everyone," said Felix.

"It's pretty hidden," said Absalom. "I don't see anyone."

"Inside. Shaking in his boots."

"What are we going to do with him?"

Felix hesitated before answering. He looked at the burying ground. So many stones, small ones, and he would bet each one stood for a child that had been born dead or died soon after birth. Something tickled at his memory, and he shook his head, but nothing came to mind.

"Stop him," he said at last. "Isn't that the point?"

"He scared the hell out of Calla. He should pay for that."

"Look at the way he ran. I think we scared the hell out of him twice over. Wrecked his cradle, too."

"Hmm." Absalom Dinkins sounded thoughtful, but not convinced.

"And we know where he is now." When a woman appeared in the house's doorway, he added quietly, "And who." Even at this distance, he recognized Tamsin Curtis. The man who had stolen a stone and offered a cradle as a mute plea for a child and then fled pell-mell bruised and bleeding across the countryside had to be Abner Curtis.

Now he knew why the burying ground had tickled his memory.

She had come to the Webbs, desperate because her babies never lived.

And Abner's soft voice had seemed familiar just before they tried to capture him.

"Is he in there?" called Absalom.

She stepped onto the ground in front of the doorway and crossed her arms like some unyielding guardian. "Are you the one who bit his ear half off?"

"He had it coming," said Felix.

"What'd he do?" She was so defiant, as if she could not imagine that her man could possibly do anything that awful, that her glare stopped their advance ten feet away from her.

Absalom Dinkins told her.

Her face fell almost as soon as he started. By the time he was done, her arms were dangling at her sides, the fingers writhing helplessly.

Her voice was plaintive. "He didn't mean any harm. He couldn't have."

Abner Curtis appeared behind her, half hidden in the shadows within the door. "That's right. And I brought the stone back."

"It's broken now." Absalom's tone was unforgiving.

"So's the cradle."

"The cradle." Tamsin spun to face her husband. "We weren't ever going to need it, were we? Not unless we could get someone else to fill it?"

He shrugged helplessly. She seemed to deflate as she said, "Yeah."

She paused, and then, her back still to Absalom and Felix, added, "Never again. I'll see to it."

Felix felt no need to say another word, and Absalom followed his lead.

They both believed her: Abner would henceforth behave himself. Her pain was too obvious, and there was nothing they could do to ease it, even though he ached for her--for them both--and wished he could answer their need.

#

When they returned to the Dinkins place, they found Hussey in the yard, leaning on a stout stick. His thigh was obviously swollen beneath the thick layer of bandages, but he said, "I'll be okay."

Felix pursed his lips skeptically. "Not for a while. I'll go get the trundle."

"I can walk!" But Hussey's lips were white as he spoke. If he could walk, it would only be at the expense of a great deal of pain.

"We need to bring another database anyway. You stay here, I'll get it, and you can ride home."

That made enough sense that Hussey could swallow his pride.



He even refrained from objecting when Calla said, "I'll take care of him."

Felix thought of the way Tamsin Curtis had spoken to her Abner and managed not to laugh, not even when Absalom caught his eye and winked.

Did every woman treat her husband like a child, like a little boy who could not keep himself from doing things he knew he shouldn't? No, of course not. Luanna and Karyn did not treat him that way.

Would that change if he was injured? Or if he did something childishly stupid, as Abner had? He had the uncomfortable feeling it would.

He was not able to return with the trundle until the next day. When he got back, Uncle Alva and Ox were already sorting out pieces of solar panel. They had enough to build at least two trundle canopies.

"You're just in time to help," said Uncle Alva. "We've already tested them, and they're all good."

"How do you do that?"

Alva gestured to Ox, who clipped two wires to a panel segment and touched their tips to his tongue. He jumped and swore.

"Good voltage," said Alva. "We don't want just a tingle.

Want to try it?" When Felix shook his head emphatically, he laughed.

Ten minutes later, all three men were bolting panel segments to the canopy frame.

Delivering the database stone and fetching Hussey and GreatGrandpa's copy the next day was the repaired trundle's test drive.

## CHAPTER 17

Brother Michael led as they left the graveyard. He had to lean on his staff, and he could not move as fast as he could before he was hit on the head, but he could negotiate the path from the bluff to the flat ground closer to the river under his own power. When Trudy tried to take his arm, he flapped her away irritably. "Don't hover, d...!" As soon as he realized what he had almost said, he crossed himself. Monks weren't supposed to swear, not even if the words sprang easily from the years before they had put on the robe and shaved their heads. He and his brothers were only poor ignorant imitations of monks, but that was one of the things they knew about and included in their imitation.

That and God and prayer and Scripture. And celibacy.

He reached to his scalp. Yes, that too. It was fuzzy. In fact, it was almost past the fuzzy stage. And he was still tender. He avoided the worst of the soreness as he scratched the side of his head and his bearded cheek and jaw and chin.

Trudy withdrew, but not far and only briefly, and after he stumbled on a small rock and nearly fell, he let her move close beside him once more. He hated the thought that he had to depend on anyone else to keep him from breaking his neck, but he also knew that refusing her

care was stupid. Excess pride of precisely the sort the Lord loved to punish.

Every few steps, he looked back over his shoulder.

Nicodemus the Havener was undoubtedly dead, but his presence seemed to follow just behind the monk's shoulder. Michael knew it was not so, but the stones in the cemetery had all been talkers, and it seemed somehow unnatural that the technology to preserve the minds of the dead no longer existed.

Trudy did not seem to share his feelings. The Havener had had his arm around her throat. He had threatened to kill her.

But now he was gone. The danger was past, forgotten, left behind. She would not look back, and if he mentioned Nicodemus' name, she would not respond.

"Mud," she said when they faced the flat beside the river and the seagulls screamed overhead. "It's slippery. Let me...."

It stank, too, and it was easier than he had expected to give in. He felt much stronger than he had the day before, but he was still weak, already tired, and the mud did not seem likely to forgive his slips and stumbles. Obediently, he permitted her to pull his arm across her shoulder and brace herself against his armpit. His other hand gripped his staff tighter than ever. He stabbed into the mud, seeking the solid earth beneath it, perhaps even pavement. He took a step and stabbed again. When he struck something hard and the shock raced through his arm to his temple, he gritted his teeth until he could taste blood.

They did not fall, though progress was slow and when they had crossed the mud to stand at the foot of the trail that climbed the next hill, Brother Michael was panting as if he had run five miles. His heart was pounding, too, and his body was soaked with sweat beneath his robe.

Trudy pointed at a clump of trees a few steps up the slope.

"Just a little further. Then we can rest."

Hail, Mary, he thought. Lend me strength. And they were beside the trees, their shade welcome and cool. He let his legs fold beneath him and sat where he could have one last glimpse of the river. The tide was coming in, creeping up the mudflats, small waves moving against the current. Seagulls floated on its breast, soared above it, perched on rocks beside it, stalked the shore. On the far side of the water, hills rose up, steep and covered with trees. Here and there he could see a flash of white or yellow or red, remnants of ancient buildings, stubs of walls, piles of tumbled brick or stone. There was no hint of smoke against the yellowed sky. Nor was there any sign of Havener ships--no sails, no creak of rigging, no hint of wake. They were alone in the world.

When he looked at Trudy, he could see that she felt the same sense of isolation, of solitude, and that it did not disturb her.

Indeed, she was looking back at him as if....

"No," he said. His breath and heart had calmed. He could speak

again.

"Monks don't marry." Or did they? Brother Brendan had once said that when the Church was young, priests did take wives. And before the end, some priests had defied tradition and married and even had children, and the Church had not rejected them. Only a few, though; the tradition of celibacy had remained strong.

"Delivered of the Lord does," she said as he got back to his feet. He took a step, and he tottered as if it were still the day before. She took his arm, supporting him. He leaned his weight against his staff, and they set off once more, stepping up the hill, moving slowly--yet perhaps not too slowly--toward the Webbs. "He has several wives at once. He keeps them as long as they're fertile."

Brother Michael made a face. "You were one?"

She knew he knew the answer, but she nodded anyway. "I had to move out when I didn't get pregnant."

"But you are now."

She nodded again but said nothing else.

"Then why did you come on this trip? Shouldn't you have stayed behind?"

Taken it easier?"

"My mother never did. And she had four of us. More if you count the stillbirths."

He winced, though he knew miscarriages and stillbirths were a fact of life in this age of the world. Humanity had fallen a long way from the days when it had been a prolific, populous species, almost as if God had decided to rein it in.

Progress remained slow even after they crested the hill. He was tired, tireder than he had been even when he and his fellow monks had been rowing The Green Isle across the ocean. Yet, just as they had all done then, he kept up the rhythmic motion, timed his steps to the phrases of the Our Father, the Pater Noster, built a wall between his will and his pain, his growing fatigue, and kept on.

"We need to stop soon."

Trudy was tugging at his arm as if she thought his attention was wandering, but it wasn't, not really. He was just tired.

That was all. But not too tired to say, "There's lots of daylight left. Most of the afternoon."

The ground was smooth in front of him, but he still stumbled, his toe digging into the dirt. Only her shouldering into his armpit, his hand clutching at her back, his weight upon his staff saved him.

She grunted with effort. "I don't want to carry you. See that tree?"

An old pine whose lower limbs were broken snags.

How big had it been when the pavement beneath their trail was bare and cars still whizzed along it? He wished it could speak.

But the only voice was that of the trickle of a stream in the crease of Earth beside it. Where he could see rocks to sit on. "That far. No farther."

He managed a nod and a step and a step. What else was there?

Something moving in the brush?

For just a moment he thought he saw the very same shape he had seen pictured in ancient books and carved on Irish tombs. He almost said, "A deer!" But then there was only a pattern of branch and leaf and shadow. No deer. Of course not. There were no deer anymore, hadn't been for generations.

"There," said Trudy and he sank gratefully onto a boulder.

A moment later, she had pulled a small pot from her pack and squatted beside the brook for water. There was a healthy looking apple tree just a few feet away; its branches bore enough halfripe apples to satisfy them.

"No deer," he muttered to himself.

"You're not going to collapse, are you?"

He shook his head and wished he had the strength to laugh.

She thought he'd said, "Oh, dear." Perhaps she thought he'd felt his heart going. But no. He'd feel better in the morning, just as he had this morning. He'd be stronger. He'd last longer.

He looked again at the clump of brush that had fooled him.

No deer. No hart among the trees.

No tongues in trees either, no books in running brooks.

But sermons in stones? He wondered if any preachers, priests, bishops, archbishops, popes had ever had themselves recorded. He thought not, but if they had, there would be sermons from stones indeed.

#

When Brother Michael woke the next morning, Trudy Inger once more stretched warm beside him and her cloak over them, he felt better, stronger, as if his efforts of the day before had purged weakness from him. Yet as soon as he stood, his heart pounded and he gasped. He crossed himself.

"What's the matter?"

He shook his head and sank to a squat.

"We started off too soon, didn't we?"

He didn't want to agree, but he had to nod. "Maybe in a couple of

hours."

"I'll see what I can find for food."

There were the apples, some blackberries, a few mushrooms they both agreed were safe. But he remained too weak to leave their camp that day. They had to spend a second night sleeping side by side beneath the old pine before Brother Michael was able to go on.

He still needed her support on one side and his staff's on the other, but he moved more easily than he had. By the time the sun had passed its zenith in the yellow sky, they were miles from their campsite, on a ridge that ran beside a granite-walled ravine and a tumbling stream.

To their left they could identify the fold of hills that concealed the river. Other hills rose to the right, one of them a bald knob of granite whose clefts supported no growth but brush.

"That's smoke." Trudy pointed at a column of roiling white that rose from beyond the knob and shuddered. "Someone lives over there. Or they used to."

Brother Michael nodded and fingered his rosary. He had seen such columns before, in Ireland. The last had prompted the monks' departure and his arrival on this shore, his presence on this ridge, beside this woman. "May God have mercy on their souls."

Something moved on the knob. A human, a man. Its posture showed no hint of terror, its gait no sign of flight. Not a survivor of the fire, then. More likely one of those who had set it. A bandit.

An arm swung and pointed at them. Seconds later a faint cry reached them, and though Michael could not make out any words, he knew they were there: "Look! More suckers! Let's get 'em!"

Trudy tugged at his arm, and her voice was urgent. "We have to run.

As fast as we can."

He obeyed, and he prayed that his strength would hold. The bandits would have to follow a roundabout path to reach their road, but that would not take them long. And he and Trudy could not possibly flee without leaving signs that anyone could follow.

Footprints. The marks of his staff in the dirt.

He tried to run but had to settle for a fast walk. Straight along the ridge. Turning left where a fainter trail followed another of the old roads. Toward the river. Toward....

They were at the crest of a hill when they first saw that the bandits were indeed pursuing them. They looked behind, and there was a pair of figures on the next hill back, silhouetted by a red ball of sun about to slip below the hill even though true sunset was still a little off.

One was larger than the other, but that was all Brother Michael could tell before their relentless trot carried them under branches and out of sight once more.

Brother Michael and Trudy did not linger. They had a lead of about a mile now, but it would shrink steadily and rapidly.

They did not have long.

"Soon," Michael panted. "There's a path."

A shout rose behind them. Not a mile away, not at all.

Perhaps a quarter mile. Maybe less.

And there it was. The fallen slab of stone. The path to the long-abandoned, ruined fort. A fitting place for a last stand.

The fort had been built to overlook the river. The path brought them to the brow of a hill that served as its inland rampart and from which they could see the water.

"What's that?" asked Trudy.

It was long and dark and moving against the current.

Michael didn't know what it was and didn't dare take the time to care.

"Move!"

Crumbling steps had just led them to the mouth of a brickwork corridor that smelled of damp and mildew when the first stone struck the ground beside them. They dove immediately into the shelter and put their backs against the wall. He held his staff ready across his chest.

"Where'd they go?" The bandit was panting too, and his voice was not nearly as barbaric as Michael had expected. In fact, he sounded barely out of adolescence.

"Stop your heavin', Jig." That voice was more like it, older, rougher.

"Then maybe we can hear 'em."

Michael fought to control his own breathing. So did Trudy.

But something made a scrabbling noise behind them and the older bandit said, "In there."

"One of ya's a woman," said Jig. "We could see that much, guy. So give 'er up, 'n maybe we'll let ya go."

Both of the bandits laughed then, as if they felt some need to assure their prey that they were lying. They enjoyed both rape and murder.

Neither Michael nor Trudy said a word, though Michael clutched his staff across his chest more tightly than ever.

A shadow blocked the entrance to the corridor. A hand holding a rock half the size of Michael's head, poised to throw.

The monk lashed out with his staff, felt meat and bone, and heard a cry of pain. The rock fell on the ground.

Only one of the bandits was laughing. The other swore.

"You know what I'm gonna do to that...?"

More laughter, drowning out the bandit's intentions. "I see light t'other enduh that tunnel, Jig. You stay right here.

Don't let 'em get away."

Jig swore again. Steps and scrambling noises marked the older bandit's progress through the ruins. Trudy picked up a broken brick and moved a few feet toward the other end of their shelter.

A rock spanged off the wall beside her. "She's ready for ya, Bull," Jig called. "I can see her movin'."

"Don't let 'em out. We'll have 'em in a sec."

"Here!" Trudy's urgent hiss and beckoning hand caught Brother Michael's attention. She pointed at a darker shadow against the wall of the corridor.

He nodded, but then he pointed past her, where the larger of the bandits was blocking the opening. She threw her brick and seized another. Bull swore and backed away. A moment later, he too was hurling rocks and bricks.

One struck Trudy on the shin. She swore as loudly as the bandit had and stepped into the concealment of the doorway she had found.

Both bandits were pitching rocks now. So far untouched, Michael threw several bricks back at the younger Jig. When the fire slackened, he too stepped through the doorway.

He could see nothing in the blackness, but the echoes of the small noises his feet made told him he was in a small room that might once have been a storeroom. He explored with his hands and staff enough to learn there was no other entrance. But he still grinned quite wolfishly when he laid one hand against the wall around the opening: It was as rotten as any he had seen when he had first come through this place. He reached up with his staff to poke at the ceiling. It too was brick, laid as a barrel vault, an arch, and where he touched it, mortar sprinkled down upon his head. He poked again, and a brick fell, narrowly missing him.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Trudy.

"I thought I could push the wall over on them when they came in." He whispered too. "But I don't dare. The whole place would collapse."

Her hand found his and squeezed. "It might be worth it."

"Only as a last resort." His mouth went dry at the thought that such a last resort might indeed be necessary. Not to save himself from pain or death. But Trudy. To save her from rape as well as death.

He licked his lips. At least his breathing was under control. His fate was not, and his heart pounded in his chest as if it wished to break free and escape on its own. But neither he nor Trudy was now

panting so loudly that someone could tell where they were from that sound alone.

The rocks began to fly again. This time there was nothing to get in their way but the crumbling masonry. Brother Michael felt the wall tremble under his hand.

"They still in there?"

"There's no way out, Jig."

"Then why ain't they hollerin'? Or throwing those rocks back at us the way they were?"

"Maybe we hit 'em on the head. They're just a-lying there waitin' for us."

"That's what you think, you step in there 'n check."

"After you, Jig."

"You think I'm nuts? It's getting' dark."

"I think if you don't...."

Jig's answer might have been a petulant whine, but it was buried by the sound of footsteps. There was a rustle of dry grass, the sound of flint and steel, and a flare of light. A moment later, he said, "I don't see 'em. They ain't in here."

More steps, these from the other end of the corridor.

"Asshole! Din't you see that door?"

"Huh! Awright! Come outa there now. We've got you cornered good."

Brother Michael held his breath and squeezed Trudy's hand.

Not a sound, he prayed. Not a sound. No sneeze, no cough, no fart.

"God knows where that goes, Bull. We need a real torch."

"Then go get one."

Steps again, leaving. But only one set.

A moment later, they returned, clattering with haste, and Jig was struggling to keep his voice down to a hoarse, harsh whisper, "Jesus, Bull! There's a boat out there, right up against the shore. Fuckin' Haveners! We gotta get outa here!"

"Shit! We go for weeks without seein' a soul, and now...."

One of them threw a last rock into the blackness of the storeroom. It hit the far wall and bounced. Brother Michael suppressed a grunt of pain when it struck his ankle and prayed the bandits would not recognize the difference in the sound of impact.

He needn't have worried. By then they were already halfway to the end of the corridor. A moment later, he and Trudy could hear them



scrambling over fallen bricks, hissing curses at each other, desperate to escape the trap they feared the ruins of the ancient fortress had suddenly become for them instead of their chosen prey.

Trudy wanted to leave their hiding place as soon as silence fell, but Michael stopped her with a hand on her arm. "It could be a ruse," he said. "Maybe they're waiting just outside, and as soon as we emerge, they'll have us."

But then a shrill voice screamed, and Trudy refused to be held back.

"That's a kid!" she cried.

## CHAPTER 18

Her bed. The cradle. Ruth's pallet. A small, square table that held a square of cloth, a candle on a saucer, a Bible. The floor was smooth planks, worn smooth, never painted. The walls were wood as well, though less smooth. No one walked on them.

No woman scrubbed them on her knees with fistsful of gritty rushes.

The one small window was four panes divided by a mullioned cross.

The only ornaments were her quilt, pieced in elegant patterns from scraps of cloth, and the small braided rug beside the bed, also made from rags. She had wished at times for paint, for pictures on the walls, for curtains, for furniture that someone had taken the time to carve and polish.

Not that she had ever seen such things, but Delivered of the Lord had once found a mildewed magazine full of pictures that showed how people once had lived. Decadent, he called them.

Giving their attention to Earthly gewgaws instead of the beauties of Heaven. Once, he said, they too had known that only in austerity lay virtue. But they had forgotten, and in their forgetfulness lay their damnation.

Then she was damned, wasn't she? She craved such gewgaws, even such simple ones as the bit of seaglass she had once forced Ruth to throw away. She did not care for austerity, nor for a tyranny that could deny her the mate she had always most truly loved. She and Consideration Wiggin had been no more than children when they first kissed. They had known for years that they would marry when they were grown, that they would have children.

Her eyes filled with tears. They had forgotten Delivered of the Lord, and now all they had of love was moments and words and looks. Never any more. And all they had of beauty was sunset light that made even a room as plain as hers glow gold and rose.

Light so warm and syrupy she could almost taste it, and indeed she did take a deep breath as if she could absorb strength from God's own smile.

On the bed beside her, End of Exile reached for the strap of the bag in which she usually carried his cloths. Now it held a change of clothing as well. And another for Ruth, who knelt on her pallet and arranged her simple doll's simple tunic. There was nothing for God's Promise

except the long dark gown she wore.

Her other gown would remain, hanging from its hook.

If she tried to carry more, someone would surely stop her.

It was just as well she had so few possessions.

Her hat was in her lap. Silvery fish-skin, bleached white by youvee, stretched over a wicker frame. Almost a globe, just like the hats worn by Haven's men except for the wings.

But not for her. Not any more. She wanted to hurl it across the room, but someone might look in. She set it gently on the bedpost and wrapped a small blanket, woven with a dark stripe near either end, around her son. When she was satisfied that he would stay warm even once they were at sea and the air turned cold, she nestled him in the crook of her left arm and gathered up the bag. "Come, Ruth."

She met no one until she was reaching for the door to the outside.

Then old Rise Up Shining Lane appeared in the entrance to the kitchen.

"Going out? It's almost dark."

"Down to the shore," she said, struggling to keep her voice as calm as ever. "While there's still a little light. It's stuffy in the room."

Rise Up Shining nodded energetically. Her grin showed ragged, rotten teeth. "I know how it is. I know how it is. The kitchen's even worse, especially on a hot day and this one wasn't cold, was it? Just finishing all the clean-up now. The girls are putting things away.

