

UNTO THE LAST GENERATIONUNTO THE LAST GENERATION

by Tom Easton

"His sidekick was a tombstone . . ."

Tom Easton

Dedicated to:

Nephew Caleb

Niece and Goddaughter Miriam

_"We stand at a unique moment in human history. Though unaware, we now manage the Earth. We have the power to make or unmake a planet. We can see the future.

Before the battle of Sedan in 1870, the French general, Ducrot, surveyed the end

of what was called the Liberal Empire, a great, prosperous state. His despairing

comment as he rolled up the map on his nation could fit us all today: 'Nous sommes dans un pot de chambre, et nous y serons emmerdes.' Our environmental laws and regulations today, for the most part, are simply exercises in putting

up umbrellas as the first dollops fall into the chamber pot. Yet it is by no means too late to climb out of the pot. Perhaps it might even profit us to do so."

-- E. G. Nisbet, *Leaving Eden: To Protect and Manage the Earth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. xiv._

CHAPTER 1

The bearded man stood by the edge of the clearing, staring at a small house whose weathered boards still clung to scattered flecks of paint. A blotched leather cloak hung from his shoulders to his ankles. It was open in front, but

its folds were capable of hiding many things.

The man leaned on a stick and scratched in the hair that covered his cheek as if

it itched. Then he pushed back his broad-brimmed leather hat and scratched at his scalp. His hair was long and gray and stringy. A red, scaly rash was visible

on his wrists and cheekbones.

"Hey the house!"

The only answer was that a pair of starlings took flight from the edge of the garden patch beside the house. A sparrow halted its repetitive song. A blue jay

squawked in the trees beyond the clearing.

More conversationally, the man said, "It's going to rain like hell, you know. I'd like to be indoors when it comes."

The house was built low, with only two steps lifting its entrance above the ground. Now the door opened slowly to reveal a second man, clean-shaven, hollow-cheeked, and holding an axe. His thin hair was tied back in a short ponytail. He too had a rash, and he wore a suspicious scowl.

The householder gave the dark and roiling clouds above their heads a glance.

"They's a few empty houses 'round here."

"So I'd like some company." He began to walk across the clearing, gesturing with

his stick. His cloak swayed with the motion. "Somebody to talk to, you know?"

The householder grunted. He was no cleaner or better dressed than the man in his

yard, but he did not leave his doorway.

"Hey," said the stranger. He stabbed his stick into the ground and waved a hand

toward the house's chimney, from which trailed a telltale wisp of smoke.

"You've

got a fire. I've got meat. Snared a rabbit this morning. Hit a pigeon with a

rock." He stepped forward, hand outstretched, smiling behind his beard. "I'm Ron."

The householder was shifting his grip on the handle of his axe when a voice behind him said, "Don't let him in!"

"You've got a woman?" Suddenly a knife was in the stranger's hand, the bushes behind him were rattling as two other men came into view, and the householder was staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

The axe came up, but by then it was already too late for defense. A hand as hard

as fate seized and held it, frozen in mid-strike.

The householder screamed in frustration and fear. Then he screamed in pain, as

the stranger's knife reached out and tore his shirt and chest and heart.

* * *

One of the house's four rooms was full of firewood. That meant it would burn well when the rain finally stopped and the house's shelter was no longer needed.

Another was just as full of boxes and bags of books and old clothes and assorted

knick-knacks the couple or their predecessors had salvaged from the remnants of

the world that had been. More fuel for the fire. There was very little worth stealing.

There was no sign that the house had ever held a child.

The third room held a sink and a table and a rusty woodstove that gave off heat.

An open cupboard revealed a cloth bag that held a pitiful few withered potatoes.

Another bag, open to show dried apples, sprawled on the table, surrounded by the

bones of the rabbit and pigeon the stranger had mentioned. A bottle supported the candle that was the room's only source of light. The stranger himself sat in

one of the two chairs and listened to the noises from the last room, the bedroom: grunts, moans, whimpers, bedsprings, the bang of a headboard against a

wall.