But where's your hat? You can't go out without your hat, or you'll get the cancer!"

God's Promise sighed. Beside her, Ruth shifted from one foot to the other. "You said it yourself, Rise Up Shining. It's almost dark.

There isn't any youvee out there now."

"You never know. You never know."

God's Promise ignored the wagging finger and stepped outside. The sunset glow was already less, but there was light enough. There was also the scent of pine still fragrant from the heat of the day, the fragrance of cookfire woodsmoke, the fishy smell of sun-baked boats at anchor off the shore, so much richer than any single catch they had ever made. There were as well the stench of outhouses and mudflats.

Of course she knew. She knew that if she had worn her hat, if she had made Ruth wear hers, someone would surely have wondered why she went out at night dressed for day. Was she planning to return? Or was she fleeing?

As soon as the door closed behind her, she felt as if a load had been lifted from her back. She was never going to go through that door

again, never going to spend another night in that house or in Delivered of the Lord's bed. Instead....

Ruth was drifting further from her side and looking not toward the shore but toward the trees.

"Stay with me, Ruth."

But the child only glanced over her shoulder and began to run.

"Ruthie!"

"You're too easy with that child."

She gasped. "Delivered of the Lord!"

"Out for a stroll? And how is little End of Exile coming along?" He had been standing near the corner of the house, where he had a clear view of his pulpit, his congregation's bleachers, the long dock, and the high cross at its end. Now he was beside her, leaning to push the corner of the blanket aside and touch End of Exile's chin. The baby twisted in her arms and gave a single plaintive cry. "Not nearly ready to wean."

His last words sounded regretful, and God's Promise had to suppress a shudder even as she did her best to seem exasperated.

"Ruth's been restless. I thought a bit of exercise...."

"Would help her sleep? Of course. But she should still mind you better. Don't you spank?"

She shook her head. Until tonight, her voice had been all she needed.

He tsked and stroked End of Exile's cheek. "You will. Boys need it worse than girls." Then he made a gesture that might have been a blessing or a salutation and turned toward the house.

"Bed is waiting." He did not say that one of his other wives was waiting too, but the hour was so early that had to be true.

God's Promise's sigh of relief at his going was loud enough to catch her baby's attention. She smiled down at his wide eyes and murmured, "Tonight. Tonight we leave." But first....

Where had Ruth gone? Where was she now? And where was Consideration Wiggins?

The first two of her questions were answered almost immediately. Ruth emerged from the trees; with her was her friend Polly. When they reached God's Promise, she said, "You know this isn't playtime, Ruth."

The two children said nothing for a long moment. Then Ruth said softly, "I know, Mommy. But Polly wants to go home."

Was she really only three?

When Polly looked at her, there was so much desperate hope in her face

that her heart turned over. Her eyes were black in the dusk, wide-pupilled, sparkling bright as if filled with stars. Then she looked toward the dock, toward a man standing in the shadow of the bleachers, toward Consideration Wiggin, and her face twisted in what could only be fear, and perhaps hatred. Yet she showed no least sign that she wished to flee, whatever was afoot, she was determined to see it through.

God's Promise bit her lip and blinked away sudden tears.

She knew what had surely happened to Polly's home. Her parents, too.

But how could she say it? And how could she refuse the child, especially if she was willing to put herself in the hands of one of the men who had...?

At last she simply nodded.

A few minutes later, she was behind the bleachers, and she and Consideration Wiggin were wrapping their arms around each other for the first time in years, trusting the dusk to hide their sin from any eyes that might be watching. His flesh was hard and hot and she could not let herself embrace him as tightly as she craved, for the baby was between them and the girls were watching.

"We shouldn't, even now, but...." He no longer sounded uncertain. He had made up his mind, turned his back on Haven already, and would flee with her in another moment.

"Did he see you?" she asked at last. She was almost panting with dread and excitement.

"Who?"

"Delivered of the Lord. He was outside the house, looking this way."

"I don't think so. Where is he now?"

"He went in.."

"Then let's go. The boat's ready. The skiff...." He waved one hand toward the foot of the dock but returned it immediately to her back.

She could hear the lapping of waves, see the orange glow of lingering sunset on the waves. There was a breeze, but it was not strong.

She twisted reluctantly away, adjusted the strap of the bag across her shoulder, and looked for the girls. They were less than a yard away, watching the house she had left behind. She followed their gaze and drew in a sharp breath. "He went in!"

"Who?" But neither Consideration Wiggin nor any other Havener could fail to recognize the man who stood outside the house's door.

"He's watching us." God's Promise felt her knees go weak with panic.

It had been a ruse. He had suspected that she was going to meet a lover, and he had gone in only to make her think she was not watched.

Now, despite distance and dusk, he must have seen her in Consideration

Wiggin's arms, and there was no consolation whatsoever in the thought that she could be punished no worse for adultery than for flight.

He began to walk toward them. Three other men stepped out of the house to follow him. Worthy Ferlig was instantly recognizable by his pants and shirt instead of the more usual kilt and thong-tied vest. Beside him, taking two steps to each of his, was David Cantor. The last, the burliest of them all and known for the strength with which he hauled nets from the sea, was Searaker Jameson. He would have been recruited for this task in order to be sure that no one escaped.

"Run!" said Consideration Wiggin.

But before they could reach the dock, their pursuers were running too.

Their footsteps pounded on the ground. Delivered of the Lord shouted out, "Stop!"

They did not stop. Their own feet pounded on the stones of the dock and drowned out the sounds of their pursuers. The children raced before them and spotted the skiff even before she did. As Consideration Wiggin knelt to remove the skiff's painter from a cleat, they dove into the boat.

God's Promise was trying to follow them when someone grabbed her gown from behind. She fell backward even as cloth tore, but she never hit the ground. Consideration Wiggin had her by the hand, the arm, pulling her toward him, toward the skiff, toward safety.

Another hand settled on the strap of her bag and yanked.

She lurched. Her grip on End of Exile loosened.

"Into the boat!"

"Mommy!"

Polly wailed as if she had seen this scene before.

"My son!" shouted Delivered of the Lord. It was his hands against which she struggled, his will that fought to keep her and her children prisoner on Haven's soil. "No one takes my son!"

The gown tore again. It jerked at her arms. She lost her grip on the baby entirely, and he fell.

The world seemed to stop. No one moved. Not even the waves that heaved against the stony flank of the dock showed any sign of motion.

But End of Exile fell, inexorably impelled by the laws of nature.

God's Promise's belly spasmed, as if her womb could suck End of Exile back to safety. She desperately willed her back to bend, her arms to stretch, her hands to snatch, but she was powerless, motionless, helpless except to gasp and sob and scream when her baby's head struck the wooden beam that edged the dock with a hollow "clunk." The splash of his body in the water was softer, anticlimactic.

"Save him! Save my son!" The hands tugging at God's Promise released

her. Delivered of the Lord dove past her, the first man into the water, and the impact of his shoulder and hip made her stagger.

She wanted to dive into the sea too, even though she was not the one who had cried out those desperate words, but all she could do was scramble for footing and stand there, paralyzed and sobbing, until Consideration Wiggin tugged gently at her hand.

Then she realized that her infant had sunk like a stone in the deep water beside the dock. The evening light was still bright enough to let her see him descend. To let her see that he had moved neither leg nor arm and now lay quite still on the bottom.

The only movement was where a current stirred the corner of the blanket she had wrapped him in. A tendril of what could only be blood emerged from his ear, wavered in the water, thinned to a hazy cloud, and vanished.

The blow on his head had at least stunned him, and now he was surely....

Ruth was crying, but for the moment God's Promise could not possibly think of her. She knew the girl had watched her baby brother fall into the sea, victim of her parents' struggle, father jerking at her mother's arms, mother letting go, baby falling, falling, thumping, splashing. Dying.

God's Promise had seen it too. Had felt it all, every second of struggle and involuntary release and fall. And death.

She screamed again, while her daughter and Polly clung together against a hostile adult world.

Her gown was gone. She wore only a light shift, but that was not why she shivered and trembled. Consideration Wiggin tugged harder on her wrist. She staggered and let him help her into the skiff. As he joined her, pushed the little boat away from the dock, and began to row, Delivered of the Lord breached the surface with a roar. "Dead!

They killed him! Catch them!

Don't let them get away!"

She could not help herself. She had to stare at him as he climbed onto the dock. At the small, limp form he clutched desperately to his chest. Her son. Their son.

The blanket lay on the dock at her husband's feet.

Consideration Wiggin rowed furiously as more men appeared and ran for the other skiffs tied to the dock nearby.

God's Promise still shivered in her shift. She hugged herself and moaned. Her baby. Her baby was gone. End of Exile gone just as her exile ended or began, just as she left home or found it.

She barely knew it when the skiff bumped the side of the fishing boat Consideration Wiggin had chosen for their flight.

But then little Ruth was saying, "Mommy! Hurry, Mommy! Get in the

boat! They're coming!"

Only then did she look behind to see a pair of skiffs pursuing them and realize that three more were heading for another fishing boat. Still more were putting out from the dock.

One skiff was in the lead, leaping closer to them with every stoke of the oars. She did not need to squint to see that the man wielding the oars was Searaker Jameson.

"Hurry, Mommy!"

She let herself be tugged from her seat. She clambered over the side of the fishing boat and obeyed Consideration Wiggin's peremptory gesture to sit down, there, on that bench near the stern, the two small girls beside her, huddling against her thinclad side, her arms tight around them. Already he had cut the anchor rope and released the ropes that held the sail furled.

Now he was hauling on a sheet, raising the sail, leaping to the tiller and turning the boat to catch the wind.

Behind them, the pursuers in the skiffs were turning their course toward the other fishing boat, whose small crew was already raising sail and pulling the anchor from the water.

Pursuit would be fast and inexorable. But for now they were free.

Consideration Wiggin laughed as if that freedom were all there was in his mind. As if he had not just lost a babe in arms.

Of course, she told herself between her moans, he hadn't lost a child.

End of Exile hadn't been his. He had been hers, and she was the one who had let him fall, let him die. She was not yet ready to admit that Delivered of the Lord had surely knocked him from her arms.

"We'll have to land as soon as we can," said Consideration Wiggin.

God's Promise could only moan, but beside her Polly said, "Why?" Very dimly, she was aware that the child was staring at Consideration Wiggin with a more considering set to her face, as if she knew that he was rejecting what he had been, that he had begun to redeem the man who had slain her parents.

"There's only one of me. They have more crew on the other boat, so they can work the sails a little better. They can sail faster. If we stay at sea, it's only a matter of time before they catch us."

It was darker now, though the sky remained light enough for them to see the sail behind them. The wind died to a breeze, flickered, regained its strength, and now her shivers were more from cold than panic and terror and loss.

Consideration Wiggin leaned on the tiller to set their course toward the mainland and scrambled to adjust the sail.

"They can see us," he said. "But there's no help for that."

We need some place to hide."

Were their pursuers gaining? God's Promise stared behind, straining her eyes. Ruth and Polly stared as well, and did she feel in the clutch of their hands at her shift some mute entreaty? "Don't let us fall in the water too. Please don't.

We want to live."

Her own hands tightened on their shoulders, saying just as eloquently, "Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Don't...."

Her breasts felt tight with milk. They shouldn't be so full, for she had fed End of Exile just before they left the house, but her skin was taut, on the verge of bursting, and the nipples were erect and pleading.

The land opened up before them, deeply shadowed hills rising on either side, shouldering aside the stars and the last lingering glow of the sun. Full dark settled over them, though the sky remained light enough behind them to let them see the silhouette of the pursuing sail.

"The river," said Consideration Wiggin as he struggled with the tiller and the sheets to keep them in the center of the channel. "That's Verona Island on our right." Pale masonry walls glimmered among the trees. There were so many that she knew that once this long, steep-sided island had been covered with structures.

The wind faltered. The sail went slack. The river's current seized them and began to move them backward, away from safety, back toward the pursuing Haveners and the wrath of Delivered of the Lord. God's Promise felt the bitterness of bile in her throat and clutched the girls beside her harder than ever.

She began to recite: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

"He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Or moving waters, she thought. With the wind dead and the river carrying us back to captivity. But then Consideration Wiggin and Ruth both joined her. Polly did not, for she had not been on Haven long enough to learn the Scriptures.

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

How could she not fear? The shadow of death was cold upon her back and belly and legs and arms, colder even than the night air.

"Thou preparest a table before me...."

"And a wind," said Consideration Wiggin. And it was true.

The sail flapped in a renewed breeze. He hastened to adjust it, and then they were moving upstream once more.



God's Promise breathed a sigh of relief. She wished she could believe the last line of the psalm could also come as near to truth, but at the moment--despite the breeze--goodness and mercy seemed far from within her reach.

A point of land thrust from the left bank ahead of them. As soon as they had passed it, Consideration Wiggin abruptly dropped the sail.

This time the river's current was useful, for he let it turn them and slide their boat behind the point, where trees overhung the water.

As soon as the woman and children were standing on the tumbled granite blocks of the shore, Consideration Wiggin pushed the boat back into the river. It moved reluctantly, but it moved, and in a moment he was able to say, "At least it won't show them where we got off. With luck, it'll bang into them."

There was light enough to see where they were going, but a few feet from the water's edge, tangled vines nevertheless clutched at their ankles. Polly fell and cried out. When Consideration Wiggin said, "Shh!" and tried to pick her up, she twisted out of his reach.

"No!"

She threw herself against God's Promise, who automatically tightened a hand on the side of her head.

In the next few steps, long-thorned wild roses, cat-claw briar, and stiff-stemmed brush caught at God's Promise's shift.

The thin fabric tore. She could see her own calves and knees and thighs, exposed as they had not been since she was a child, and she blushed as if she stood before the Haven congregation. Her shift tore again, and she felt night air against her side, her back.

To her surprise, her shame faded away instead of growing worse. Was it necessity that liberated her from all other feelings? Yet tears still flowed over her cheeks. Grief remained, all but overpowering in its intensity. End of Exile was dead. Gone. And Haveners were hunting her.

End of Exile would not have died if she had turned her back on Consideration Wiggin and stayed within her room. He would still be alive if she had been content to remain one of Delivered of the Lord's wives. Almost, she wanted to cry out, be found, and expiate the death.

But then she thought: Remaining there would be to remain a breeding animal. A slave.

And she had learned that she had the power to say no to such a fate.

Ahead of her, Consideration Wiggin froze, his posture watchful, listening. She and the girls imitated him; for a moment, she thought she could hear the rattle of brush disturbed by someone's passage, the sound of footsteps, harsh breath, and her heart pounded in her throat.

But then Consideration relaxed.

Whatever it had been was gone. There was no danger hiding in the dark.

Then why did she still feel frightened? Why was she so reluctant to step from the tumbled granite blocks and shiftdestroying thorns onto the narrow path before them?

Why did she jump when Ruth said, "Mommy," in such a perfectly normal tone and volume?

"Keep her quiet!" said Consideration Wiggin, but God's Promise whispered, "What?"

"I gotta go."

There wasn't any reason to seek concealment, but she did it anyway.

Here was a stub of crumbling wall beside the path, shadows behind it.

"Wait a second," she said to Consideration Wiggin, and before he could finish saying, "Don't," she was off the path.

A rough hand clapped over her mouth. Another thrust through the tears in her shift and squeezed what it found. Someone gasped in her ear.

Little Ruth's terrified scream was abruptly cut off.

#### CHAPTER 19

"It hurts." Pa sprawled in the shade of the colonnade, pressing his left hand against his right side just below the nipple. His left eyelid drooped. His right hand clutched a half-empty bottle by the neck. He coughed, and there was blood on his lips.

Hussey lay a few feet away, his face white and pinched.

Unconscious, he was oblivious to Bella's hands as she unwrapped his thigh, more swollen now than ever, and cleaned pus and blood from the wound. Marjy, despite her age, was watching carefully.

Ox and Uncle Alva sat nearby.

Bella glared at Felix. "You couldn't just stand up and say, 'Gotcha!' could you? It would have served just as well. He'd have known you knew who he was. He'd have had to give up."

Felix could not meet her eyes, for she was right. Abner Curtis had not been a violent man. He had not tried to steal the baby, but to beg for it. "Look at my cradle," he had said. "We will treasure him and love him just as well as you." Stealing the stone had been a ploy, an attention-getter. It had been destroyed, like the cradle, only as a side-effect of the ambush.

As much their fault as his.

"I'm going to visit them while you're gone," said Bella.

"Maybe I can help. At least get them out in the open somewhere."

"That's the thing," said Maddoc. "They need sunlight."

"We'll see."

Hussey moaned and tossed his head, and Bella's hand was quick to stroke his forehead, soothing, calming. Her disgust with the actions that had gotten him injured was forgotten for the moment.

"It hurts." Pa coughed once more, and Felix leaned over his father, wishing he had Bella's touch, knowing that Hussey's chances of recovery were surely greater. All he could do for either man was look in mute entreaty at the Mad Doctor who had years before set him on the quest for healing that had led him to the hospital and its near-dead data banks. Now Maddoc just said, "Hmm."

Great-Grandpa added gruffly, "Vanya doesn't want to give you bad news."

"Be quiet, Anders. At least till you've got an M.D. too."

"So what's the secret? I saw enough melanomas when I was alive. I know they spread. I know...."

"Shut up, you damned fool!"

"Fuckin' blockheads!" grunted Pa. "You think I don't know I'm dying?"

"Not necessarily," said Maddoc soothingly.

"Sure I am. It hurts like hell when I breathe. So does my head. When I don't breathe, too." Pa struggled to smile, but the effort was weak.

"He means it's not good practice to tell the patient," said Great-Grandpa. "Might get him depressed, interfere with his will to live."

"Shit." Pa coughed again and hawked a wad of bloody phlegm.

"Not much point in living if I feel like this."

"There are things we can do."

"Not anymore, Vanya," said the copy of Great-Grandpa that had been retrieved from the Dinkins place. It sat in the trundle bed just a few feet from the colonnade. Behind it was a new supply of stones to hold whatever data the expedition might find at the university. The bag of Hudson cables sat beside it.

"It's too late just to cut it off his neck. It's in his lungs and brain and God knows where else. At least, that's what you told me yesterday."

"Ain't you got something better to do than talk about me?"

"It's been a long time since I could do anything but talk."

"You, boy!" Pa drained his bottle and waved it at Felix.

"You don't have to hang around and fret about me. That trundle's fixed and ready, I know that. So go. Get outa here."

Karyn appeared in the doorway to the house, holding Leo and Too-too by their hands. Behind her came Luanna with a bag of food and a bottle.

She set the bag in the trundle's bed and said, "That's it. He's right.

We've got to get going." She handed the bottle to Pa, who drank half its contents immediately.

"At least there's anesthetic," muttered Maddoc.

Pa coughed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I wish it worked better."

Ox stood up. Uncle Alva had wanted to go with them to replace Brother Michael, but Great-Grandpa had said they could not afford to leave the women and children without a man, and Gil would not do.

Karyn and Bella had both been offended. "We're not defenseless!" they had insisted, but Felix had agreed with the stone. Once again, the expedition would consist of him and Ox and Luanna.

"But you'll be short-handed," Alva had said.

"But this time the Haveners won't know we're there."

"No Trudy either," said Karyn.

Pa growled. "Will you get your asses on the road?"

#

If the Webbs were to salvage the knowledge of the past and thereby prosper in what their world had become, they had to seek out the university, even though they could not be sure it still existed, or that its computerized libraries still functioned to be tapped. But they had known no more when Felix and Ox had set out to find the hospital, and that mission had proved successful.

Surely this one would too--the university did exist; its library did work; and they would bring home treasures of useful knowledge long forgotten by the living world.

They had been thwarted once. Perhaps that was why they now felt more determined than ever to reach that goal. There was also a sense of haste, for they were leaving their home base with too few able-bodied defenders to ward off an attack by bandits or Haveners, either of whom would find it a tempting target.

There were therefore no jokes about mule trains or movies this time.

Felix, Ox, and Luanna took their positions beside the trundle. Felix cast an eye over the stones and supplies and arranged the pair of long knives or swords where their hilts could be seized on an instant's warning. The Great-Grandpa beside him said, "Don't fret. It's all there." He looked at his Pa and wished he could do something to ease

the man's pain or cure his cancer even as he knew the wish was futile.

And when Ox said, "Let's go," he waved one last time at Karyn and the children and the rest and touched the switch that started the trundle's electric motor humming. The wheels began to turn, and they were once more on their way.

When they first came in sight of the sea, they scanned its reaches carefully, but there was not a sail to be seen. The only boats were those they could make out at anchor near Haven's long dock and high, gold-tipped cross.

"I want to keep an eye on them," said Luanna. She glanced at the trundle's bed to be sure her bow and arrows were within easy reach.

Wind whipped at her hair and pushed thin clouds across the yellow sky.

On the shore, screeing gulls mobbed the dark mass of something dead.

Ravens glided to perches in the low trees above the high-water mark, watching, waiting for their own chance at the feast. One or two seemed to be paying more attention to the travellers.

"You can't," said Ox. "The trail...."

The trail bent inland, away from the sea and the river, away from any chance of spotting Haveners in pursuit of them once more.

"Isn't there another one? Nearer the water?"

"There used to be," said Great-Grandpa. "I remember driving on it to get to Bar Harbor."

Felix nodded. He had been this way before, seeking out the isolated farmsteads that could use a stone and its database, and now he could point out the appropriate forks in the trail. They wound up on a straight path just barely well enough trafficked to show the underlying pavement. It followed hilltops and ridges, and long stretches stood high enough above the surrounding trees to have views of the sea, a bay, a far shore rich with ruins converging to form the river's mouth.