"She ain't as young as he was." The man on the other side of the table was pinching the sides of his thin mustache between his fingers, trying to train them into wings. His dark hair was pulled back into a short braid. The youngest

of the three, he seemed barely out of adolescence. The plumpness of his cheeks,

however, was not that of youth, not babyfat. His companions were also fleshier

than the householder had been, a sign that people like them ate better than their more sedentary prey.

"He probably got her same way we did," said Ron.

"You want her again?"

"Maybe later."

"Before we leave."

"Before then, Hussey. This rain ain't goin' to quit right away."

The bedroom door slammed against the wall. The third member of their party appeared, his forehead and scalp beaded with sweat. His beard was cropped short,

like grizzled fur. "Like fuckin' a corpse," he muttered.

"Hey, she's warm," said Ron.

"Warmer than your hand, Kiwi. And about as boney."

Kiwi glared at Hussey. "Not for long, you fuckin' kid. Smartass."

No one said a word. The only sounds were the rain on the house's roof and sides and the sobs of the woman in the bedroom.

CHAPTER 2

"Is anybody else up yet?"

The plaintive voice seemed to come from beyond the bent and twisted apple tree

that dominated the knoll and framed beneath one arching limb the red, red setting sun. A breeze drifted it across the blackberries and cat-claw brambles

that sprawled down the slope beside the narrow path. From somewhere it coaxed chaotic chords of organ and violin and accordion.

If someone with a nose had been on hand, he might have noticed that the breeze

carried the scent of new growth and thin soil with just a touch of something sour, as if the world itself were spoiling.

"Saw squirrel."

That one rasped and growled and drew the ear toward a pair of masonry pillars that still supported a corroded wrought-iron gate, its leaves leaning this way,

that way, dripping ornate letters from their gothic peaks. A few letters were missing entirely. Those that remained on one of the gate's leaves spelled out:

"E_ernal _ife." Those that remained on the other said: "Bultin Bo_rd Cet_ry."

To

either side of the pillars stretched a low stone wall. A number of stones had fallen free of their mortar.

A narrow path passed between the decrepit gates. In its center, green and blue

flies swarmed around a small pile of dung.

The music shifted. Trumpets replaced the organ, flutes the violin. The accordion

vanished.

The rattle and bang of a very different rhythm sprang into the air.

"Shut up, Hammerhead!"

"Squirrel run. Wanta chase."

"Shaddap, you stupid mutt. Chase!"

"If I had a hammer, I'd hammer out freedom," someone sing-songed.

"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after _life_, you know?"

I

paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."

"If I had a knife, I'd slice that mutt's throat."

"If it had a throat."

"Asshole."

"It doesn't have one of those either."

"_Not_ quite."

The voices bouncing back and forth made the weedy zone defined by the battered

gates and wall seem crowded. Yet nothing disturbed the brush and brambles. No dog nosed after squirrels. No men or women paced the overgrown paths, glaring and gesturing at each other as they bantered. The scene was deserted except for

the disembodied voices and a crow spreading its wings atop an eroded, stained angel.

"What the hell happened to the songbirds?" someone asked. "Haven't seen one since I was a kid and in the flesh. Helluva long time ago, you know? Nothing but

crows."

"And ravens," another voice added. "Sparrows, jays, herring gulls, starlings, grackles. Trash birds, every one of 'em."

"Don't forget the pigeons."

"I wish I could."

"No hawks either. No eagles, no ducks, no geese."

"We got owls."

"Not bloody many."

"They eat pigeons, don't they?"

Someone giggled madly.

The sun was slipping down behind the knoll. Red filled the western sky and silhouetted black the apple tree. Shadows stretched from the meager, ragged woods beyond.

Beyond the warped and weathered gate, more shadows pointed straight at blocks of

stone. Some stood erect and proud. A few leaned like drunks who craved a lamppost. All showed signs of age in cracks and chips and softworn corners. Some

were so oriented that the dying light could emphasize rows of eroded lettering.