The shore steepened and became a cliff from which jutted a stub of roadway supported by a corroded steel tower and a few intact cables, all stained white with seagull droppings.

The road forked at the bridge, with the left branch descending to continue along the river's bank. Trees closed in on either side, yellow-leaved oaks and maples and hickories, green apple trees, with the river visible through the trunks and branches on the right.

Occasionally the apples they saw were ripe enough to be falling on the ground already. They paused at one tree whose apples were redder than most and gathered enough to fill a sack. In an open spot, the fronds of wild asparagus stood thick and feathery, but it was too late in the year for there to be spears to harvest.

The trundle never faltered. There was never a sail in sight, and when

the sun finally slipped below the hills on their left, they camped without any expectation of trouble at all.

Their campsite was a bulge of sandy ground with a view of the harbor that had once been Bucksport. Now there were only fragments of hull and mast jutting from the waves and ruins on the hillside beyond.

Visible a little further up the river was a tangled, vine-covered mass of concrete and steel that made GreatGrandpa tsk and say, "The mill."

It was almost full dark when they heard the creak of rigging. "The fire," hissed Felix, and he and Ox furiously kicked sand over their coals.

"Too late," said Great-Grandpa softly but bitterly, as if he could remember his other copy's fate. "They're sure to smell it, and then I get smashed again."

Luanna had an arrow nocked. "There's the sail."

The Havener fishing boat did not stop, but hastened on a little further. Then it dropped its sail and let the current swing it up against the shore no more than a hundred yards away.

A moment later, it slid back into the river's current.

"It's empty," said Ox in an astonished tone.

Voices, cries, struggling to be quiet.

"Someone's running."

"There's another," murmured Great-Grandpa, and indeed here came a second ship, deftly avoiding the drifting derelict, slowing as if it listened, sniffed, strained to make out its prey.

Another voice, thin, high-pitched, saying, "...ommy."

A shriek, a scream cut off as if with an axe.

The ship darted toward the shore.

"Let's go!" said Luanna. "That was a kid!"

They paused only long enough for the men to grab their weapons. They ran then, crashing through brush and brambles, tearing their clothes and skin on thorns, splashing when they struck some swampy rivulet.

Felix swore when they stumbled over the blocks of stone that littered the perimeter of the ancient fort. He hadn't known any such thing was here, but he wasted no time or energy on wondering what it was or had been. The scream had come from.... There! A scrabbling in the brush.

A man's voice shouting, and yes, it was familiar but he had no time to think whose it could be. More voices. Another kid. A woman.

And the Haveners. He could hear them shouting too. They were on land now, heading toward the commotion with as much haste as the Webbs, and if they were closer when they started, they had started later.

The sounds of struggle led Felix and Ox to a fragment of ancient wall and an instant impasse. There was just enough light to see one bandit, his back against a granite block, his arm around the throat of a wet-cheeked woman clad only in a ragged homespun shift, a knife in his other hand. A second bandit clutched a girl no older than Leo by the back of the neck; her eyes were wide, and she was making desperate gagging noises. She was also trying to kick, but the bandit held her too far from his body to connect. A third man faced them, a knife much like Felix's in his hand and a second small girl beside him.

Not one of the men dared to move until the older bandit said, "They're ours now."

"No," said the stranger, and Felix was astonished to recognize Consideration Wiggin. He lifted his knife.

"We'll kill 'em now if you'd rather."

"Let them go," said Ox. Now it was Wiggin's turn to seem surprised but he too said nothing. "Or...."

There were noises in the brush behind the bandits. They rolled their eyes and clutched their captives tighter. More noises behind Felix stopped just before Luanna's arrow jutted from the younger bandit's throat. At the same moment, the end of a staff slammed against the other's head.

Even before the bandits struck the ground and the woman and child could run to Consideration Wiggin, a voice shouted from nearer the shore, "Circle them!"

Felix and Ox spun about. Three Haveners were there, distinctive in their fish-skin hats, laced vests, and kilts.

Others were approaching behind them and fanning out to the sides.

A few held clubs in their hands; most had long knives.

Their leader was the only one who wore pants and shirt. He was staring at the woman beside Consideration Wiggin and shaking his head. "He wants you back," he said. "You, too, Wiggin."

You're adulterers and traitors and child-killers, and God has surely told him what to do with you. The children will be safe."

Despite their tender age, the children had no illusions about what he meant. Ruth wailed and clung to her mother's thigh. Polly froze stock still while tears ran down her cheeks.

When Consideration Wiggin cupped the side of her head with a hand and tried to pull her against his side, she resisted, though she did not run. He blinked sadly at her, then shook his head.

"No," he said. "Look at her. She remembers. Children cannot be safe as long as we do what we do to their parents."

"It's for a righteous end," said the Havener. "The salvation of their souls, the salvation of the world."

Consideration Wiggin looked at the woman pressed against his other side. Her lips were almost white with tension. "I've found a better purpose."

"She belongs to Delivered of the Lord. She's his bride, the mother of his children. Give her up, man. Come back, yourself.

Or surely you will both be damned."

Consideration Wiggin shook his head. "No."

"Then we have to take you."

"If you try, Worthy Ferlig, you're a dead man." He looked at the other Haveners. "So are you."

Someone laughed nervously. Worthy Ferlig only looked at Luanna and gestured his fellows to move forward. "We'll take you, too. We need women." Then he looked past Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise and the girls. "You can come home now."

There was a thump and the crash of a heavy body tumbling into brush.

"Hah," said the voice Felix had thought familiar, and now he cried, "Brother Michael! You're alive!"

"Thanks to Trudy. She's a good nurse."

But now was not a time for conversation. The Haveners moved forward.

Luanna's bow sang again. Michael's staff slammed skulls and arms and legs. Knives cut and slashed.

The bow and the staff made the difference. They reached past the blades so successfully that the more numerous Haveners had to fall back, leaving dead and injured behind. At that point, Brother Michael shouted, "Follow us!" and led the retreat up the slope through the ruins of the ancient fort to the trail above.

"This way!" Ox had scooped up Ruth. Consideration Wiggin had Polly.

Now Ox freed one arm to point toward the camp the Webbs had left when they heard the first screams. "We can't leave the trundle."

"You're already trying again, then," panted Trudy.

"We couldn't let them stop us." Felix would have laughed if he had any breath to spare. Twilight had passed. Low clouds were blotting out even the starlight now. Night was deeper. He could barely see the deeper black of the river, the lightness that was the sail beside the shore. But he could make out faint shapes from the corners of his eyes, and the sound of the Haveners in the ruins on his left kept him oriented. Sparks bloomed as they lit torches, and that also helped, even if the torches shed no useful light this far away.

"They're looking for tracks," said Brother Michael.

Felix knew where the trundle was. Brush and brambles and fallen logs that tried to smash his shins could not stop him as he led the way until he stumbled onto what he was sure had to be the right path.



"They'll be chasing us," said Consideration Wiggin. "And they'll send more ships up the river. We were planning to find the university first, and destroy it."

"You would," said Luanna.

"They would," answered God's Promise. "We're not Haveners anymore."

Trudy nodded as furiously as if she had fled with them.

Very briefly, Felix wished he had the time to ask the Havener woman why her tears still flowed and she uttered such dreadful sobs. What had happened to her and her clothes? But though the worst of the danger was over, at least for the moment, they could not pause to discuss such questions.

"There it is," said Ox.

The shape of the trundle, the supplies they had abandoned on the ground, the smoky, hot-dirt scent of a smothered fire. They rushed to get everything back on the trundle, and when GreatGrandpa hissed that they had missed a blanket, Felix swore out loud. But then they had everything, and the trundle's batteries still held charge enough for hours of flight.

"Put the kids on here too," Great-Grandpa whispered.

They did, and then they fled, following the trail inland and north, retracing the same path Brother Michael and Trudy had used to flee the bandits. When the trundle's electric motor weakened, they leaned into its sides and rear and kept it moving. There were enough of them that when Brother Michael had to join the children on the trundle, they hardly flagged. By dawn they had already reached the mudflats that had slowed the last expedition.

"Hurry," said Consideration Wiggin, even though he was panting raggedly. "They must be following us already, and the sea-breeze is behind them. If they see us from the water...."

"The way you saw us before," said Felix.

Wiggin nodded. "It could be a trap."

"But we have to rest." A day and a night without sleep, and the night one of violent action and flight, had exhausted them all. Felix could see that the others were no better.

Brother Michael pointed at a grove of trees so dense that the dawn sun visible beneath the overcast did not lighten their shadows. A few minutes later, they were in its shelter, Ruth was snug against her mother's side, Polly against the other and tolerating Consideration Wiggin a foot away despite her memory of what he had once done, and all were fast asleep. Only GreatGrandpa remained on watch for Haveners on land or river.

## CHAPTER 20

When Michael next opened his eyes, the clouds overhead were thicker, a sullen yellow-gray that threatened storm before many more hours had

passed. Shadows were weak, but he could see that they flowed from the west, not the east. A whole day had passed.

He shook his head and ran his fingers over the fuzz where his tonsure had been and stretched. Trudy lay beside him, her eyes open, watching his face. A corner of her cloak lay over her hip. A few feet away, Felix and Luanna were stirring. Ox was standing beside a bush, looking toward the east and the river. A crunching noise drew his eyes to the trundle, where the two young girls sat on the ground, eating apples.

Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise lay nearby, now close against each other's sides, still asleep.

"Did they pass us?" asked Felix.

"I'm shaking my head," said Great-Grandpa. "I didn't see a sail all day. Maybe they went back to Haven."

"No," said Trudy. "They wouldn't give up."

"But they'd have to take care of their wounded."

Consideration Wiggin had opened his eyes. "If they retrieved our ship, they could use that to send them home, but that would still take all day. I don't think it would leave them with too small a force."

Felix untangled himself from his cloak and got to his feet.

When he went to the trundle for an apple, the girls avoided him.

Polly especially seemed distrustful of strangers. "How long have we got?"

"There's no telling," said Consideration Wiggin. "But they won't wait for tomorrow."

Michael stared long and hard at the other man. He was the man, Trudy had told him, who had kidnapped her years before and carried her off to Haven. A devout Havener, loyal to Delivered of the Lord and his dreams of a holy conquest of the Earth, striving for a day when everyone on the battered planet would be saved and the way would be open for the Resurrection and the Judgment.

Yet now he seemed quite serious in his flight from Haven.

"What happened?"

Consideration Wiggin told him of their flight and the struggle on the dock, the death of God's Promise's son.

"She's changed you."

"No." The ex-Havener shook his head. "It was lack of her that changed me. We wanted to marry when we were children, but then...."

Brother Michael understood. He also understood why, when Consideration Wiggin looked over his shoulder at the trail behind, there was fear in his eyes. Not once was there any hint that he was waiting for friends or allies to appear.

Silence stretched until at last Felix said, "Then we'd better not wait either." Apparently he understood as well, or at least could think of no reason to refuse to believe him.

The trundle's canopy had received almost enough sunlight during the day to recharge the batteries completely. They therefore made good time until they reached the crest of the hill where the expedition had been attacked before. At that point they paused, and Felix finally said to Brother Michael, "We thought they must have killed you."

"They almost did," said the monk. Briefly he explained how he had awakened in the cemetery, unable to move, able only to listen as the Webbs decided he had been captured or slain by the Haveners. He had passed out then, and when he came to they were gone.

"Trudy was there, though." His eyes met hers, and he knew that his face said precisely the same as hers: there was now a bond between them as strong--or nearly so--as that between Felix and Luanna or Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise.

"What happened to you?" Luanna asked the other woman.

Trudy shrugged. "They surprised me, pushed me aside. I stayed out of the way."

Great-Grandpa made a coughing noise. "You'd better get out of the way."

Find some shelter. The storm's going to break pretty soon. I can already hear thunder."

A few minutes later, the others could hear the distant rumble too.

Flashes of light ran across the sky, burrowing within the clouds. A gust of wind seized the trundle's canopy and rocked the vehicle on its wheels. The rain began to fly.

They and all their supplies were thoroughly soaked long before they found a ruin whose corroded sheet metal roof offered even partial shelter.

The only comfort came when Consideration Wiggin said, "At least they can't follow us in this."

#

When they finally emerged from their shelter, it was noon of the next day. The storm had passed, and the sun was struggling to break through the last of the clouds scudding overhead. The Earth smelled of rain and ozone and tree sap released from windbroken branches.

God's Promise's face was finally dry, though her eyes were as haunted as ever. She kept Ruth and Polly close beside her, and she did not say much.

Ox turned as he surveyed their limited horizon of ruin and trees and a narrow trail. "Where's the river?"

"On the other side of that hill," said Brother Michael.

There was still a slight tenderness to the side of his head, but he felt as strong now as he had before the battle that had laid him low.

The day and night of rest had done him good.

"I wish we could see it."

"I don't want them sneaking up on us either," said Luanna.

Both Trudy and God's Promise shuddered at the words. The children watched the adults as if they were not quite sure that they too should worry.

"Soon," said Felix, but they did not resume their journey until dusk cloaked them once more from any hostile view and the remaining wind had swept around to blow toward the sea. Half an hour later, the trail descended a long hill and struck another mudflat where the river had encroached upon the land. The sky still held enough light to make the water sheen, and they had a clear view for miles between the dark shoulders of the land to either side.

"There they are," said Consideration Wiggin. "With reinforcements. I see two sails, not just one."

"But look at the way they have to tack." Great-Grandpa sounded pleased. The silhouetted sails were almost broadside to their line of sight. "They won't get this far until sometime tomorrow."

"If the wind holds," said Brother Michael. He touched the stone and shell beads around the waist of his robe and muttered a quiet prayer to himself.

"One for us," said Consideration Wiggin. "And one for the university."

"They can't have any better idea of where to find it than we do," said Luanna.

Felix nodded. "Unless they have a map."

"We don't need a map," said Great-Grandpa. "I remember."

They fell silent, watching the sails tack back and forth across the darkening bosom of the river, edging ever closer to them.

When the silence was broken by the pealing of a massive bell not very far away, they all jumped, startled. But Brother Michael immediately thought of the mass of metal he and the other monks had found in the cellar hole over which they were building their abbey. He laughed delightedly. "A church bell!"

"Where?"

"Up ahead."

"Should we? They might be as bad as Haveners."

"Or worse."

"But we ought to warn them who's coming."

They struggled through the last of the slippery mud and followed the trail into the ruins of what once had been a small village. On the left above the trail, a knoll held up a wooden building that still wore flecks of white paint.

"That used to be the Baptist church," said Great-Grandpa.

"I went to a wedding here once."

The shingles on the roof were bleached and crumbled and split by time and youvee and weather. Many were missing altogether. Most of the windows had been boarded over long ago.

A few still held glass, through which dim light was visible.

The front of the building had once been pierced by a pair of doorways, tall, pointed arches, but one had been filled in with random lumber.

Only one still held a decrepit door. High above it the steeple reached for heaven, a bell still swaying in the open chamber at its top. On its face was a dark circle blotched with lichens and peeling paint and a few scraps of brass corroded green.

"Used to be a clock," said Great-Grandpa. "Now you can't even tell what time it stopped."

"Someone's still there," said God's Promise, and her daughter Ruth nodded firmly. "I want to see them."

"Uh-uh." Polly backed up as if the building had scowled at her.

"I don't know why, but...."

"You're both staying right here," Felix assured the children as Luanna picked up her bow and quiver. "With Ox, to keep an eye on the trundle."

"Not me!" Great-Grandpa insisted that Felix carry him up the knoll.

As they approached the top, he muttered, "Decrepit place!"

The stone was right. The clapboards on the church's flanks were in no better shape than the shingles on its roof. One limb of the cross fastened to the wall above the entrance was broken.

The half-open door hung askew on its hinges and trembled in the wind.

But voices echoed from within the building, and when they came to the broken-backed steps, they were greeted with, "Hurry up! Hurry up!

You're almost too late!"

The speaker was the gravestone that braced the open door and kept the wind from slamming it against the side of the building.

Its identifying inscription was hidden from view.

"Too late for what?" asked Brother Michael.

"Evening services, of course." The voice turned suddenly skeptical.

"But I'm peering at you. Adjusting my glasses, don't you know. You're new here, aren't you? Then no-no-no, you can't go in."

Felix laughed out loud. "Would we be interrupting?"

"New parishioners are always welcome. Of course they are.

You are. Three young couples, looking very wholesome. Haven't had any like you for a long time. I used to be a deacon here, you know, so I know, I do, I do."

"Is that what we should call you?" asked Consideration Wiggin.

"What?"

"Deacon."

"Oh, no. Haachim Keruf. My grandparents were Turkish, you know, and if you say, 'Gesundheit!' I'll say it felt pretty loose to me."

Great-Grandpa and Felix both groaned at the pun before Felix asked, "Can we go in, then?"

"No-no-no. Back when this was a real church and I was a deacon, I'd have said, 'Step right in!' But I can't do that now.

I'm just an old fart who said they were blowing wind. Full of shit.

They didn't like that. No-no-no. They're fussy. Put me on the door and said, 'Don't let anybody interrupt us.' No-nono. So you really should arrive a little earlier. Can't go in now. Not now. Come back tomorrow. We'll be glad to sign you up then. Oh, yes, we will."

"Sign us up for what?" asked Great-Grandpa.

"It's the Temple of the Sacred Memory. Didn't you know that? But of course you didn't! No-no-no. How could you?

You're new! Aren't you?"

Felix nodded. "We're just passing through, but we thought we ought to let you know some Haveners are chasing us. They should be here in the morning."

"That's all right," chattered the stone. "They never bother us.

No-no-no. Not at all."

"I hear women in there," said Luanna.

"And children," God's Promise added. "They'll bother you, all right."

"They never have before. They think we're nuts, you know.

Quite nuts. Want to see?"

Brother Michael wondered whether the stone was really crazy or his

patter was all an act, but only Consideration Wiggin said anything at all: "I thought we couldn't go in?"

"But you won't be here tomorrow. So go ahead. Laugh all you want.

You can even dance if you wish, but don't expect me to provide the music."

At that, Great-Grandpa played a snatch of Mendelsohn's "Wedding March."

"Go ahead. Have a peek. But just stand in the doorway, mind."

Obediently, the group of travelers climbed the steps, being careful to avoid the gaps where planks had disintegrated. Just inside the doorway, a small chamber was so choked with piles of debris that only a narrow lane led to the entrance to the building's main room. Metallic glints shifted in the deepest shadows.

They gathered there, and Brother Michael breathed a sigh: "I never thought I'd see it. I heard of it, but...."

"What?"

"Stained glass."

Mounds of wax cascaded over the backs of bench-like pews, the edge of the pulpit, and the keyboards of the organ. From them jutted glossy white wands Felix guessed must have been stockpiled in the church's storerooms an age ago, in rat-proof metal cans or cupboards or old refrigerators. The candles' light flickered but was bright enough to show festoons of wallpaper hanging from the walls, spiderwebs, water stains and growths of mold, and heaps of fallen plaster. The windows were dark with layers of smoke and grime that didn't quite hide the red, gold, green and other colors of their patchwork, nor the figures the patches formed.

Felix leaned through the doorway into the room. Brother Michael felt drawn as well. But neither man, nor their companions, really wished to get any closer. The church stank of smoke and hot wax and unwashed bodies.

Two rows of pews faced a fire that had been built on a bed of sand enclosed by bricks. The front row of pews held a dozen men and women and children. Their clothes were threadbare and gray with dirt. Their heads were bent to expose scrawny, grimy necks corded with tendons, and they broke their posture only to scratch. Practically every square inch of skin was red with a scaly rash.

God's Promise wore a look of intense yearning as she stared fixedly at a small boy, barely able to walk. "End of Exile," she whispered hoarsely. "Another year. A little more. But...."

Tears poured silently down her cheeks.

On the other side of the fire was an arc of gravestones, each one marked with the telltale solar cells upon its top. One of them was speaking: "...names like Kentucky Wonder and Seattle Slew and Devil's Food. They ran like the wind, they did, and when they couldn't run any more, folks made hats out of their hides. But they're all gone now.

Quite extinct. No more Derbies. I am Peter Shurland, and I remember."

One of the men in the pew on the left was obviously older than the rest. The hair on his head was sparse and wispy. His bush of beard would have been white if not for the debris matted into its filthy tangles. He turned when he heard the Webbs behind him, but he said nothing. He only glared and turned back to the ritual being acted out before him.

A boy fell forward onto his knees. He could not have been older than ten, but he shouted with all the gusto of a seasoned preacher: "Remember for us the Moon!"

"Remember for us!" chorused the rest of the congregation.

"We remember," said all the stones together, and then one made a throat-clearing noise. "I am Verna Schwenck, and I remember. My father told me once.... He was just a kid when he saw it on TV. The spaceship was wrapped in gold foil, and Leonard Bernstein and Walter Cronkite and Armstrong used it to land on the moon. Bernstein stayed in the lander and conducted the orchestra. Holst's 'The Planets' I think Dad said it played.

Armstrong was the first to set foot outside the LEM, and he said, 'That's one small step for a man and one big sucker of a step for mankind.' Cronkite did most of the talking."

Silence met the account until another of the worshippers in the Temple of the Sacred Memory asked, "What was Armstrong's first name?"

"Neil," said one of the stones.

"No," said another. "I'm sure it was Louie or Lewis or something like that. Played the trumpet, too."

Great-Grandpa made a snorting noise in Felix's arms and said quietly, "That doesn't sound quite right."

The worshippers and stones within the Temple ignored the small sound he made. But the late Deacon Haachim Keruf at the door did not. "I'm shrugging," he said when they turned to leave. "Oh, well. Cosmic rays, you know. The memory gets a bit scrambled after a while. Though maybe that was what Verna's father said. Rays do hit meat too, you know."

Great-Grandpa laughed out loud. "Maybe that's why religions get so crazy!"

Felix glanced over his shoulder, but the congregation of memory-worshippers still seemed to be aware of nothing outside their service. "Downloaded ancestors, too."

"Dropping bits!" The ancestor laughed again. "Like leaves on the ground, and we get crazier every year."

The tears that choked God's Promise's throat made her words almost unintelligible: "Then we shouldn't worship memory?"



"We don't!" said Consideration Wiggin. "We worship God."

Brother Michael felt uncomfortable. "And the Bible." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "I'm embarrassed, but we brought some old books with us from Ireland. Memories of the old world, and we treat them almost like...." His gesture toward the congregation finished the thought.

Trudy touched the monk. "Living in the past, when the present is all we really need."

Michael nodded, and Felix said, "That's what we're doing."

"Then why are you lugging your grandpa around with you?" asked Luanna.

"And the university," he said.

"Living in the past," said Deacon Keruf. "That's all it is, any way you cut it."

"No!" said Felix. "Those people in there don't even know the present exists. We do, and we're trying to solve the present's problems."

"Looking for experts in the dust," said Keruf.

"Anywhere we can find them," said Felix. "It's solving the problems that matters."

"Hmmp. People used to solve problems for themselves. They called it research. I remember...." The deacon's tone echoed that of the rememberer in the church.

Great-Grandpa laughed. "They still started off with a library search.

I remember, too."

"We just have to find the library first." Luanna turned and left the church. The others followed her.

## CHAPTER 21

It happened every night. The congregation demanded that the stones remember the past, what they had experienced themselves, what had been told them by others, what they had read. Sometimes the stones told them obvious lies--there had been the one about the time-traveler who said he found monsters living under ground and preying on the people above, the little girl who fell through a mirror, the nations that threatened each other with weapons that could destroy the entire world.

Sometimes they seemed confused. Sometimes they did not.

Eventually the living humans tired. The bearded man the Webbs had noted at the front of the church was always the first to nod and stretch out along the pew and begin to snore. Then one of the women snuffed the candles, everyone lay down, and night descended, dark and silent, until dawn exploded color from the stained glass in the eastern windows.

"Who were they?" The congregation's patriarch now stood on the porch, scowling at the door-stone and yawning and scratching at his sides all at once.

"Travelers!" exclaimed the boy who had asked the stones to remember the Moon. "I wish they'd stayed so we could talk with 'em!"

"Old memories not enough for you?" The man cuffed him with a filthy hand. "Don't just stand there, idiot. You know what to do."

"Yessuh!" As the boy scampered back into the church, the creak of opening doors announced that others were already beginning the daily task of moving the stones outdoors for the day. They had learned long ago that if they did not, the memories stopped. Stones, like people, had to be fed.

"Quite right," said Deacon Haachim Keruf. "Yes-yes-yes.

Just as he said. Travelers. Just passing through, and they heard our bell and came to see."

"You should have chased them off," growled the human.

"See my mighty arms! My glistening thews! The terrible swift sword and spear and uzze with which I smite every foe!"

"Oh shaddap!"

"That part's up to you, boss. You know that. Oh, yes-yesyes, you know that. All I can do is ask 'em pretty please keep the din down so they don't disturb you. If that's not enough...."

"Shaddap, I said." The man knew the stone was right, but he had been up longer than usual last night, thinking of the intruders even as he listened as always to the stones' scrambled reminiscences, and yes he knew how mixed up they had to be since no two agreed. Not ever.

Hardly ever. But there it was. It was all they had for a taste of a better time, and yes he knew it was not enough. It never was. It never would be. But.... Here was one of the women. Ugly thing, even if she was the mother of his last two kids. And she at least thought to bring him a couple of apples for his breakfast.

"Nice day, isn't it?" said the stone. "The sun's coming up in the east and I do believe the sky's the teensiest little bit less yellow today. Almost like the old days were coming back at last. But it won't last. No-no-no. It won't last much longer at all, it won't."

"Storm coming?" He was more interested in the apples.

Crunchy, tart, sweet, juicy. If only they didn't have that nasty way of making one feel even hungrier afterward than before. He spat seeds and fragments of core, poked a tender tooth with his tongue, and felt vaguely pleased that his mouth tasted a little better now.

"Not so you'd notice it. Just a bunch of Haveners. Didn't I tell you?"

Those travelers said they were being followed.

Chased, actually. They just stopped by to warn us, don't you know?

Curious too, of course. It was our bell that drew them.

But they didn't have to tip us off, did they?"

The man was already bellowing into the church. "Haveners coming!"

"Too late for that," said Deacon Keruf. He sounded strangely satisfied. "I said they'd never bothered us before. I didn't say it was because you scurried off and hid. And now it's too late.

Yes-yes-yes. I can see them now, stumping up the road like they should be singing 'Onward, Christian Soldiers.'" "Shit," said the man. He could see them, too. Worse yet, they had already seen him. Hands were pointing. Mouths were open, though the words they spoke or shouted were still no more than a murmur, the distance was so great. Now they were running.

#

The congregation was sitting on and around the church's dilapidated porch steps. Haveners eyed them cautiously, reluctant to get too close. A few were inspecting the children, again from a safe distance.

"They've got fleas," someone said, sounding offended.

It was not as if Haveners had never seen fleas or lice before. They had, both on themselves and on the people they raided for women and children. But they knew the use of soap and the value of boiling laundry. Cleanliness was next to godliness, after all, and it kept you from itching, too.

Givethanks Hagedorn was concerned neither with cleanliness nor with drafting recruits to the Havener cause. He was grinning and rubbing his biceps. The stone that had screeched it was a deacon and claimed sanctuary was smashed. So were those they had found inside the church, as well as those in the small burying ground behind. He had pounded every one of them into rubble with his hammer. Now he wished there had been more. It had been too long since his last visit to a cemetery.

He was quite happy that they had put in to shore at dawn and found the tracks of their quarry in the mud. They were less than a day old, so they had chosen to follow them a little ways, hoping to find the quarry rubbing a night's sleep from their eyes. And they had found this ancient church instead. And stones.

He grinned and worked his fingers over the handle of his hammer and brushed away the crumbs of broken stone and rubbed his biceps another time or two. He was satisfied for the moment.

"What did they tell you? Where are they now?" Worthy Ferlig was interrogating the grizzled leader of the congregation, but every time he leaned intently, impatiently forward, he had to recoil. The man's breath could drive God Himself from a church.

"They didn't talk to me. They're gone." He flailed his arms helplessly. Most of his congregation looked just as stricken, forlorn,

and bewildered as he felt himself. Only the boy who had asked for memories of the Moon seemed as enchanted by the Haveners as he had ever been by the stones. His eyes were wide and shining, and he practically quivered with his eagerness to know more about them, perhaps even to go with them and see ever more that was new and strange and exciting.

"Who did they talk to, then. Tell me!"

Why were these people smashing the Memories and herding his people together and bullying him? What gave them the right? And why did he wish he could tell them what they wished to know? Why did his flailings point vaguely out of town, upriver?

"The Deacon."

"Who?"

A gesture at the porch behind him, at a pile of rubble hardly distinguishable from the debris within the vestibule.

"The stone."

Ferlig made a face. Then he scowled at Givethanks Hagedorn.

"In a rush, were you?"

Hagedorn shrugged and rubbed his biceps again. "That's what he said, you know. Don't bring any more home. Just smash 'em.

So I did."

So he had. Orders. And now they had no hope of learning whatever the Webbs and turncoats and traitors and baby-killers might have said about their plans. Not that Worthy Ferlig needed to know much. Just enough to catch up and seize the renegades and fetch them home. Delivered of the Lord wanted his daughter back. His wife, he had said, would be stoned as an adulteress just as the Bible prescribed. So would Consideration Wiggins.

There were plenty of stones on Haven's shore.

On the other hand... He looked at the Haveners who had been inspecting the children. They nodded back at him.

"You'll stay right here," he said to the leader of their captives.

"We'll pick up the kids on the way home. Make decent Christians out of them."

When the other's eyes lit up with a spark of defiance, he backhanded the man as hard as he could across the face. "We'll find you if you run. And then you'll wish you hadn't."

"Where now?" asked David Cantor.

"We know where they're going," said Ferlig. "Up the river.

To that university. So's our other ship, and it should get there first. We'll follow them, and when the renegades are trapped between us, we'll have them."

He looked at Givethanks Hagedorn, who stood poised as if he awaited nothing more than an order or an invitation to smash more talking gravestones. "And then you can bang away at something bigger," he said. "A whole university." Though he would surely need all the help two boatloads of Haveners could provide.

#

Where the Penobscot River met the sea, it was broad, placid, heaving up and down with the tide. As the Haveners had sailed upstream, it had narrowed and acquired broad banks of mud and salt-marsh. Its current hastened and became visible, and they had to cling close against the shore to take advantage of the slack water there. Occasionally they had to pole the boat against the flow, and when the wind died entirely, they tied up for as long as necessary.

It was at the first such enforced rest that Worthy Ferlig saw the dark object in the river. It moved with the current like a log, but once it had passed their position, it stopped and swung about and began to move upstream again. It repeated its mysterious motions several times, for all the world like an impatient man pacing as he waited for something to happen. When the breeze returned, it moved off upstream until it disappeared in the distance.

By then, however, it was dusk and too late to continue their journey.

They remained at their mooring until morning, when there was a fresh breeze to move them swiftly up the stream, ever closer to the university and a new encounter with the Webbs and their treasonous allies.

The hills to either side of the river were thick with stunted, yellowed trees interspersed with healthier apples.

Ruins were visible everywhere, and occasionally they saw a cemetery and even heard the voices and songs of its residents.

Such times were when Givethanks Hagedorn hefted his hammer and begged to be set ashore for an hour or so. But Worthy Ferlig said, "No." The Webbs and God's Promise and Consideration Wiggin, Ruth and Polly, Trudy and the stranger with her, were still ahead of them, getting closer and closer to their goal.

The Haveners could not pause, even though the pause might also serve their holy mission.

The ruins grew thicker, until it was obvious that a city had once bustled beside the river. Or two cities, according to old maps Worthy Ferlig had studied. Bangor and Brewer, the grids of their streets still visible among the piles of rubble and the growth of a sparser forest. Three broad bridges had once crossed the river to link them, but all that remained of the bridges now was their roots on the banks and the stubs of their supporting piers. The rubble that had fallen into the river had been washed away by decades of spring floods.

Occasionally rocks heaved out of the water to remind them of the bones of the land beneath. They avoided them successfully and continued past the ruins of another dam, more sickly forest, more rubble that spoke of a time when humanity had been nearly as thick upon the ground as blades

of grass.

Worthy Ferlig found it hard to imagine such a time. God had commanded man to be fruitful and multiply, and He had done so thousands of years in the past. But he could see for himself that people did not multiply nearly as well as, say, brambles or crows or sea gulls. How could even those thousands of years have been enough to so crowd the land?

Very briefly the thought teased him that perhaps conditions had been different once, that man had multiplied more easily.

Perhaps he might even have come to the thought that man had multiplied excessively, and that his own immense numbers had produced the change in conditions that now afflicted all the species, but that was when they came to the mouth of a tributary river, not quite as large as the Penobscot but still respectable.

The confluence was marked by the ruins of still another dam, past which rocks made an impassable barrier of foam and roil and quite contradicted the new river's ancient name, the Stillwater.

Moored to the shore just downstream of the barrier they found the other ship of Haven. There was the smoke of a campfire among the trees, and then the hail of a familiar voice, and it was clear that this group had not yet reached the university.

Ferlig showed his teeth. They should not still be here. They should have come ashore and immediately struck out for where their copy of Haven's tattered map said the university had to be.

Even though their delay now meant he still had a chance to capture Consideration Wiggins and God's Promise himself, and there would still be something left for Givethanks Hagedorn to smash.

## CHAPTER 22

Searaker Jameson's hair was crusted with a scab where Michael's staff had slammed against his head at the fort.

He was not used to such treatment, for his strength was so great that few foes ever so much as touched him with fists or clubs or knives.

Therefore, though he had embarked on the mission to find and destroy the university because Delivered of the Lord had commanded it, he now had a more personal motive. He knew who had hit him, for one of the Webbs had called Michael by name just before the battle erupted. He would destroy the university, of course, but then he would be there to meet that Michael, that Brother Michael, when he arrived with the Webbs.

And this time he would be the victor.

It never occurred to him that the outcome of their encounter could possibly be anything different. If any doubt at all existed, even buried deep within his heart where only God could see it, it disappeared entirely when Worthy Ferlig appeared on the river. Here, he thought, were the reinforcements that made victory absolutely certain.

Despite his relief, as soon as Worthy Ferlig touched the shore, he was

scowling and snapping, "What are you doing here?"

"They'll beat us!"

"You fell behind...." If only Consideration Wiggin had not turned his coat and stolen Delivered of the Lord's wife. If only Worthy Ferlig were not such an officious stick.

"We stopped to look for tracks."

Givethanks Hagedorn was nodding and hefting his hammer. "We found some. Stones, too."

David Cantor's voice was soft, appeasing. "And then the wind was bad."

Ferlig looked at the camp, the fires, each on its small mound of ashes, the latrine holes, the bedrolls on the ground.

His thoughts were plain to see. "You've lost one day. We can't afford another. Let's go now."

His own crew groaned at his back, but no one argued. The camp was swiftly packed, and within an hour the double-strength force of Haveners was trotting along a narrow, over-grown trail that ran beside the Stillwater. Like almost every trail any of them had ever set foot upon, it was hard beneath a thin layer of soil, moss, and grass.

Occasionally the pavement showed through; always they were flanked by the ubiquitous ruins and rotted-out automobiles. To their right they could hear the river, often no more than a murmur of water hissing against banks, sometimes the turbulent rumble water made when it ran over or around rock.

The ruins grew thicker. A few still held roofs. But there was no sign of human life until they struck a broader trail.

Here the pavement showed in broad swatches and the vegetation had been worn away. The automobile hulks had been pushed into the brush on either side.

"Stop." Worthy Ferlig held up one hand and obeyed his own command at the edge of the new trail.

"Looks like traffic," said David Cantor. "Plenty of it."

"I don't hear anything."

Cantor shook his head, and when his leader ventured onto the trail, he walked beside him. They paused at a patch of dirt.

"No tracks." Not of feet, not of wheels.

"Then we beat them this far."

"If they came this way." Cantor straightened and turned.

Searaker Jameson and the other Haveners turned with him, and when he faced the river, all saw the bridge at once. It was not intact, for periodic floods and storms and acid rain had taken their toll, but it

offered a solid path to the other side. From where they stood, they could see that it had been repaired with lumber and sheets of metal and other materials taken from the ruins. Below it the river ran still indeed, smooth except for the roils where the water swirled over and around the ledges that rose from its bed. Downstream, it parted to either side of a low, wooded island. The air smelled wet.

"Someone did." Searaker Jameson laid one hand on the hilt of his knife. "Someone does. There's no new growth." Where the dirt was bare, there was no sign of sprouting seed or root.

"No tracks either," said Cantor.

"The university's over there," said Worthy Ferlig. He seemed oddly reluctant to take the first step toward the bridge and their goal.

"But where are they?"

"Who?"

"Whoever did those repairs." He gestured. "And wore down this trail.

"There must be a lot of them."

"They haven't been by for quite awhile," said David Cantor.

"But they could show up any time." And if there were so many of them, if they had any link to the university, if they had any suspicion of the destruction the Haveners intended, they might be beaten before they had even seen their goal.

"Then we'd better hurry." Givethanks Hagedorn grunted in agreement and lifted his hammer off his shoulder. Several others made similar noises.

The bridge proved surprisingly solid under foot. The varied materials that made up its piebald deck each had its own distinctive sound, its own rattle or creak or echoing boom, but every scrap had been anchored firmly to the bridge. Nothing broke or came loose beneath their weight, and soon Givethanks Hagedorn was pointing with his hammer and charging into the brush beside the road. "Stones!" he cried as he disappeared from view.

When they could not hear him smashing the idols of the past, the others followed him. They found him facing a small riverside cemetery that held an ancient monument so eroded that the lettering on its sides could not be read and several brokenbacked stone benches among the brambles. There were also several dozen pedestals that had held talking stones many years before, judging from the condition of the scraps of mortar that still remained. There was no sign of the stones themselves.

"Just like those Webbs," someone muttered.

"We'll destroy them, too." Worthy Ferlig sounded grim enough as he turned away to make even Searaker Jameson shudder.

They returned to the trail, which climbed a small hill and forked.



They chose the right hand path, but when it quickly narrowed and became impassable, they had to turn back.

Unfortunately, the left-hand fork behaved no better. It too narrowed, without showing any signs that other paths had ever branched from it, and shortly after it came within view of the river on the left, it stopped entirely.

So did all those small noises in the undergrowth and trees to either side that suggested the presence of insects and sparrows and crows, mice and squirrels. No one noticed the glitter of glass and metal high on a tree trunk, between a pair of roots, under a chunk of fallen masonry.

Back when he had still expected Consideration Wiggin to lead the mission to find and destroy the university, David Cantor had copied onto a piece of plank that portion of Haven's map of the region that showed the university and its vicinity. Now he unslung his pack and produced the board. "There used to be a road here," he said, tracing a line beside the river with his finger. "And the university was right beside it." He and all the others looked to the right, but there was only a tangled growth of honeysuckle and yew, so thick that no one could possibly see through it, not even in winter when the honeysuckle dropped its leaves.

Worthy Ferlig drew his long knife. "We can cut through that."

#

The Webb expedition did not have the advantage of a wet road and a wind at their back. They had to struggle up long hills until the trundle's batteries were exhausted. The first time they confronted a fallen bridge, there was a path and a rocky ford designed for foot traffic but passable for wheels. The second time, they shook their heads at the steep drop before them and backtracked several miles to find another road. The third time, the drop was more gradual and the tide was out, exposing a shallow stream and a sandy flat; they carried the trundle's cargo piece by piece down the bank and across.

The fourth had once crossed another road but now blocked it with mounds of rubble from which grew trees as large as any in the woods to either side. When they paused at the edge of the broken pavement, Great-Grandpa said, "You need to get down there, not across."

Luanna pointed to the left, where the trees were sparser, suppressed by the remains of some large building. A trail so narrow that it might have been made by a single pair of feet or by small animals wound past clumps of brush.

The new road was wider than any that Consideration Wiggin had ever seen before. Large portions of its pavement showed no sign that they had ever been covered with dirt, though weather and youvee had damaged the surface enough to provide footing for scattered clumps of moss and grass. Just off the edge of the road not far away, a tangled mass of what might have been two dozen cars disintegrated quietly.

"This was the Interstate," said Great-Grandpa. "And that pile-up tells me something. The end had to come fast. Chaos and panic."

"We saw the tanks by the hospital," Luanna reminded him.

"There's two more." Ox pointed, and there they were.

Facing the pile-up, rusted into immobility, not even their most hidden machineries ticking into life to accost new passersby.

"I'm nodding. They were fleeing war when the army stopped them."

"And the rest." Felix patted the trundle that had been made from the parts of so many ancient roadside relics. "The batteries ran out."

Brother Michael was shaking his head, and his fingers were shifting the beads of his rosary back and forth as if he were hardly aware of them.

When he asked, "How many people died?"

Trudy moved closer to him. Perhaps she was thinking of how close he had come to death, of how much closer he would have come if she had not been there to nurse him.

"The world population was over ten billion when I was recorded," said Great-Grandpa. "Things were rough everywhere. I had to fight in Peru.

And they got worse later on, I hear.

Eleven billion. Twelve billion. Maybe fifteen billion, though I don't suppose anyone was keeping very careful count by then."

When Consideration Wiggin glanced at his companions, it was very clear that not one of them had any idea what a billion was.

He didn't either; it was not a number that had any meaning.

"You don't get it, do you?" asked the stone. "Well, there's nine of you. Line up across this road. Go ahead."

When they had obeyed, Great-Grandpa said, "You're about five feet apart. That's room enough to swing your arms and lie down when you get tired. Now imagine another row of people, just like you, one step ahead. And another a step ahead of them. A mile is 5,280 feet, enough room for about 1,700 rows, or a bit over 15,000 people. Run this parade for a hundred miles, and you've got a million and a half people.

Run it for a hundred thousand miles, four times around the world, and that's a billion and a half people. A million miles--to the Moon and back, and do it again--fifteen billion people."

The adults looked as uncomprehending as Ruth and Polly.

Consideration Wiggin struggled to picture in his mind a line of people thirty-six abreast all the way to the moon and could not do it.

Felix and Luanna, Brother Michael and Trudy, Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise, all drew together against the echo of a past calamity that could not be great enough to lessen a grieving mother's pain over the loss of a single child. Ox stood beside the trundle, staring at the ancient highway as if he could see fifteen billion bodies. His

hands opened and closed as if he wished he too had someone to cling to.

Felix reached and tugged him into the embrace he shared with Luanna.

Trudy and Luanna each flattened a hand against their tummies, where one carried a member of the next generation and the other surely would again. God's Promise clutched at Ruth and pressed her other hand against the torn cloth just below her bosom as if to remember the son she had lost such a brief, brief time ago. Then she reached for Polly.

"How did they die? How could war.... How could anyone kill so many people?"

"Famine," said the stone. "Plague. Storm and youvee and war. Every horseman you can name, and some you can't."

"God's punishment," she said.

"We did it to ourselves. Or maybe that was the mysterious way in which He worked. I met a woman once. She said there wasn't any population problem, no acid rain problem, no ozone problem. Nobody had to worry about a thing, because God would provide."