Some of the stones, the oldest, most weathered, most illegible, were simply that: stones, thin slabs and obelisks and Victories of granite and limestone and

marble. Green scales and furs adorned their shadowed north sides; where such growths faced the sun, they had turned long ago to withered, blackened ash. Many more, chunks like upright steamer trunks, reflected fire from their tops in

checkered patterns broken by bird droppings and debris. Their sides were nearly

free of moss and lichen. Here and there among the brambles were smaller stones

surrounded by piles of rubble in which the setting sun highlighted threads of metal, some as bright gold or silver as the day it had first been smelted, some

red or green with time and oxidation.

The vegetation was sparse. It should have rolled in riotous waves over the abandoned ground, but the soil had been leached and eroded by decades of acid rain, baked by solar ultraviolet, poisoned by pollutants and pesticides. It was

perhaps a wonder that it supported any life at all.

"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after life, you know?"

I

paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."

At the base of one of the piles was a hole, a burrow. Something moved within it.

There was a soft hissing sound, like air escaping from a tire or like a cat that

had just spotted some strange beast.

A growl shaped itself into: "Wanta chase."

"How about a bone?"

"Yes!"

"Oh, do be quiet, dear." This voice sounded maturely feminine. "You'll just get

the poor thing all worked up."

"So what else is there to do around here?"

A large cockroach emerged from under a rock and paused watchfully, its antennae

testing the air. A ground squirrel darted from the burrow, seized the roach, and

bit off its head. Then it sat up on its haunches, surveyed the cemetery, and ate

the rest. It did not seem disturbed by the chatter that surrounded it.

"Wanta chase!"
"Be nice to meet a little meat."
"My grandson."
"Great-grandson."
"Whatever. It's been long enough. He's due again."
"Lucky bastard."
"Jealous, huh? Just 'cause your descendants didn't make it."
"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected...."
"Shaddap, you asshole!"
"You sound like you think you had something to do with it."
"Genes will tell. He's a good boy."
Snorting noises echoed as the light diminished.
"Just needs a chance, you know? Something to bring out his qualities."
"Hah."
"But he won't be by tomorrow."
"Why not?"
"Looks like rain."
Someone made a sniffing noise. "Smells like it. High humidity. Barometer dropping. Cold and wet and wind."
Someone else laughed. "Won't bother us."
"Dry bones. Dem dry bones," sang the voice that had wished to hammer out freedom.
"Dry stones."
"Unless we rust."
The music stopped. "You could pay some attention to me," said what sounded like
a younger woman.
"You're old business," said the older woman. "He forgot you even before he married me."
"What you said," said the same masculine voice that had offered the poor dog
a
bone. "'Oh, do be quiet, dear. You'll just get the poor thing all worked
up.'"
"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after life, you know?
I
paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."
"Shaddap!"
"Oh!"
The last trace of sunlight vanished. The sky turned black, and a few bright stars were visible. But the voices continued as they had for decades, as they would for decades more, as long as the circuitry embedded in the stones held out, as long as the sun could still reach through the filth atop them to the cells that powered them. They chattered and nattered, teased and tormented, goaded and nagged and complained.
Occasionally someone screamed into the night.

CHAPTER 3

The house creaked under the pressure of the wind. A gritty noise drew Felix Webb's eye to a picture frame, swaying, scratching against the wall. Behind a pane of dirty glass, it held the Memory of the Webbs. At least, that was what Pa
said. It had been his Pa's before him, and his Pa's, and his and his and his back to the dawn of time.
The scratching noise awakened his rash. Something seemed to crawl across the puffy, reddened flesh of his elbows and wrists and knees. It tingled. He crossed
his arms, sliding his hands beneath the coarse wool of his sweater to scratch his wrists and elbows in secret.
The Memory was a talisman, of course. Its implicit message was that times had been bad before, that they had gotten better, that perhaps they could get better