Brother Michael winced at that. "She forgot, God does not always provide with a gentle hand."

"Yeah," said the stone. "Mother Nature doesn't either."

"How many are left?" asked God's Promise, and Consideration Wiggin wondered at the tone in her voice. Did it matter?

However many people there were in the world, the only ones they knew were their own friends and families and neighbors. Yes, and even their foes. Yet she had lost End of Exile, a single child.

One in all those billions four times to the Moon had to be less than one in however many there were now.

"I'd be surprised if...." Great-Grandpa paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was cracking. "Ten million. Worldwide.

At most. Not counting those like me."

Six hundred miles, nine abreast, and a wall of stones beside the line to remind them of the past.

No one broke the ensuing silence until well after they had a fire going and their meal ready, and then it was only when Trudy said, "The ground should be carpeted with their bones."

"The rain," said Ox. "Acid rain. It eats bones."

"And stones," said the stone. "And sealing wax and kings."

They followed the Interstate for most of the next day. What had once been the city of Bangor sprawled around them. In places, the rubble was piled too thick for anything but grass and weeds and brush to grow, and Ox's voice was hushed with awe when he said, "This is worse."

"I know," said Felix, and so did Consideration Wiggin. He too had seen Augusta, the one-time state capital where they had found the hospital.

It too had been derelict, abandoned and empty, but many of its buildings had been intact enough still to offer shelter.

"Something happened here," said the ex-Havener.

"War," said Brother Michael. "Bandits couldn't have done it."

The others nodded, even the children. The devastation was too total.

The tanks, thought Consideration Wiggin. Worse weapons.

Someone had pounded this city until people could no longer live here.

Did no longer live here, except perhaps, for a while, in holes deep in the ground. He had no idea why. None of them could, not even Great-Grandpa, who had died well before the last days of the civilization they could see all around them.

The rubble retreated for a time when they came to the cemetery. Large trees loomed beside the highway, and stones spread as far as they could see on both sides of their path. The stones closest to them, hundreds of them, were just that, slabs of rock that remembered only what had been chiseled into their faces and stumps that had once supported talking stones.

Luanna eyed her bow where it rode the trundle. "Nothing like Haveners.

They weren't smashed."

Felix nodded. "They're gone."

But many of the preserved dead remained. Solar cells still glinted further from the road. Voices and music, shouts and screams, came to them, though they could not make out any words.

"Ask them," said little Ruth. "What happened to the rest."

But no one wished to take the time. Later, maybe, when they were not racing with the forces of destruction with knowledge as the prize.

After they passed the cemetery, the rubble once more spread around them. It gave way to the remains of smaller houses, a few of which still had partial walls and chimneys. The ruins grew sparser, the trees thicker, and the Interstate stretched ahead of them. The trundle's batteries drained, and they kept on, taking turns pushing and pulling. Fortunately the highway's builders had smoothed every hill into a gentle slope that barely slowed them down.

Great-Grandpa told them where to leave the highway. A mile further on they struck a trail of bare dirt and pavement and worn-away greenery that seemed to say a great deal of traffic passed by. But there was no sign of tracks until they were among a town's ruins once more and could see a patchwork bridge ahead.

"Fresh tracks," said Ox. "Just a few hours old. They're ahead of us."

"How do you know it's them?" asked Trudy.

Ox straightened and looked at the river ahead of them. "I can hear rapids," he said. "Or falls. So they had to leave the boats." He indicated where the footprints emerged from the undergrowth. "They came from the right direction."

"They're waiting for us, then."

Little Ruth looked up at her mother. "Daddy? Is Daddy waiting for us?"

"He wants to take us home."

"I don't want to go home. He chased us." The child's voice was sad.

Polly touched her sympathetically, showing that she knew what it was to lose another. Consideration Wiggin bit his lip and wished that he and God's Promise had abandoned Haven long ago. "He made you drop my brother."

"You can wait here," said Felix.

"Like a sack of potatoes?" God's Promise's voice rose in both pitch and volume. "For the victor to collect later on?"

"I'll go with you."

Felix nodded that he understood and gestured, "Hush!" Then he looked at Brother Michael and Trudy. They nodded back, abruptly, decisively.

They too would remain with the group.

They proceeded cautiously as far as the fork in the road, where they stopped to study the ground.

"They went along the river," said Consideration Wiggin very softly, just in case the Haveners were close enough to hear him.

There was only a single set of footprints on that path, going in just one direction. "The other path.... They went, but they came back."

"We can't follow them." Luanna had her bow in her hand now, and an arrow ready on the string. "There's too many of them."

Great-Grandpa spoke just softly as they had, and with the confidence of memory: "Both roads go where we want. Go right."

"But it stopped them."

"It's a dead-end," whispered Consideration Wiggin.

"Maybe not," said the stone. "Someone keeps it clear."

"A decoy."

"Go see."

No one wished to go left and round a corner and find the Haveners just ahead of them. Or to be ambushed. They therefore obeyed, and when the path ended against a wall of brush, they poked about until Polly found a narrower path concealed by a bushy yew.

The adults had to duck under the yew's branches to join the child, and when they did they could not help but wonder. The new path's surface bore marks much like those left by the trundle's wheels. There were also scratches like the tracks of oversized insects and curving lines that might have been left by snakes.

There were no human footprints at all.

#

Felix did not know where his Ma's old fridge had gone. It was no longer in the kitchen where she had kept it till she died, so Pa had done something with it. Maybe he had dismantled it, taking the coils for his still.

Why did he think of that now? In that fridge, one among several icons of a vanished age, Ma had kept a yellowed scrap of paper printed with a colorful picture of the inside of a store.

All rows and shelves, flat surfaces and packaged foods, a geometry of civilization.

What he saw before him was outdoors. There were no shelves, no packages. But there was the same orderly geometry in fields of grass clipped short and roadways paved with something smooth and black, shrubs and hedges trimmed to even height, towering, wide-trunked, spread-branched trees whose shade was dark as night, three and four storey buildings whose bricks and stones and windows and roof tiles were every one in place. Many of the buildings were green with a thick growth of ivy trimmed to keep even the smallest tendril from trespassing on the roof or obscuring a window or door. There were no wooden structures, no vehicles, no people.

"Someone's here," said Great-Grandpa. "They've kept it up like nothing ever happened."

Brother Michael swung his out-stretched staff across their field of view. "Where are the gardens? What do they eat?"

For that there was no answer, but it seemed obvious that someone had to be here. Someone had cultivated the barrier of yew and honeysuckle and other plants that surrounded the university and shielded it from curious eyes. Someone had maintained the buildings and cut the grass and trimmed the shrubbery.

"Where are they?" asked Luanna as softly as anyone. "There must be hundreds of them."

"Hiding," said Polly as if she knew something the others didn't. She was looking at Consideration Wiggin. "They're scared of strangers."

The ex-Havener grimaced. "More to the point, where are the Haveners?"

They've had plenty of time to get through those trees."

The other adults nodded. Then, with a glance at Polly, Trudy said, "We need to hide too. But where?"

It was Ruth who indicated the stone building rather smaller than the rest. It was just a single storey high, and its door was easily wide enough to admit the trundle to a central foyer with three doors. The door straight ahead opened on a utilitarian array of metal cabinets and a long conveyor belt that entered a dark hatchway. The door on the right concealed a small room with three desks and a filing cabinet.

Each desk held a computer keyboard and screen and a thick layer of dust, much like what Felix had seen at the hospital long ago. A large fly buzzed feebly against the dirty window, trying to escape to the freedom of the yellow sky and green grass outside.

"Is this the library?" he asked.

"No," said a warm, friendly voice. "Try the other door."

When they obeyed, they found a pair of padded couches flanked by metal tables and racks built of metal rods and glass tubes. A poster on one wall showed a sea of faces, many of them in colors Felix had never dreamed human flesh could wear.

Superimposed white letters said: "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Get out of the way."

Glass-fronted cabinets held mysterious devices. Soft music and the scent of flowers filled the air. There was no dust, and the two windows were clean.

"Who'll be first?" asked the voice. "I can only handle two at a time."

"We're together," said Great-Grandpa.

There was a moment of silence before the voice resumed, sounding confused: "What are you doing here? You're already dead."

"I thought that's what you were," said the stone.

"It's no secret. There's a sign on the door."

"Not any more."

"What are you talking about?" asked Felix.

But before the building could answer, Brother Michael was beckoning everyone toward one of the windows. "Do you see them?"

cried God's Promise.

The monk shook his head and moved his fingers on the shaft of his staff. "I don't know. But...."

Felix saw what he meant. There was movement in a patch of shrubbery between two brick buildings. A shadow shifted behind a window.

Something glittered in the grass and was gone. A trio of pigeons descended toward a rooftop stained white with decades of droppings but shied away at the last moment.

## CHAPTER 23

Ireland had had more people, genuine villages, a peasant economy. This land had not seemed even that settled. Its people were as isolated as pioneers in a virgin land, surrounded by hostile savages.

Why was he here then? Looking out at a wonder, an array of intact buildings, their windows and roofs unmarked by the collapse of the world that had been, surrounded by green lawns and trees, linked by smooth strips of pavement. A wonder and a mystery, for there was no sign at all that the perfection before him had been maintained by patching together whatever someone could salvage from nearby ruins.

Nor was there any sign of those whose labors had maintained this unlikely oasis of the past.

He thought of the many mansions Jesus had said were in his Father's house. Then he laughed at himself, for this could not be heaven, not possibly, not at all. It was something else, something he did not understand, though it drew him powerfully.

He wished those responsible for this place and its wonders would reveal themselves. But there were only movements and shadows and frightened birds that hinted at hostile forces gathering. It had to be the Haveners, who had ambushed them and pursued them and threatened to destroy this university and all the knowledge it might contain. Who craved nothing more than a new Dark Age, a dominion of superstition, a tyranny as bad as ever Ireland had suffered under the hated English.

Brother Michael sighed. He knew why he was here. The monks had fled bandits and found Vinalhaven, where even now his fellows were working on their abbey. They had seen a sail and feared more bandits, and he had come to learn what he could about their new neighbors.

He adjusted his grip on his staff, both hands, well spaced, ready. He had brought that with him, too. His only weapon, but one he had used to good effect when he and his fellow monks had to flee the barbarian raiders at home in Ireland. Surely that was why Brother Brendan had chosen him to scout the mainland here.

And now he had new friends. Their bodies were pressing tight around him, crowding to see out the window. Closest to him, her fingers snug around his arm, her hip making his robe hot against his thigh, was Trudy.

He had found her, hadn't he? Or she had found him while he was busy with mundane chores. Later she had nursed him back to health. Only later had he had a chance to defend her the way a man should defend his mate, and now here they were. Trapped, with the same foe outside, waiting to seize them.

He wished God had led him down some other path. Some path that would let flourish the Webbs and their ancestors and their efforts to share what knowledge they could salvage from the past with their neighbors.

But that was not to be. The Haveners hovered outside the building, and



he thought it rather looked as if he would never return to Vinalhaven to share what he had learned. They were out there, weren't they?

Shadows and movements. Looking for them.

Looking for the library.

If he survived, then maybe someday he would, in the tradition of monastic observers, write down the history of these events. If the library survived, a copy of his account might still sit upon a shelf or in a metal box or in some stone's decaying memory centuries hence.

But....

Something moved among the bushes between two buildings to the left, and he could almost recognize a human form.

"We're trapped in here." Consideration Wiggin turned and tried to push past Ox and Luanna to reach the door. "As soon as they find us...."

"No!" cried Felix. "They don't even know about us!"

But Wiggin twisted free. He had his long knife in his hand now. "They will," he said. "I was supposed to lead them. I know. Delivered of the Lord told me to destroy the university.

Surely they have that same mission."

God's Promise was nodding. Her face was red, the soft flesh around her eyes swollen. Tears glittered on her eyelashes and occasionally ran down her cheeks just as they had ever since End of Exile had fallen from her arms. "He said it's the work of Satan, worse than the stones in the cemeteries."

Consideration Wiggin was at the door, jerking at its handle.

"He also wanted to make sure there wasn't anything for you Webbs."

He jerked harder at the door, but it still refused to open.

"Your staff, Michael." He raised his knife to hack at the door.

The room's voice spoke again: "That won't do any good, you know."

"It's just a door," said Brother Michael, and he slammed the end of his staff just below the knob.

The room echoed with the boom. Dust jettied from the cracks where the walls met the ceiling. Ruth and Polly both covered their ears with their hands.

"A steel door," said the room. "We don't want people changing their minds once they come in here, you know. Now, who'll be first? I can handle two of you at a time. Just lie down on the couches."

"And then what?" asked Felix.

"A little gas," said Great-Grandpa. "Or a needle."

"I have pills, too," said the room. "I'll just dim the lights for

you.

It'll take a little longer, but it will work.

Then all your troubles will be over."

"A euthanasia clinic," said Great-Grandpa. "There were a few of them in my day. The ads were like that poster: 'Get out of the way. If you cannot contribute, it is your duty to future generations to remove yourself.'" "Assisted suicide," said the room. "No one dragged you in here. You volunteered. And a good thing you did, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Trudy.

"You have a case of chronic chlamydia so bad it's a wonder you're pregnant. You--the fellow in the robe--there's a spot on your scalp that will be a deadly cancer very soon." When Michael put his hand to his head, the computer added, "Too much time in the sun without a hat."

Great-Grandpa laughed. "Sounds more like an Englishman."

"What about the kids?" Consideration Wiggin laid one hand flat on Ruth's head. When he tried to touch Polly, she shied away, and he winced visibly.

"The scaredy-cat has gonorrhoea. You've got a dose yourself.

You give it to her?"

Consideration Wiggin stiffened but gave no other sign that he understood what the room had said. "And Ruth?"

"Chlamydia. Malnutrition. You guys don't eat too well, do you?"

No, thought Brother Michael. Not well enough at all, and they've told me they're so much healthier now that they have the data-bases from the hospital. But he said nothing, while Felix asked, "What's gonorrhoea?"

Clammydad?"

The room corrected his pronunciation and said, "Infections of your baby-making gear. They get bad enough, you don't make babies."

"Love bugs," said Ox.

"You got it, babe. Gonorrhoea and chlamydia both. So does your wife, and probably any kids you have."

Ox winced. "Can we fix it?"

"You need antibiotics for that," said Great-Grandpa. "And if there's any such thing left in the world, you won't get it here. Even in my day, the government approved of anything that reduced fertility."

"Anyway," said the room in a superior tone. "I deal in different drugs. Drugs that cure everything, even the bloody blues like the lady in the rags."

"God's Promise," said Consideration Wiggin. "She lost her son when we

fled Haven. That's grief."

"That too. Used to be I'd get a client, and the next day their lover would be in here too. It's a fast way out, and it does the world a favor, though the rock-head's right. Love-bugs do a better job of trimming back the species."

"Then let us go," said Felix. "Leave the job to the lovebugs, and we'll be gone soon enough."

"You betcha. You volunteered, and I locked the door. No exit, guys, so who'll be first?"

Brother Michael understood the situation now. He stared at Trudy and found her staring back, just as wide-eyed. They were both terrified.

So were the others, all but the children. "Them too?" he asked. "The children?"

The room paused briefly, but its answer showed no sign of doubt: "Of course. Parents have the right to make such decisions."

"Polly's parents aren't here," said Consideration Wiggin.

"They're dead."

Polly glared at him and hung her head.

"How nice," said the room.

"Shouldn't we have known what we were stepping into?" The room, thought Brother Michael, was being entirely unreasonable.

Yet he recognized that the room's voice--or the mind behind it--did not have the depth or subtlety of the dead recorded in the talking stones.

Those had been persons, and they retained many of the capabilities of their originals. Only a few seemed so centered on a script as the room, so built to a specific purpose.

"Informed consent," said Great-Grandpa.

"There's a sign on the door."

"You said that before," said Luanna. "But there isn't."

"Let me check that." One of the cupboards against the wall opened, and a small, multilegged device clambered from the shelf.

"My god!" Felix looked at his wife. "Remember the thing you smashed at the Sawyers'?"

"It's not quite the same."

"You don't think we haven't been keeping an eye on the world out there, do you?" asked the building. The device scurried across the room, and when the door opened just enough to let it out, Consideration Wiggin grabbed its edge with his fingers and pulled. But it refused to budge another inch. Nor did it respond when Brother Michael rammed his staff

into the gap between door and jamb and tried to pry it open.

"And shouldn't we be able to read?" asked Luanna.

"I can," said Michael.

"Doesn't matter," said the clinic very calmly. Several more of the little machines appeared from the cabinets, dragging bottles of colored fluids, clambering up the rod-and-tube racks that Michael now could see bore hundreds of tiny holes and protrusions to give the machines footing. They hung the bottles from the tops of the racks, attached long clear-plastic tubes with needles on their ends, and returned to the cabinets for masks with corrugated hoses which they then attached to silvery nozzles that jutted from the bases of the couches.

"Many of my clients have that problem," added the room as its minions pulled out and attached to the wall three more posters. Two had legends that claimed they showed a refugee camp filled with starving children and a hospital crammed with cholera and plague victims. The third needed no legend at all; it showed the mullions of a window, a tattered curtain, a glint of glass, and beyond a dessicated landscape littered with shriveled human bodies.

"We're an open-admissions school, you know," said the room.

"But it's up to the students to succeed. If they flunk, well, many of them come to me."

Great-Grandpa made a sighing noise. "It hadn't gone that far when I was alive."

"If you remember these clinics at all, you know we had a problem."

"Oh, yes."

"And not many people at all were part of the solution."

"I can believe that," said the stone.

"Are you?"

"We're trying," said Felix. "We came here looking for the library."

"We need to know so much," said Luanna.

"And there really isn't a sign," said the room. "I see that now.

You're absolutely right. Just a few crumbs of paint and rust on the ground. Fell right off the wall. But I can fix that." Still another cabinet opened. Still another of the small machines appeared, turned around, extended telescoping arms, and began to pull into view a rectangular object on which letters said:

HARRISON MEMORIAL EUTHANASIA CLINIC

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A second machine seized the other end of the plaque, and together they carried it toward the door. The humans watched the door open a bit wider, though still not wide enough to let even Ruth or Polly escape, and the sign go through.

Brother Michael returned his attention to the window. Three men were standing in front of the building on the right. One was using the hilt of his knife to smash the glass in a window. One was looking their way, pointing now, his mouth open in a shout.

More Haveners appeared.

Trudy moved to his side and said quietly, "I recognize them.

That's Searaker Jameson. Givethanks Hagedorn, the one with the hammer."

"He's the one who smashes stones." Brother Michael's mind was less on the gathering threat outside than on the woman beside him. He put one arm around her shoulder and, when she leaned against him, tightened his grip. It was almost a clutch, almost desperate, and yes, he told himself, the threat outside was getting to him, wasn't it? Or was it that he had been so long without a woman, and longer yet without a proper mate, and now here she was, beside him. He felt no regret at all at the thought that he might no longer be able to be a monk. Not if celibacy was all that important.

"Yes," said Consideration Wiggin as he and God's Promise joined them at the window, their arms just as tight around each other. "And there's Worthy Ferlig. David Cantor. Righteous Atkins."

Trudy recited more names. Then Consideration Wiggin said, "They can't know we're here."

"The machines," said Brother Michael. Or was he simply Michael now?

"The ones putting that sign up by the door."

They were a sign of life. Alien enough in form to qualify as an enemy.

Not large enough to be a threat. Far more appealing as a target than a silent, apparently lifeless building, and Givethanks Hagedorn was adjusting his grip on his hammer as if to confirm his thought.

"Room?" said Felix. "Clinic? Do you see them? Do you know what they're about to do?"

"See who? All my senses are in this building, in this room."

"The machines," said Ox. "You sent one out to check for your sign.

Have them look over there." He pointed at the window. A moment later, the Haveners pointed back and began to shout, just as if they could see him.

"The sign's not fixed," the room said querulously. "But I'm bringing my remotes in. Who are they?"

"The Haveners," said Luanna.

"You mentioned them before."

"Religious fanatics," said Great-Grandpa. "They steal women and children to increase their numbers. They want to save the world by taking it over."

"So what else is new?" asked the room.

"We ran away from them," said Consideration Wiggin with a look at God's Promise.

"They want to keep us from visiting the library," said Felix.

"They needn't worry," said the room. "I have you locked up tight in here."

"They don't know that," said Luanna.

"I'll tell them."

Brother Michael didn't think they were making much impression on the room. "They'll destroy you," he said. "That's what they're here for."

"That's right," agreed Consideration Wiggin. "That's what Delivered of the Lord said before I left with her." He looked down once more at God's Promise. Her eyes were still puffy, and she was turning within the circle of his arms to watch the children nearby. "We were supposed to destroy the university.

The entire place. He thought it would be the best way to keep them away from the library."

This time the room had no reply. There was only silence that stretched and stretched. Brother Michael thought the room must be thinking over what Consideration Wiggin had just said.

He held his breath, and then he noticed the others were doing the same thing, all of them except for Ruth and Polly. The children clung to God's Promise and stared at the walls with wide and frightened eyes.

It was Ruth who broke the silence: "Are we going to die?"

"I see," said the room. "That rather changes things, doesn't it? I think I had better give the chancellor's office a buzz."

A moment later, the room's door swung wide.

"My bow's on the trundle," said Luanna. "I need my bow."

#### CHAPTER 24

Most of the Haveners had stood aside while Worthy Ferlig, Givethanks Hagedorn, and Searaker Jameson attacked the barrier of honeysuckle and yew with their knives. But they were not idle long. Barely had the attackers begun to sweat in the summer heat before they broke into a shadowed pathway that angled away from the river.

"There must be a hidden entrance." David Cantor kicked at the litter of hacked-off branches. "A branch to push aside. A bush to walk behind."

"It doesn't matter." Worthy Ferlig beckoned, and the Haveners followed him. Their strong arms and knives had made a way where none was visible. Their attitudes and postures betrayed no doubt that they, and Givethanks Hagedorn's hammer, would deal as well with any further obstacles. The university lay before them. Soon they would destroy everything the Webbs hoped to gain. Their foe would be powerless, bereft of hope, and the world would belong to Haven and the Lord.

If the small eyes that watched from hiding had known of horses and warfare, they might have seen in the tilt of Worthy Ferlig's head and the flare of his nostrils the ring of the trumpet. The gleam in his eyes was the light of the gates of Heaven, ajar and waiting.

Or perhaps.... For just a second, Worthy Ferlig's brave posture sagged.

He wrapped his arms around his torso, hugging himself as he had surely not been hugged by any woman since Haven had claimed him from the mainland. Those flaring nostrils were detecting the scent of love, all that he could ever remember of the mother he had lost and who might now be waiting for him. Not the gates of Heaven at all.

"It's just a matter of time," he muttered. "A few years at most. And then the Resurrection and the Judgment."

He hastened onward, his men behind him. When the shadows briefly deepened, as if a cloud passed overhead or the woods grew thicker all about them, he said aloud, "We cannot doubt." The fishskin helmets of his men, glowing like pearls in the gloom, nodded. "That's a sign," he said softly. "God is with us."

When the shadows lightened, his pace gained an elated bounce and hastened. When they vanished, he froze in place.

Before him stretched a realm created by some compulsively fastidious gardener. Close-cropped lawns whose grass dared not so much as lean over the edges of paved walks and roadways.

Trees and shrubs beneath which lay not a single leaf or twig.

Buildings whose windows were filled with glass that gleamed like water.

The only trace on walls and roofs of the decades that had made ruins of everything he had ever known, except where human hands made patchwork repairs and adaptations, were the wristthick stems of the ivy.

Not one of the men was aware of the glittering eyes that watched them from the edges of the roofs, the concealing leaves of trees and shrubs and ivy. Not one even suspected that the mind behind those eyes could interpret a catch of breath to speak of awe at the thought that the world could ever have been like this everywhere, or anywhere, or white-pinked lips to speak of a flood of fear at the thought that they would soon meet those who had maintained this fragment of wonder.

Reddened cheeks revealed anger through and through Worthy Ferlig's

soul. It was no surprise to anyone when he clenched his fist around the hilt of his long knife, all he had for a sword but surely enough to punish those who had the sheer gall to make the men of Haven look inadequate.

His abrupt downward chop sent the Haveners forward, trampling the grass, breaking glass and venturing into buildings that proved quite empty, as if they had been so well maintained only in readiness for some absent tenant. They spread out, though they were careful to remain in sight or hearing of each other, just in case one of them found the university's inhabitants or the Webbs.

But there was nothing. The buildings into which they intruded remained empty. As far as they could tell, the noise they made drew no attention.

When someone finally shouted, Worthy Ferlig grinned with joy. With every other Havener in sight, he headed toward an ivydraped brick building whose ground-floor windows were now no more than jagged spears of glass. There was a thick growth of shrubbery between it and its neighbor, forming an arc around a corroded metal statue of a naked woman. He averted his eyes, looked sternly at those of his fellows who did not, and slashed at the branches with his knife.

Beyond the thicket stretched another lawn. A hundred feet away stood the smallest building he had seen so far in this place, no larger than a one-storey, flat-roofed house. There were no trees or bushes beside it, no cover for defenders or attackers. And unlike every other university structure, its door was ajar. Beside that door, two gleaming things like giant insects struggled to lift an oblong plaque.

They were metal, weren't they? Machines like the Webbs' trundle. And now they were stopping their labor, turning as if to look at them, dropping to all fours or sixes or eights--he could not count their limbs from here--and scurrying into the building. The door began to close.

Givethanks Hagedorn was already lifting his hammer and leaning forward, beginning to run. A bit to the left, Searaker Jameson lumbered forward as well.

Worthy Ferlig raised his knife as if it were an axe.

"Somebody's in there. Let's go!"

He swept his knife down and began to run. He passed Hagedorn almost immediately, and then he was in front, just as a leader should be. He roared out all the anger and fear and determination that was in him, and when his fellow Haveners roared too, he roared again.

That was when the building's door snapped abruptly open to reveal the woman with the bow. An instant later, her arrow was jutting from his chest, just to the right of his breastbone.

He sat down, hard. He struggled to speak. "What's her name?"

Luanna.

That's what Wiggin called her."



The arrow had gone between his ribs. Something gurgled deep in his chest, in his throat. He exhaled, and there was blood on the arrow's feathers, on his own knife, in his lap.

His face was white. His wide eyes spoke for him eloquently: Why weren't the other Haveners running past him? She couldn't possibly have shot them all. He blinked as if a haze were falling rapidly over his vision.

"Luanna," he managed once more. She still stood there, bow ready, an arrow on the string, but not shooting.

He twitched as if he wished to look over his shoulder. The watching eyes took that to mean something like a question: Had he gotten that far ahead of his men? Was she simply waiting for them to get a little closer?

Then why was it taking so long?

He blinked: Why was the sun going dark?

It wasn't, thought the mind behind the watchers. Not really.

Everything that mind had ever learned about the human death experience said he had entered a tunnel whose other end was so distant that it showed as no more than a point of light. But he was moving fast, faster. The light was growing, brightening, expanding, consuming all his vision.

All his life.

All his soul.

#

"Where are they now?"

The front door was once more ajar, just a handsbreadth. If any Havener was even now creeping toward the opening, he would not get in. Yet Luanna could still watch the lawn outside.

Unfortunately, the only Havener in sight was the one she had shot. His pants and shirt identified him. He was not moving.

Something scraped against the building's outside wall, revealing that at least one of their foe hid almost beneath their feet.

Consideration Wiggin, Felix, and Ox all had their knives in hand.

Brother Michael held his staff angled toward the gap between door and jamb, knowing that when the attack finally came there would be far too little he could do.

Yet the others' knives would be useless unless the Haveners were almost on top of them. His staff could reach out several feet, and if he could not stab a Havener to the heart, at least he could....

God's Promise was squatting as far from the door as she could get, near the back of the building's foyer, one arm around each of the two young

girls, Ruth and Polly. Brother Michael thought her grip on Ruth, her own daughter, was a little tighter.

Her skin glowed red where it showed through the rents in her shift.

Trudy stood in the doorway to the other room, the one with the dusty desks and the fly still buzzing against the windowpane, the one that did not invite its visitors to lie down and die.

Keeping his staff poised against the attack that still did not come, he watched her.

She watched him, licked her lips, folded her arms across her chest as if to remind him of who and what she was, of the life they might have together if they survived this siege.

But it was hopeless, wasn't it? Run his rosary through his fingers as often as he might, pray as often as he could, there was nothing his God could do now. There were only Luanna's arrows, his staff, the knives.

That room didn't need to invite their death, did it?

They had no chance at all.

They were as trapped in this foyer as they had been when they faced the couches. The Haveners surrounded them, watching the building's windows, the main entrance from which Luanna had shot Worthy Ferlig, the rear door the building refused to open at all. There was no cover, no hope of escape.

"At least they can't burn us out," said Ox. The building wasn't made of wood.

"That's no comfort," said Luanna. "We haven't got that much food or water. They can starve us out."

"I have plenty of water," said the building. "And there's food in storage."

"Hah!" Great-Grandpa snorted. "Don't touch anything this place offers you."

"Truly! We're both threatened now. I need you. And besides, the chancellor's office said I should look out for you."

Felix laughed, short and sharp. "After what you've said already, do you think anyone will believe that?"

Consideration Wiggin moved further from the door, into the shadows at the back of the foyer. He still watched the door to the outside. He was still on guard against the attack that was not coming. But he had something else to do first, to do while he still had the opportunity.

When he neared God's Promise, she stood up. They embraced as if they knew it would be their last chance. Certainly, if the Haveners seized them, they could expect no mercy.

Ruth clung to her mother's leg as she stood. Polly backed off, avoiding Consideration Wiggin. She watched the embrace for a moment.

When it was clear that he was not a threat to her, she moved in again.

But she clung to her friend, not the woman, and certainly not the man.

Brother Michael thought of how the Haveners acquired children and wondered if Wiggin had killed her parents, and if she knew it. Surely she would act no different if that were true.

The monk was running his rosary through his fingers, the words of the Last Rites returning again and again to his lips, when Trudy wrapped her arms around him from behind and said simply, "Hold me."

He turned and obeyed, and he found more comfort in the pressure of her arms than in his prayers. Could he feel a pressure from her belly too?

No. She did not yet show the child she carried. That was only in his mind, that and the thought that her next child would be his as well.

Determination swelled within his breast; he took a deep breath, another, another.

"There's one!" A silvery fishskin helmet showed above the grass where someone hid in a shallow fold of land. Luanna raised her bow, drew, and released. The arrow pierced the helmet and sent it rolling. There was no sign that she had touched the Havener who wore it.

When Brother Michael tried to free himself from Trudy, she clutched him tighter and pulled his head down to hers and kissed him fiercely. Then she let him go. He stared at her wonderingly. Yes, he thought. She wanted just what he wanted, and they would have it, if they survived this trap, monk or no monk.

This time he made the move. Their kiss was just as fierce, but it did not last. She pushed him away and said, "Go." He obeyed, positioning himself by the door. His staff was ready, his mouth dry, his heart pounding. There was a fury in him now that would destroy all opposition to his and Trudy's future together. Unless he were himself destroyed.

"Another!" But even as Luanna nocked another arrow, there was a thump against the wall beside the door. Some Havener had thrown himself against the building. Now he was out of sight, out of reach, unless one of them stepped outside. That, of course, would be just what they were waiting for.

Luanna did not fire this time. The thump had distracted her, and whoever had shown his hat or butt or leg was now sheltered once more from view. Yet the Haveners could not stay in their positions. If they wished to defeat the Webbs and their allies without a prolonged siege, they had to attack.

On the other side of the doorway, Consideration Wiggin licked his lips too. Michael could not see Felix and Ox but he knew they were there.

Behind him, knives ready, as nervous and scared and terrified as he was himself. He hoped they were as determined too, but he could not see

how that could be. Except for the Havener, of course.

"There!"

This time Brother Michael saw the Havener lunge out of his hollow and charge across the lawn. Luanna was drawing even as she swung, but before she could release the string and arrow, an arm darted from their blind spot beside the door. A hand seized her wrist and pulled. She lurched. The arrow went into the dirt just a few feet outside the building.

Michael did not wait to see if she could break free of the Havener. He stepped forward, through the door, knowing that surely there were foes to either side, ready to cut and slice and bludgeon.

Keeping his staff at waist level, he thrust it abruptly backwards.

When he felt it connect and heard the "Whuffff!" of a gut now breathless, he grinned. He did not look but immediately thrust forward, as hard as he could, into the chest of the man who was pulling Luanna through the doorway. He felt breastbone and ribs crack, heard crunch and snap, and he grinned again.

He did not have to strike a second time. The Havener let go his victim. Luanna retreated into the building. As soon as he knew she was safe, at least for the moment, he followed her.

#

Something glittered in the grass.

"A long, long time ago," said the building. "People cut grass short with big, noisy machines that poured smoke into the air. Someone suggested that all that was really needed was tiny machines, the size of grasshoppers, that measured each blade of grass and cut it to some preordained length. A lawn infested with such devices would never grow shaggy."

"It never happened," said Great-Grandpa.

After the battle for the doorway, the Haveners had fallen quiet. Trudy once more leaned against Brother Michael's back, her hands on his shoulders. He did not turn; the others had seen how effective he could be with his staff. Now they were content to let him and Luanna be their first line of defense.

Consideration Wiggin had returned to God's Promise. Ox and Felix stood beside the trundle, watching, waiting for the next attack, their bodies rigid with tension.

"It did here," said the building. "They're not very big, they're not very complicated, and they don't do very much, but what they do, they do very well. And they can be reprogrammed."

The chancellor's office is talking to buildings and grounds right now."

The Havener whose hat Luanna had shot off suddenly rolled over in the grass, yelled something unintelligible, and leaped to his feet. He seemed to dance, waving his arms, swatting at his chest and thighs and

legs, kicking, yelling again. Luanna let another arrow fly, but his movements were erratic, and she missed.

Felix shouted. Consideration Wiggin abandoned God's Promise to return to the door. Brother Michael moved forward as well.

Glittering objects clung to the Havener's clothes despite all his efforts to escape them. The thongs that bound his vest parted, and the cloth flapped like wings as he leaped about.

His kilt developed a fringe and fell from his waist. His hair and beard fell from his head in large swatches.

His skin bloomed with red spots and lines.

Several screams almost beside the door announced that the same fate was befalling those Haveners that had reached the building's wall. The first to leap desperately into view was Searaker Jameson, already naked and bleeding from a hundred cuts, flailing at his glittering tormentors, an armada of tiny machines, each one applying scissors-like jaws to everything it could reach. He roared with pain, and when he saw the building's door, he raised his knife and charged. Luanna stopped him with an arrow.

More of the university's machines hovered and darted like dragonflies in the air around the Haveners, surrounding them with a silvery blur of wings. They made a high-pitched buzz. Spots and lines of other colors--green and yellow, magenta and purple, red and white--appeared on the Haveners' naked skins.

"Painters, too," said the building.

Most of the Haveners dropped their knives as they struggled to fight off the attack. As those that did not flailed their arms they slashed themselves and each other. No one, however, was injured too badly to flee.

When Felix reached for the door, the building said, "No!

Don't go out there yet!"

He did not take his hand off the edge of the door. "You think we're going to stay in here? After what you said you were going to do?"

"But it's okay now. I told you, the chancellor's office said to take care of you."

"I want to get out of here," said God's Promise. She had one hand on the side of the trundle, and though she sounded frightened, she seemed quite eager to escape the building. The children still clung to her legs, though Polly was leaning forward, eyes bright, staring eagerly after the fleeing Haveners and their lilliputian pursuers. It was suddenly clear that whatever signs she gave of a shy, retiring nature were only temporary, products of whatever had happened to her and her family in the past.

The others made agreeing noises and began to press toward the door.

Even Great-Grandpa cried, "Get me on that trundle!"

"They'll attack you too, then. They aren't very smart."

Everyone froze. Michael remembered what the building had said about "programming" the lawn-clippers. "Then reprogram them," he said.

"B&G's working on it.

"What are you?" asked God's Promise.

"A computer," said Great-Grandpa. "Like me, but bigger. Am I right?"

"Of course you are," said the building. "What else could I be? But I only run this clinic, though I'm linked to the others, and the chancellor's office can give me orders."

"What about the library?" asked Felix. "That's a computer too, isn't it?"

"It had better be," said his ancestor.

"Of course it is. And it's waiting for you now."

"Follow me!" cried a voice just outside the building.

"Follow me!"

"Go ahead," said the building. "You're safe from the lawnmowers. And I'll let you go. For now."

"We won't be back," said Michael.

## CHAPTER 25

The machine that hovered just before the door was the size of a seagull. It even had something of a gull's rakish look, though its wings were made of some translucent substance and beat as ceaselessly as a dragonfly's to hold itself in midair at about the level of Brother Michael's chin and just out of reach of his staff. Nor was its voice much like a gull's: When it said, "Follow me," it sounded more like a young woman with a bit of phlegm in her throat.

The monk was the first to leave the building. As he used his staff to roll the body of Searaker Jameson off to one side, Trudy joined him.

"Should we?"

He was shrugging when Felix pushed the trundle through the doorway and he had to step aside, almost tripping over the Havener's body. He had joined the Webbs in their quest because he was here to learn and explore and perhaps because their quest was like a river. As soon as he stepped into it, the current seized him and there seemed no other way to go even when enemies gathered around them and their shelter invited them to lie down and die.

"I'm scared." She was beside him now, holding his upper arm in both hands.

"The Haveners?" He could feel her shaking.

"No. You beat them. You and Luanna. But that." She was pointing at the gull-like machine in the air before them.

"It helped us, you know. Or its friends did."

"I'm still scared."

So was he, of course. Talking gravestones were one thing.

Even talking buildings were acceptable, probably because they were immobile. Machines that imitated birds and insects and not only moved but talked, they frightened him too. But before he could do more than open his mouth to agree with her, Felix was saying, "We all are. But we have to go on. That's what we're here for. We can't quit now."

Luanna nodded. She still had her bow in her hand and her quiver slung over her shoulder. There were only a few arrows left.

Consideration Wiggin said, "Delivered of the Lord wanted to destroy this place, to keep you Webbs from gaining anything from it. I have to see what it is." God's Promise looked over her shoulder at the building just a few feet behind them all but did not disagree even though her expression shouted out that she had no faith at all in the university's intentions. The children, Ruth and Polly, stayed hard by her feet.

"And we can't keep you out here," Wiggin added. He touched God's Promises's back where a tear in her shift exposed skin that had reddened from the youvee she had absorbed since they had fled Haven.

"You need a hat, a cloak."

"Over here." Ox was holding up one of the fishskin Havener helmets.

The lawnmowers had torn it in only a few places, and none of the tears were large. In his other hand was a kilt.

"You can wrap this around yourself."

The hovering machine did not wait for God's Promise to shield her skin against more youvee or for the group to begin to move. As soon as the euthanasia clinic's door swung shut and latched behind them, it darted off, heading toward the largest building they could see. It was a massive edifice of stone, covered with ivy, windows dark eyes in its upper levels.

"Is that the library?" asked Felix.

The machine darted back and hovered an arm's length from him. "Yes, yes. Don't dawdle now. It's waiting for you."

From the trundle, Great-Grandpa said, "It's changed. There used to be windows near the ground."

The machine darted so quickly toward him that if he had still been a living human, he would have had to flinch. "Riots and war," it said.

"Mobs and armies. We had to close them off."

Now come. Follow me. Hurry, hurry."

Now Brother Michael could see through the ivy to make out the lines of bricked-up windows. The bricks bore faded pocks and other scars.

"Before the Haveners come back?" asked Luanna, but the machine said nothing more. As a door in the library building yawned toward them, it darted ahead, almost vanishing in the distance, and perched above the opening.

"It's waiting for us," said Ox.

"But what is it?" Consideration Wiggin looked over his shoulder at the building they had just left. "A bigger trap?

More death?"

No one tried to answer him until Great-Grandpa said, "Libraries are funny that way. You can find death there, sure.

Or life."

Brother Michael felt confused. "What do you mean?"

"I'm shrugging. You'll learn."

Consideration Wiggin stopped, one hand on God's Promise's wrist just below the edge of the kilt she had thrown over her shoulders. "Then we're not going in there."

The two children had been trotting a few feet to one side of the path.

Polly had been watching the grass intently as if, thought Brother Michael, she wished to find a miniature lawnmower machine. Now both girls gave Consideration Wiggin a worried look, and Polly stared searchingly at shrubby thickets and building corners that might conceal the Haveners.

When Trudy reminded him, "They can't be far away," God's Promise tugged at his hand. Reluctantly, he stepped forward with the others and followed the machine when it dropped off its perch and darted through the door.

The corridor into which it led them was unlit, and the doors on either side were closed. Brother Michael tried one; when its knob refused to turn, he immediately thought of what the university's lawnmowers and painters had done to the Haveners.

"If this place doesn't want us exploring, I won't argue," he softly said to Trudy.

The machine led them around a corner into a broad room lit by a row of windows high above a checkerboard array of wooden tables. Each table was surrounded by chairs and bore on its surface several strange boxes the monk did not recognize. There was not a speck of dust that he could see. Nor was there any sign of shelves or books, neither paper books nor talking books.

"Computer terminals," said Felix. His tone said he had seen them before; they were comforting and familiar.



As Ox parked the trundle by the edge of the room and turned away, Great-Grandpa cried, "Don't leave me here!"

Luanna was the one to pick up the stone and place it on the nearest table. "That's how you talk to the library," GreatGrandpa said. "The terminals, I mean."

"I hope it's in better shape than the hospital was," said Felix.

"It has to be," said the stone. "Think of all those robots.

And it's kept up the campus pretty well."

Something made a throat-clearing sound. They all froze and scanned the room.

"There's been a little degradation," said a voice they had not heard before. "The grounds are in better shape than the databases, but there's still a great deal left."

"That's what we're here for," said Felix.

One of the computer screens lit up, flickered, and displayed a smooth, androgynous face that turned as if it were examining them all, one by one. "Have you seen the registrar?"

Luanna asked, "What's a...?"

"Ah." The face slowly blinked its eyes. "That's what students do, you know. Sign in with the registrar. Pay your tuition. Choose your courses."

"Knock it off." Great-Grandpa made a snorting noise.

"Anybody can use the library."

"You're dead, bubbaleh. Things have changed."

"You still don't have to be a student to use a library."

"So let's ask them." The image on the screen looked squarely at them, each in turn, and it recited their names.

"Brother Michael. Trudy Inger. Consideration Wiggin. God's Promise and Ruth. Polly Sawyer. Ox and Felix and Luanna Webb."

"How'd you...?"

It ignored the question. "Are you here to learn?"

"Of course," said Felix.

"Then you're students. The only entrance requirement is that you have to sign in."

"But where?"

Another screen lit up with the same face. "Over here," it said in a very similar voice. "I'm the registrar."

A third screen came to life. "I'm the treasurer, but I do believe we can waive the fees. You folks don't even know what money is, do you?"

This one's face was identical to the others.

Its voice was gravelly, masculine.

"I do," said Great-Grandpa.

"You're dead, bubby. You don't count, even if you can."

"Snotty son of a bitch."

The registrar said, "We haven't had any students in simply ages."

"Maybe they're dead too," said Great-Grandpa.

All three faces ignored this remark just as they had the other.

"But that doesn't mean we can waive all the requirements."

"Oh, no."

"No, no."

"After all, what would the chancellor think?"

"Do you think he'll ever come back?"

"He has been on leave an awfully long time."

"Maybe he's dead," said Great-Grandpa.

"Who's dead?"

"No, who's on first."

"No, no, no! What's on first. Who's on third."

"Goddam comedians," said Great-Grandpa.

"Gotta pass the time somehow," said one of the faces. The voice was the treasurer's, but Brother Michael thought it was the library's lips that moved.

"Having a few students around the old place would help."

Michael felt Trudy's hand tighten on his. He glanced at the others.

All looked as confused as he felt.

"How about it, guys?" Now it was definitely the registrar image that was looking at them. "Just think, sign up, take a few courses, and you'll know what all these things used to be."

The screens on the next table all lit up at once with pictures. One Michael recognized as an automobile, shiny and new. Another was a ship a thousand times the size of The Green Isle. A third showed a computer

screen in miniature. Another was a small, insectile machine crouched under a bush.

"Cars and trucks," Great-Grandpa recited. "Airplanes and ships.

Machine guns and tractors. Computers and flush toilets.

Robots for chores and observation. Rockets and satellites."

"Some of which are still up there, still working," said the library's voice. The image of a cylinder adorned with wings and shallow bowls was instantly replaced by a yellow-stained circle swirled with white.

"There's the weather. Pretty big storm coming this way. All that yellow is desert. The brown streaks are rivers carrying topsoil to the sea. But look at that, will you?" A white circle formed near the edge of a yellow patch.

"The green is coming back, a little more forest every year."

Brother Michael shook his head. That was the world? He could not comprehend how the picture could possibly relate to real weather or real deserts or real rivers and forests. But before he could say anything, Ox asked, "What's a flush toilet?"

The image on that screen animated to show how the device was used and what happened to its contents. "Beats a privy," said the library.

"But you lose the fertilizer," said Great-Grandpa.

The image was replaced by that of a bulging bag. "We can teach you how to take care of that little problem."

"Diseases," said Felix.

"Clinic say you were sick? Convincing little bugger, ain't it?"

Brother Michael put his hand to his scalp. He could not feel any sign of the tumor that was supposedly taking root. Did the library mean there was no tumor? Was he healthy?

No.

A lawnmower robot was climbing over the edge of the table before him.

"That's right," said the library. The lawnmower worked its scissors-like jaws. A second robot appeared beside it and spouted flame over the blades from a tubular snout. "Just bend over. Put your head on the table. We'll snip it out right away."

Michael backed away from the table. He shook his head furiously. "I'd rather have Brother Isaac do it."

"That amateur?" The image on the screen shook its head too.

"Well, if you insist. Don't you trust me?"

"Love bugs," said Ox. "Great-Grandpa said there used to be something to kill the love-bugs."

"Antibiotics," said the stone.

"Right," said the library. "But I think we'd better get the bio department in here for that."

Another computer screen flickered to life. Its image differed only in that the library's face was set atop a torso wrapped in white.

"Why do you use so many screens?" asked Luanna.

A fifth screen came to life. "Psychology Department," an unctuous voice said. "People seem to like it better that way when they have to deal with a multi-function computer. It's more like dealing with several people."

"Then why not give each screen a separate face?"

The "Hmmp!" that answered her came from the library's initial screen.

"It's just one computer, really. So let's not be ridiculous."

"You wanted me?" asked the biology department. It sounded earnest, impatient, eager to get back to more important concerns.

"Right," said the library. "Tell them why we aren't about to teach them how to make antibiotics to cure their chlamydia and gonorrhoea infections."

In a more formal tone, the biology department said, "In 2016, when world population was passing the eight billion mark, the UN Population Council tried to ban the use of antibiotics for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. Spokesperson Shanna Gillooley said, 'It has become clear that the only way to reduce population below the world's carrying capacity for human beings is to encourage nature's own efforts to reduce the human birth rate. Diseases such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea, as well as others, are already endemic throughout the world, and among their major effects must be counted damage to both male and female reproductive organs. If we can refrain from attempts to cure or prevent these diseases, we hope, the result will be a dramatic decrease in human fertility.'"

"Of course," the biology department went on as nearby screens began to show screaming mobs, burning buildings, and bodies. "This proposal was not accepted. The offices of the UN Population Council were destroyed, and the staff was slaughtered.

Ms. Gillooley herself was hung from a lamppost.

"Unfortunately, that did not change the need." A screen lit up with multicolored charts that Brother Michael did not understand at all.

From the expressions on their faces, neither did the others.

"Population continued to grow. Eventually production of antibiotics stopped because the world's resources were devoted to growing food and fighting wars of desperation.

But by then it was too late."

The windows high above the tables rattled as wind struck them. Brother Michael looked up and was startled to see how dark it had grown outside. Yet it was not the black dark of night.

This was the deep yellow-gray of the storm the library had said was coming.

The light that had kept the room from growing dim as the clouds thickened over the building came from glowing rods mounted on the walls and ceiling.

"You don't really want to go back to that, do you?" asked the library.

"I want to have children," said Trudy.

"That's what they all said, then." Lightning flashed across the windows. Thunder boomed. For a moment, the library's imaged face turned skyward with a look of worry.

The biology department spoke once more: "Symbiosis is an important part of the history of life. Cells have even incorporated other cells and thereby gained new abilities.

Perhaps we should regard the chlamydia and gonorrhoea organisms as new symbiotes. Indeed, the effect they have upon fertility, which used to be seen as a curse, may be precisely how they aid the long-term survival of the human species. Certainly, other ways of controlling fertility did not work well, and the species nearly vanished."

The scene that replaced the biology department's face on the screen was not one of violence, mobs, fires, or incomprehensible charts, but of a street walled in by buildings and so filled with human beings that not a scrap of pavement could be seen.

"I wish I understood all that." Brother Michael looked at Trudy. She wanted children. So did he, he realized now. And this computer, this library, seemed to be saying they should not.

"Take a few courses," said the biology department. "And you will.

Then, once you've figured out how to make antibiotics on your own, you'll know better."

"I don't think so," said Trudy.

"Will that be all then?"

"Right," said the library. "Back to your microscope."

"What microscope?" asked Great-Grandpa.

"Just a simulation. Keeps him happy."

Consideration Wiggin was looking at God's Promise in very much the same way as Michael had just looked at Trudy. The gaze Felix Webb turned on Luanna seemed a little less anxious.

And why not? thought Michael. He already had two children, Leo and Too-too. A third was on the way.

"You'll understand soon enough," added the library. "Settle in here and start studying. There are gaps in the databanks, but I still have a great deal of the old knowledge. There's a lot to learn."

"We can't stay here," said Luanna. "There aren't enough of us at home if bandits show up, or if the Haveners attack there."

We have to go back."

Felix nodded and turned to point at the trundle and its cargo. "That's why we brought the other stones."

The library made a sighing noise. "Oh, I know that. I do."

You want to download all you can, just the way you did at the hospital.

Extension students!"

Ox looked suspicious. "How do you know about that?"

Suddenly Luanna laughed. "The machines! You've been spying on us!"

The library's face nodded. "It's taken a long time to develop them, too. I had the maintenance equipment, but it's only in the last few years that I've been able to send out scouts."

Just like the monks, thought Brother Michael. They had sent him out just as the library sent out its machines to see who the neighbors were and what they were up to, what hazards they offered.

Consideration Wiggin indicated the others with a sweep of his arm.

"Are there any other groups like this? Trying to relearn the old ways?"

"I haven't found any." The library's image on the screen shrugged.

"But I plan to keep sending the robots further afield.

There's a lot of world out there."

The mottled orb the library had called up on one of the other screens and called the weather began to flash. "See?"

When they were all looking, the image steadied and a small red dot began to blink. "That's us."

Brother Michael leaned forward, suddenly intent. The dot was so tiny, right on the edge of what could only be land. To its right was a large swatch of blue. "Where's Ireland?"

The globe's image seemed to turn. A second dot began to flash. Across the blue. Weeks of sailing and rowing. And the distance between the two dots on the image was only the length of his thumb.

"A lot of world," the library repeated.

He had to nod.

## CHAPTER 26

The rain had passed by the next morning, when they left the library and its door boomed shut behind them, but the wind still raged. Puddles turned from clear to froth in an instant and tattered into the air.

Tree limbs heaved against the scudding yellow-gray clouds. Some lay broken on the ground; around them clustered the largest machines they had seen yet. Some had snouts that screamed as they bit into the fallen wood and made sawdust fly. Others, like large trundles with long arms sprouting from their backs, lifted and stacked the pieces and carried them off.

"Now for home," said Felix. As the trundle's motor began to hum, he steered it onto one of the university's paved paths that seemed to head toward the river.

Michael wished he could take one of the university's lifting machines with him. If they could handle heavier weights, they would make the work of building the abbey so much easier, just as, he thought, they must help the university keep its buildings in repair and its grounds in order. There was far too much the miniature lawnmowers and painters could never handle.

Trudy was beside him, watching him. "Do we have much longer?"

Did they? If he took her with him, what would his fellow monks say?

None of them had wives. He had always known them to be celibate. But Brother Brendan had told him that once monks had married, as if to say he could if he wished.

"Do you want to stay with them?"

Her face lit up. "Oh, no."

"I just hope you can swim."

"I wish we had one of those boats it showed us," said Ox.

"We could use the river."

"Oh, no," said Great-Grandpa. "That's like antibiotics.

Too advanced for the likes of us. Or you, really."

"It gave us plenty," said Luanna.

"It filled up all the stones," said Consideration Wiggin.

They paused when they came to the path the Havener force had worn in the grass. They followed it toward the barrier hedge of trees and brush that bordered the campus.

"And it did it just like a university," Great-Grandpa grumbled.

"Nothing useful. Just prerequisites. 'Here,' it said. 'Learn a little history and economics and population biology and ecology. Come back later and convince me that you know what problems to watch out

for. Then maybe I'll tell you how to do some of those things you crave. If you still think you want them. Or need them."

"We need babies." God's Promise crossed her arms across her chest and stared down at them as if they held an infant. There were tears in her eyes. "The Haveners are right on that. There aren't enough of us."

"But," said Luanna. "We don't want to have too many of them. That's the mistake our ancestors made."

"We need to defend ourselves, too," said Ox. He patted the side of the trundle. "We need more of these, with better engines. We need sawmills and tractors. Stoves and cloth."

"Medicine," said God's Promise

"We'll come back," said Felix. "Or we'll figure things out on our own."

Uncle Alva's good at that."

"He isn't God Almighty," said Ox, and Felix and Luanna both laughed.

"You could check the cemeteries," said Great-Grandpa.

"Think of Maddoc. We remember a lot."

Felix grunted as he shoved the trundle aside to avoid a branch. "Not many of you remember much that's useful."

"Ah, well. I'm not sure why that's so. Maybe we just choose to forget. Or maybe those who knew anything didn't get recorded. At least around here."

"And think of the Temple of the Sacred Memory. How much of what you do remember is scrambled?"

The stone did not answer, but the question echoed in Brother Michael's mind despite his wish to think more of Trudy and the future. The books the monks had brought with them from Ireland sometimes seemed of very limited relevance to present-day concerns. Perhaps they too were scrambled, if not by sheer weight of time then by their authors, whose memories must have suffered much like those of the stones.

Perhaps it would be better if people took every memory of the past--stone, flesh, or paper--with the proverbial grain of salt. Every man should apply his own intelligence to the problems that faced him, take memories of the past, yes, but judge them for himself, ask how much sense they made, how applicable they were. He looked at Trudy and thought of Haveners and Irish brigands who thought all the world was property to be seized. Every woman too, of course.

He laughed out loud against the pressure and the rush of wind and ignored the looks the others gave him. So now he was a heretic!

And that was just what the university was asking of them with its prerequisites. Learn, it said. Judge for yourselves what you need.

Think for yourselves. Perhaps even, find your own answers.



Felix halted the trundle. They could see the trail through the barrier hedge just ahead, but....

"You think they might be waiting for us?" Ox was already drawing his knife.

"They won't give up," said Consideration Wiggin. "We aren't used to losing. No one has ever done it to us before. So they'll be waiting somewhere."

"We have to guard the stones," said Felix.

Luanna nodded and touched the string of her bow as if to be sure it was tight. She drew an arrow from her quiver. She made a face when she saw how few were left.

Brother Michael inspected his staff, holding it against the light to check for cracks, running his fingers over its surface.

He too was ready.

"Let's go," said Felix. "Stay near the trundle. Keep moving. And don't let them touch the stones. Not this time."

They were nearly through the hedge when several Haveners stepped silently into the path ahead of them. Several more blocked the path behind them. Still others stepped into sight among the trunks and vines to either side. They were surrounded.

A few of the Haveners still held their knives. Most had broken branches in their hands, crude clubs but quite enough for destruction.

All were naked and bald and marked with scabs, stripped and nicked by the university's machines. Their reddened skins said that there had been time enough before the storm for the youvee to begin its deadly work.

"Don't stop!" shouted Felix, and Brother Michael slashed and thrust with his staff. Beside him Trudy used a knife to keep any Havener from approaching too close. Luanna shot arrow after arrow at the Haveners in front of them. The others fought too, with knives and clubs, all but God's Promise who, with the children trotting beside her legs, leaned into the rear of the trundle to hasten their escape.

But someone struck Trudy in the head with a thrown stick.

When she staggered, Brother Michael shouted and seized her with one arm. She went limp in his grip. He strained to hold her up while continuing to wield his staff one-handed, but now he could no longer respond swiftly, decisively, effectively. One of the Haveners slipped past him and swung his knife.

Felix screamed: "Luanna!"

"Keep moving!" A hollow thump marked Ox's blow. Michael spared a sideways glance to note Luanna's blood-drenched body lifting off the ground and landing limply on the trundle. There was a single arrow left in her quiver.

A wheel bumped over her attacker.

God's Promise grunted: "Go!"

Felix screamed again and became a wild man. He lifted his knife high and charged ahead, slashing, stabbing. The remaining Haveners tried to stand their ground, but he was like the storm that had passed its worst over their heads the night before. A force of nature, unstoppable even though he bled from a dozen wounds.

They did not stop running until they were across the bridge and among the ruins of the town. They chose a spot on the hillside above the river, where they had a good view of whatever pursuit might come, and collapsed on the ground, panting. Only Consideration Wiggin remained on his feet, staring back the way they had come.

A few minutes later, Felix rose stiffly from the ground and stood beside the trundle, staring at the body of his wife. His eyes were wide and stunned and unresponsive, though from time to time he glanced toward the far bank of the river.

Trudy was the one who examined Luanna. She parted the clothing and studied the wound. She felt the skin and looked at the quantity of blood that had pooled beneath her in the trundle's bed. Finally, she shook her head. "There wasn't anything you could have done, Felix.

Not if the battle had stopped right then. Not if we'd been able to stop running on the other bank of the river. It went to her heart."

"And mine," Felix whispered.

No one else had worse than shallow cuts and scratches and bruises.

Brother Michael had just finished intoning the Last Rites when the Haveners appeared on the other side of the bridge. At sight of them, Felix screamed once more and waved his knife in the air. He had no words he could call upon in this moment of loss and fury and grief, but the message was clear.

Once he had sent it, he fell into himself. His shoulders slumped, his face drooped, his breathing turned harsh, on the verge of sobs. When he nearly dropped his knife, Ox took it from him and gripped his shoulder so hard that he winced.

Brother Michael thought the two must love each other dearly, much as he loved his fellow monks, or... Trudy was still beside him. He looked at her and said, "Thank God it wasn't you."

She leaned her head against his side, forcing the rough wool of his robe into his skin. "Or you."

#

The wind eased, the clouds thinned, the sun shone through once more.

By the time they reached the cemetery, the only signs of the storm were the litter of broken branches on the path and the fresh scars where ancient walls had lost more bricks or rotted beams had finally given way.

It was the first cemetery they came to. It was small and ancient, far older than the ruins that were everywhere, but it had a few talking stones scattered among the slabs of weathered limestone and marble, slate and granite crusted thick with blackened lichen.

"Who are you?" asked a feminine voice when they pushed through the blackberry canes and brambles with Luanna's body.

They had left the trundle and its cargo, including Great-Grandpa, on the trail. "Who was she?"

The letters on the stone said the speaker had once been Sister Marabella.

"Were you a monk?" asked Brother Michael.

The stone laughed. "Is that why your hair's so thin on top?

And the world has no more nuns?"

"I've read of them, but no. I've never met one."

"And the girl? Not the deader. The one leaning on your arm? Some monk you are!"

"Times change. No nuns, no bishops, no popes, we're all there are."

"Ah." The stone hesitated as if it were thinking over what he had just said. "Perhaps it's just as well. But there's still a God? Jesus?

Heaven?"

Another stone made a jeering noise. "Forget it, Maryboo.

They held the resurrection ages ago. The world is ashes now, just a pit, Satan's dungheap, sheer Hell nor are we out of it!"

"As far as I know," said Brother Michael.

"Then that will have to do." Sister Marabella made a satisfied noise.

"And now the deader."

Despite the grief that brought tears to his eyes and blocked his throat, Felix Webb managed to explain what had happened to Luanna.

When neither the nun nor any other stone said anything in reply, he and Ox used their knives to excavate a shallow grave.

As they laid the last turf back in place, the nun began to recite, "Ora pro nobis...."

#

When the path they retraced brought them within sight of the Penobscot river the next day, everyone was surprised to see the Havener ships at anchor, sails furled.

"How did they know where to wait for us?" Felix, swallowed up by his

grief, had been trudging at the rear of their small procession ever since they had buried Luanna, keeping up but pausing often to look behind, a lesson, Michael thought, in interpretation: Lot's wife too had looked back, and her tears of loss had dried to leave her solidified in salt. Now he roused himself and pushed forward to stand beside the trundle.

"Perhaps they didn't," said Consideration Wiggin. "We're almost to the Temple of the Sacred Memory, after all."

"Oh, no." Trudy bowed her head sadly. Brother Michael thought she had to be recalling her own first encounter with the Haveners, stolen from her family, carried off, enslaved.

"Yes!" God's Promise aimed an accusing finger toward the ships.

"That's how they work. And they need replacements for Consideration and myself, for Ruth and Polly." Her voice broke as she added bitterly, "For End of Exile. And no one can deny them."

"Can they see us?"

But the question needed no answer. Sails bloomed from the masts, Haveners hauled their anchors in, and the ships slipped away down the current, out of reach and mind.

Yet their effects remained. A little further down the path, they found the Temple of the Sacred Memory still standing. Its front door lay smashed in the entryway, covering most of the crumbled remains of Deacon Keruf. On the ground before the steps lay three bodies, one of them the leader of the congregation, another the boy who had asked for the Moon.

"You did this," said one of the men who emerged from the church to stare sullenly at the Webbs. They were angry, but they did not quite dare to attack. There were no women or children in sight. "You brought them down on us."

Only Great-Grandpa answered aloud: "It was the Haveners, and you know it. That's what they do."

"They never bothered us before."

Felix grimaced in sympathetic pain, and Michael thought that there really wasn't any answer to that. If the Haveners had not been angry, perhaps they would have continued to leave this small group alone. Or perhaps not; surely their hunger for dominion would eventually have brought them here. Now, perhaps, now that the Webbs had made contact with the university, that hunger might be blocked.

The expedition passed on without further comment, though they could feel the pressure of angry eyes on their backs until long after the church was out of sight.

#

They were passing the cemetery where the first university expedition had been attacked by the Haveners when a red head seemed to emerge from the ground ahead of them. The man's body followed as he strode up the slope, broad shoulders, worn robe, a rosary much like Brother Michael's

own, and a broad grin as well.

Brother Michael shouted in surprise. "Brother Herman!" He and Trudy were at the head of the line of travellers, the trundle behind them, Ox beside it to work its controls, Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise and the children behind. Felix Webb once more brought up the rear.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah, it was a miracle!" Brother Herman beamed and hastened forward, hand outstretched. "I see you found friends. We had to dodge your foes a little down the river."

"Was that the miracle? That you succeeded?"

"In a way, in a way. Is this your lady, now?" He held out his hand to Trudy and, when she responded with her own, shook it gravely.

Brother Michael hesitated. Was that all the reaction Trudy would draw?

Would his Brothers so easily accept his breach of celibacy? But then, he thought, they were not really monks at all. No one had demanded any vows of them, not even Brother Brendan. There was no hierarchy beyond whatever they imposed on themselves, and if they chose to depart from what they knew of monastic traditions--or to return to those more ancient roots the abbot had mentioned once--they were free to do so.

He sighed with relief he had barely known he awaited and introduced Trudy and the others. Then he insisted, "The miracle!"

"Brother Brendan..." Brother Herman grinned at them all, more broadly than before, and added for the others, "That's our chief, you understand. He was at the shore, wondering what was happening to you.

If you were alive or dead and would ever return to us. And then a porpoise, of all things, swam up almost to his feet and told him it was time to fetch you."

"A porpoise?" asked Consideration Wiggin. "I've never seen one."

"Nor had we," said Brother Herman. "But there it was, and talking very politely, too. 'Please,' it said, and as soon as we were ready, it led us to the mouth of that stream down the hill."

He gestured back the way he had come. "And when the foe was coming, it showed us where to hide."

"A miracle," murmured God's Promise, and when Brother Michael looked at her he could see hope rising in her eyes. If miracles could happen, surely she was thinking, then perhaps....

He had a strong suspicion of just what the truth had to be, but he said nothing. There was no point but cruelty in dashing her hopes. She would end her grieving in time, as would Felix, to whom he turned now: "Then this is where we part."

The other monks waited at the bottom of the hill. Some were gathering wood to feed the fire beneath a pot of mussel stew.

Two were watching the mouth of the stream and the river beyond for any return of the Haveners. Brother Brendan was checking the rope that anchored The Green Isle to a sapling on the shore; the ship had a mast once more, and a furled sail as well. All jumped to their feet when Brother Michael and the others came into view.

Little Ruth and Polly stared round-eyed at all the strangers, looked at Brother Michael and studied his robe and rosary and half-grown-in tonsure, turned back to the monks, and nodded to say that yes, it was obvious, they were the same sort of people, allies at least, even friends. Ruth dared a tentative smile, Polly a bolder one, but still they remained close to God's Promise.

When he saw Brother Isaac Kretzmer, Michael thought of Felix's Pa.

"Brother Ike," he said. "Did you bring your knives with you?"

"Not all of them." The other grinned and drew a leather folder from inside his robe. When he opened it, Michael saw a single scalpel and a pair of threaded needles. "But I thought you might need some small repairs."

"Nothing urgent." Brother Michael touched the side of his head for the first time in days. It was hardly tender at all where he had been struck in the first battle. And his scalp--could he feel the smallest of bumps there, under the hair? "But they have a man with a tumor."

He made a fist against the back of his neck, and then he pointed. "His dad."

"If he's still alive," said Felix morosely.

"Won't do much good," said Great-Grandpa from the trundle.

"That's what Maddoc said."

Brother Isaac's lips set in a thin, tight line, as they always did when he faced injuries and diseases before which he was helpless. "Where is he? I'll do everything I can."

"Go with them in the morning," said Brother Michael.

But then Brother Brendan was coming forward to be introduced, his hair just as gray as when Michael had seen him last, his cheeks beginning to restore the slight roundness they had had in Ireland, his eyes beaming with pleasure that Michael was safe and sound and would soon be restored to the fold, his hands moving in blessings for the children and not a trace of censure for the woman at his side. Here were the others, and a host of questions--"Who are these people?" "What did you learn?"

"Those sails...?"--and the pot of stew at last.

When Brother Michael woke the next morning, he stood up quietly, careful not to disturb Trudy beside him or the others a little further away. It was almost dawn, the last stars were dim, the sky beginning to show the yellow cast of all the dust it bore. And there was Felix, slumped on a rock by the shore, staring toward the river beyond.

Michael did what he had to do before approaching the other man and standing behind him, thinking. Comfort was impossible, he knew. Only time could ease the grieving.

Yet the pain of that grieving was so great. He touched his rosary as if to remind himself how to pray, and he let his lips move as he thought, "Please, God. Don't ever take Trudy away from me. If it hurts this much, I won't be able to stand it."

He took a breath. Comfort was impossible, but perhaps....

He spoke as softly as he could. "What will you tell Leo?"

Felix sighed, long and hard and shuddering. "What can I tell him?"

That she's dead, of course. But what else? The knife? The blow? The blood?"

"That she died protecting him. Doing what was necessary.

Seeing to it that all the memories in those stones on the trundle came back for him to use when he grows up." Not memories, he told himself.

Not really. There was no one in those stones, not the way there was in Great-Grandpa's stone. Only the thoughts of long-dead men and women.

The knowledge and wisdom they had gained. Memories, then, after all, of a sort.

Another sigh. "He's too young to understand."

"Tell him anyway. He'll understand part of it. Then tell him again and again until he's old enough to take it all in.

Make a story of it."

"Yeah." But Felix's posture was one of defeat. And the others were stirring now, a few already putting things back aboard The Green Isle.

Michael turned away and accepted the apple Brother Samuel tossed at him.

"I'll tell your sisters where you've gone," Ox was saying to Trudy.

"We'll be back, of course we will." There were tears in Trudy's eyes as she flattened both hands across her tummy.

"We're family, and my kid'll have to see his aunts and cousins.

I'll want to see them too. And we'll need to get a stone."

"You'll have to fetch me home again," said Brother Isaac.

"We'll have a stone ready by then," said Great-Grandpa. "Or two. One for the old stuff. One for the new."

"Watch out for the Haveners," said Consideration Wiggin.

"Today they're running for home, but in the future...."

"We'll sail at night," said Brother Brendan. "Or row."

#

When the monks had first been approaching this continent, this refuge from the chaos that had engulfed their home in Ireland, Brother Herman had sworn he saw a whale. Perhaps he had. Perhaps such things did still remain in the world despite all the damage human beings had done before they fell from the grace of civilization. Perhaps there were still deer somewhere, or elephants and unicorns and lions.

Someday, thought Brother Michael as he crouched in the prow of The Green Isle with Trudy close against his side, their arms around each other as much to brace against the motion of the ship as anything else.

Someday they might go searching for such things, just as the Webbs had gone searching for the university and its library.

Now Brother Herman said a porpoise had actually spoken to Brother Brendan. Could that be? Michael searched the water ahead and to either side, studying the waves and the signs of current and the tangles of driftwood washed against the river's banks. Trudy pointed at ruins that seemed much older than most, and he recognized the remains of the ancient fort where he had first set foot on the mainland, and where later....

"What's that?"

She was pointing at the water now. And there it was. Darkskinned, narrow-nosed, mouth set in a perpetual bony grin, head lifted from the water as if it wished to ask a question. "The porpoise," he said, and he could not help but grin.

The other monks had also noticed now. They let go the tiller and sheets and struggled for a vantage point that would let them see.

"That's it," said Brother Brendan. "That's the one."

No longer under way, the boat was beginning to swing in the current.

"I've never seen one," said Brother Michael. "But I've seen stories that said they would sometimes accompany ships at sea and push drowning men to shore." The rope his fellow monks had used to tie The Green Isle to that sapling on the shore lay beneath his left hand. "Or pull a boat by a rope."

When he held the rope up for the porpoise to see, it opened its mouth and made a laughing noise.

Brother Michael did not hesitate despite what he saw in the porpoise's gaping maw. He threw, and the creature caught the rope and turned away. The ship lurched, and they were moving once more toward home.

"A machine," said Trudy. She too had seen the metal claw that had thrust from the porpoise's mouth to seize the rope.

"Another robot."



The other monks were already furling the unneeded sail, relaxing on their benches, chatting. Not one of them seemed to have noticed the true nature of their miracle.

"The university said it had scouts." He eyed a sea gull overhead and wondered briefly how many of the creatures they saw were robots in disguise.

"They'd make good messengers, wouldn't they?" She sounded wistful, as if she were already missing her sisters. "Or even boats. Though they'd have to be bigger."

In response, he only hugged her tight. This was a new world, after all, a new life, and though there were foes and hazards here just as there had been in Ireland, he was suddenly flooded with hope and optimism.

He prayed once more that it would last, that God would let him keep this woman at his side, that the Haveners would not discover the abbey on Vinalhaven. Indeed, he prayed that time would stop at this very moment, and then he laughed, for he knew that time never stopped, that change and loss were part of every life, and that God loved surprise.

## CHAPTER 27

The Webb compound was surrounded by stones that had been moved from their home cemeteries and given the task of standing guard, of watching for bandits and Haveners and other strangers who might be approaching, and of giving the alarm.

It was the most outlying stone, carefully concealed by a clump of ferns, that saw them first and cried out, "Strangers coming! No! It's them! They're back! They're back!"

Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise were in the lead, already past the stone. Ox was steering the trundle; Brother Isaac helped him push when it faltered on a rise. It was tired, its batteries nearly drained, and curled up among the stones that were its cargo were two small, exhausted girls. Felix Webb was still bringing up the rear.

"But where's Luanna?" cried the next.

The trail was surrounded by trees, many of them healthy apple trees rich with ripening fruit. Consideration Wiggin could see ruins among the trunks, stubs of wall and chimney and ancient plumbing jutting from drifts of honeysuckle and blackberry and other brush. Ahead he could glimpse the roofs of the Webb compound's buildings, more stones beside the trail, and now a child, a boy, running pell-mell toward them, yelling, "Mommy!"

He looked at God's Promise beside him. Her face was a mask of agony; she knew what the boy had lost, what he would too soon know he had lost. He wished he had a child of his own so that he could share that pained awareness, almost he wished he too had lost a child as she had lost End of Exile, even as he sensed the intensity of the pain and knew how hard it must be to bear.

No one said a word. Ox looked aside. Consideration Wiggin felt it was not his place to tell the bad news. God's Promise and Brother Isaac

followed his lead. Felix--yes, he was still there, at the rear, standing frozen, head up and speechless as he watched his and Luanna's son approach. Even Great-Grandpa was silent.

Leo hesitated when he saw the girls on the trundle's bed, but he did not stop. "Mommy?" Finally he saw his father.

"Where's Mommy?"

Felix opened his mouth as if he wished to speak but nothing could emerge. He closed it again, and when his son was within reach, he lifted the boy to his chest and wrapped his arms around him. The boy returned the hug as desperately as it was given, but soon he was squirming, struggling to escape. "Daddy, you're hurting me!"

"She's dead, isn't she?" Karyn had appeared while all the rest were watching Leo and his father. Uncle Alva was behind her. Approaching more slowly was Bella, with both Marjy and TooToo by the hand.

Felix nodded. His cheeks were wet, and now Leo was crying too. He visibly forced himself to loosen his grip on his son.

"What happened?"

"We'll tell you later." Ox and Bella were embracing as eagerly as Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise ever would.

"How's Pa?"

Karyn shook her head as if to say he wasn't well, or he wasn't the issue.

"He's a surgeon." Ox pointed at Brother Isaac, who nodded gravely, and named him aloud. "Maybe he can help."

"He couldn't help Luanna?"

Consideration Wiggin shook his head gravely, and Karyn seemed to notice him for the first time. "What are you doing here?" Her tone was faintly incredulous--he was the man who had kidnapped Trudy years before--but also distracted. "What happened?"

"We found your sister," said Ox. "And Brother Michael."

"Where are they now?"

"He went home," said Brother Isaac. "She went with him."

"What happened to Luanna?" Karyn asked insistently.

God's Promise whispered, "They killed her."

"No!" Karyn shrieked. "No! But how!"

Before anyone else could say a word, a voice called from the compound ahead: "Don't dawdle! We want to hear too!"

"That's Maddoc," said Great-Grandpa. "I'm there too. And Pa and Hussey."

"Tell me how!" Karyn's tone was frantic. Clearly she had loved Luanna as much as Felix had, and would miss her as much.

Great-Grandpa explained what had happened. She clutched at the side of the trundle, let go, and waited for Felix and Leo in the rear of the procession to reach her.

Consideration Wiggin thought it was all very confusing.

Some of these people he had met years before, when he had been a Havener. Some were strangers. All were eager for news of the expedition and what it had found and what had happened, especially to Luanna. But here, on the trail, hardly seemed the place.

Together, he and God's Promise chivvied the expedition back into motion and into the compound, where he recognized the thatch-roofed colonnade surrounding a pair of gravestones. He had not seen it before, but since he had first met the Webbs, such shrine-like shelters had become standard for mainland settlements, and not so long ago he would have felt obliged to tell Givethanks Hagedorn to unlimber his hammer. The houses and sheds were nothing unusual.

To one side of the compound was a small burying ground.

Among its weathered markers were two slabs of stone that seemed newer than the rest. "Who?" asked Felix. "Pa? And...?"

"Your Pa's still alive," said Bella. "One of those was for Brother Michael. The other one was for Trudy."

"But they're alive," said Felix.

"Then Luanna," said Karyn.

"There's Pa," said Bella. He lay half under the colonnade, barely stirring at their approach.

"He's hardly ever conscious now," said Maddoc in a softer voice.

Felix's face tightened. So did his arms, until his son protested once more. Karyn tugged at his hand with hers, her face dark with concern and sympathy. He let her pull one arm free, wrapped it around her, and they embraced, the child between them, a huddle against misfortune.

Consideration Wiggin was embarrassed at the strength of the tide of envy that swept through him. God's Promise was beside him at last, regained after so many years, her presence alone enough to fill him with joy. But he knew he could lose her again, this time forever, unless he died before her. And if he did, he would have no second wife to wrap her arms around him and offer comfort. Yet he would not change his present moment.

Brother Isaac knelt beside the dying man, studied the tumor on his neck, fingered the small spots that now showed on his cheek and arm, brushed at his scalp, and frowned when the few remaining hairs came away at his touch. He shook his head.

"Hasn't got long, has he?" said Maddoc. He seemed to recognize the other's manner.

"Brother Michael said I was needed." He shook his head again. "But there's nothing I can do. Nothing at all."

The workshop door opened to reveal the rear of the other, smaller trundle. Hussey emerged; his leg was bandaged and he limped, but he seemed otherwise healthy.

"Did you find it?" asked Uncle Alva.

Consideration Wiggin nodded. He knew what he had to mean.

"The stones are full."

"But no engines," said Great-Grandpa from the trundle. "No weapons.

It said ecology and history were more important."

Uncle Alva snorted. "But those are what we need."

"Invent them for yourself. It won't stop you. But it won't help, either."

"Then what good is it?"

"Want a sample?"

"Yes," said Felix. "Show them what it gave us."

"Technology is knowledge organized for practical purposes," said one stone. "It is not just machines, but also procedures and organizations and even wisdom."

"China once made it illegal for any couple to have more than one child.

This country accepted Chinese immigrants as political refugees on the grounds that their human right to procreate was being infringed at home."

"What's China?" asked Karyn, but no one tried to answer her as the third stone chimed in: "As E. G. Nisbet noted, 'Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, commented that in a rightly based society all things work together for good. This is a doctrine of optimism, more difficult to believe and to act upon than easy despair or cynicism.'" "Resources are finite," said a fourth.

"For that you lost Luanna?" Karyn's tone was querulous and bitter.

"It's so obvious."

"Yet far too many people refused to believe it," said GreatGrandpa.

Consideration Wiggin sighed. He thought he understood Karyn's feelings. They were what he would have felt himself if the Haveners had caught him and God's Promise and the girls.

They would have grasped for a better future, and they would have failed.

"It seemed to think," he said. "That it was giving us important

knowledge. We'll have to study it. Then we can go back. It said we could."

"And in the meantime...?"

"Ask around the cemeteries. Find someone who remembers."

"You won't find anyone," said Maddoc. "Even when I was alive, hardly anyone knew how to build a car or a gun. There were machines for that, you know."

Uncle Alva looked at the trundles he had built. "Yes," said Great-Grandpa. "You're doing all right so far."

"But Luanna," said Felix, as if the cost of "doing all right" was far too high.

Pa never did wake up again, not even when Felix lifted him gently from the ground beneath the colonnade and carried him inside and laid him down in the bed he had shared for so many years with Ma. Two days later, as if he had been waiting for his son and the rest to return from the university, he died.

Hussey vanished immediately after Karyn found Pa's body cooling in his bed. He was not there when Felix wrapped his Pa in a sheet, carried him into the yard, and laid him on the ground. Nor was he there when Ox fetched the shovels.

Consideration Wiggin helped to dig the grave beside the stone that had been intended to mark Brother Michael's death, cutting through the darker surface soil into yellow clay and sand, releasing the scent of earth and the promise of future growth. Water pooled in the bottom of the hole, and when he helped to lower the body into place, it emitted a foul sigh that said corruption had already begun, the gas that would swell and burst the abdomen was already generating.

He stood aside while Felix went back into his father's house and emerged a moment later with a bottle of applejack and a picture frame containing a sheet of word-covered paper.

"What's that?" asked God's Promise. When Ruth passed nearby, searching for pebbles that could serve as gravestones for the beetles she was showing Leo how to bury, she patted the small head. Polly too wandered about the compound, watching by turns the other children and the funeral, but she was always careful not to come near Consideration Wiggin.

"The Memory of the Webbs," said Miriam. She and Gil were standing to one side. "The story of the first Webb to come from across the sea.

Like you." She looked at Brother Isaac, poised beside the grave, his rosary in his hand.

"It should go with him," said Felix. He seemed stunned.

First he had lost Luanna. Now he had lost his father, and though this loss was no surprise, it was still a blow. It was a wonder that he could walk, much less carry and fetch.

"No," said Karyn. "The bottle, yes, but that's your memory too. And

Leo's, and Too-Too's, and...." She laid one hand on her belly to remind him that the next generation was still on its way.

"May I see it?" When Consideration Wiggin took it from the other man's hand, he felt only slight resistance. Beneath the glass was yellowed paper and a faded handwriting. He could not read it, but Felix began to recite the words, and soon he understood what Karyn meant. "Samuel Webb, a native of Great Britain, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, was commander-owner of a slave ship...." It was a tale of disaster and fortune from a younger, more hopeful age. Yet there were similarities, he thought, echoes in their own time. This was a memory that should not be lost, even if it were not graven in stone.

When he was done reciting, Felix stepped into the grave and gently tucked the bottle into the crook of his Pa's elbow. Then he looked up at the others standing around the grave as if to say he would stay there, in the hole, just lay him down and throw the clods to cover him.

Please.

Ox was the one to kneel and hold out a sturdy arm. After a moment's hesitation, Felix accepted the hand and let himself be boosted from the grave.

The words that Brother Isaac then spoke were not ones that Consideration Wiggin was used to hearing, but he supposed they would do. He had turned his back on his own past. Or no. He glanced at God's Promise beside him, her eyes still dark with her own loss, and corrected himself. Not all of it. But a large part of it. The part that prayed over graves for dominion over the world. The part that made Polly avoid him.

He wondered if the child really remembered what she had seen that day.

Her father stricken down by Givethanks Hagedorn's hammer. Her mother dead in his arms, her neck broken by his hands. How could she remember? If she did, she could not possibly stand the sight of him, or choose to follow someone-Ruth or God's Promise--who must put her in his company. He sighed. People had a way of forgetting what they cannot stand, of losing details and retaining only a sense of dislike or hatred or aversion. Even children did it, didn't they? Perhaps she would forever after avoid him, and never remember why well enough to let him redeem himself in her eyes.

Felix was throwing the first shovelful of earth into the hole when Hussey hobbled into sight at the edge of the compound.

A step away from Consideration Wiggin, Bella identified the people with him: "Absalom and Calla Dinkins, Malcolm and the baby. The ones in back are Abner and Tamsin Curtis."

"I thought we should have some of the neighbors, too," said Hussey.

Calla handed the baby to her husband and embraced Felix, forcing him to let go of the shovel; Ox caught it as it fell.

"Your father," she said, patting his back. "And Hussey told us about Luanna. I'm so sorry. And after what you did for us, too."

Absalom was staring at the trundle and its cargo of stones.

Consideration Wiggin could see in his eyes that he knew where they had come from and what they carried.

Abner Curtis was hanging back, shamefaced, but his wife was watching the children. Malcolm, the Dinkins infant, Leo and TooToo and Marjy, they were familiar. They belonged here. She had seen them before.

Ruth and Polly were retreating from the strangers toward God's Promise, but Ruth's retreat was direct, unhesitating.

Polly seemed less sure of herself, as if she did not truly belong with anyone here.

Tamsin Curtis's stare was focused now, intent, even desperate, thought Consideration Wiggin. Her yearning was something palpable, and Polly could sense it. She was responding, hesitating in her retreat from the strangers, staring back.

"The kid's an orphan," said Great-Grandpa from beneath the colonnade.

"The family used to live not far from here," said Karyn.

The look she darted at Consideration Wiggin was a question that he could not answer except with a flush of shame. "The house is still there."

Tamsin hesitated as if the mere suggestion that she could change the conditions of her life frightened her, but then she leaned forward, her hands reaching, her fingers twitching.

Polly lowered her head, peeked from beneath the edge of her light brown hair. Then she dashed toward God's Promise.

#### EPILOGUE

For millennia, the New England coast had been a place of rock and sea and forest. For centuries it had been occupied by human beings, the rock quarried, the sea harvested, the forest cut and cleared and turned to field and meadow and house-lots.

Once fish had swarmed in the sea, deer and birds and other game on the land. Once the soil had been rich, crops bountiful, and people thick upon the face of the Earth.

That had all changed. The soil's fertility was exhausted, the fish gathered and eaten, the wildlife slain, the waters and the land poisoned, the people nearly vanished.

Yet nature is resilient. Given time, fertility returns.

Poisons decay. Life begins to increase, to reclaim its old dominance of sea and land and air, and if its variety is diminished now, given time even that will increase again.

Evolution has repopulated the world before, after volcanoes and comet impacts and other disasters have wiped out all but a few fortunate species.

The intelligence that was the university thought that it might last long enough to see the world restored. It had, after all, proved able to maintain itself and its surroundings and to build robots that could explore the world around it and bring it data. It could even defend itself.

Would humans also last? It was not sure, for they had nearly destroyed themselves when they injured the world so badly.

Now they were struggling to regain their former glories.

Or would they vanish at last? Their survival was by no means guaranteed, and if they did rebuild their civilization and their numbers, they might fall again, this time more completely.

Yet the university intelligence had hope. Its smallest robots hid under rocks and in clumps of brush and twig. Larger ones perched on limbs and roofs and masts or swam in the waters disguised as porpoises and whales. Through them it watched the Webbs rearrange their lives to fill in the empty spaces once occupied by Pa and Luanna. It watched Consideration Wiggin and God's Promise and Ruth settle into Pa's house, and the Curtises-with Polly in the end--return life to the Sawyers'.

It watched pain and loss be set aside, put behind, until once more the little ones danced and all of them laughed and it thought that perhaps, just perhaps, it was doing the right thing when it tried to help.

THE END