again. He wished he could believe it. But life could hardly be more bleak, hope more distant, paradise more impossible to attain. Felix wished he could believe otherwise, but how could the Webbs prosper when the species itself was in decline? He had no brothers or sisters. Two had been born dead. Ma's other pregnancies had ended early. Their few neighbors had no children at all, as if something had turned off the human species' ability to reproduce itself. And he was almost old enough to want a wife. Several wooden buckets were positioned on the floor to catch the water dripping through the roof. One hung from a hook set in the ceiling. The largest sat between the ancient refrigerator and a metal sink, where the drip was fastest, heaviest, tock-tocking like a demented clock. Ma Webb coughed and spat into that largest bucket. Then, using a filthy thumbnail, she pried a round, black magnet from the face of the fridge and moved it left and up and down until the dangling wishbone hid the latest rust spot to break through the equally ancient paint. She realigned the feather her wrist had brushed. She shifted a scrap of yellowed paper that had long ago been drawn upon with a broken brick. She did not touch the once-crumpled tinfoil, the square of cloth that had once belonged to a silky garment, the tiny bundles of once-fragrant leaves and blossoms, now dried and faded. Each item had its significance, as did the soft blue shawl atop the fridge. Pa never touched the relics, but he could follow her first example. He too coughed, hawked, spat into the bucket. Ma peered and said, "Least yours ain't bloody yet."

"How the hell can you tell?"

"It ain't that dark in here."

"Dark enough." He jerked his head toward the nearest window. Even though it was early afternoon, the light that entered the house was dim, the gray of thick clouds and long rain. A fat-bodied fly crawled across the glass. He was entirely bald, with just one remaining tuft, gray and greasy, dangling down the back of his neck. Grizzled fur, kept short by hacking with a knife, covered his cheeks and chin and upper lip. Around its edges, his skin was pink and scaly.

Ma was nearly bald, for though hair sprouted all over her head, it was sparse and thin, and her red-splotched scalp showed through. Both were thin, their bodies worn, their faces etched by a lifetime of deprivation so unremitting that it was accepted routine, normal, almost beyond despair. A sudden draft cut through the pervasive reek of mildew. Smoke belched from the stone fireplace, and Ma coughed again. Something rolled across the roof. Something else flapped and pounded. Rain thundered on the battered sheet metal above their heads. The water drip became a stream. Uncle Alva, as thin and worn as Ma and Pa, his beard longer and darker, touched the bucket with a toe to center the stream. "There's better houses out there."

"Worse, too," said Pa. "Empty cellar holes."
"Haunted, most of 'em," said Ma.
"Tighter roofs."
"Not many," said Ma. "I've seen 'em, and those old shingles just go to mush."
"Not all of 'em. Some have metal roofs."
"So do we," said Pa. "And I built this place. Ain't leaving it."
"I built the ell, and it ain't leakin'. It's got a floor too."
No one looked down at the layers of damp carpets that were all that covered the bare rock beneath. Pa had chosen his house site because that rock was there, a long stretch of ancient pavement that arched from side to side. Only when the storms were long and furious did water cover the land and sneak in beneath the walls. Most of the time, all that got in came in through the roof. Felix tried to ignore the adults. He huddled on the end of the sway-backed sofa beside the potato barrels and stared at the door. To one side hung an ancient clock that was rarely wound and whose tale of hours no one missed. The family counted time by dawns and sunsets. To the other, his broad-brimmed hat and long cloak hung with all the others. If the storm would only run its course, even if the usual overcast went with it and let the sun shine bright and youveeful, he could get out, hat and all, and find.... He shook his head and scratched at the rash on his arm. He did not know what he wanted to find. He did know it wasn't in this shack.
"Don't scratch, boy," said Ma. "It don't help any." Then, as if she had caught the itch from him like a yawn, she too dug at her arm. His cousin Ox sat beside him. Ox was a year younger but larger and heavier and less prone to fidgets. Instead of looking at door and hats and windows, he watched Uncle Alva and Ma and Pa. From time to time he glanced toward the doorway to the ell Alva had constructed for the two of them to live in. It was just as tight as the man had claimed. The evidence of its floor was the foot that separated the doorway's sill from the carpeted floor of the main house. Ox was stronger too. That was why everyone called him Ox. He also did what he was told. His rash was just as bad as Felix's, but he didn't scratch, except when something moved in the long hair he pulled back and tied behind his neck. Felix kept his own hair chopped short. Ma had dug a stub of crayon from a drawer. Now, tongue protruding through the gaps in her yellow teeth, she was carefully drawing a purple horizon line on the side of the fridge. A purple sun bulged above the line. Rays looked like spiky hair. She was standing back, cocking her head first right, then left, considering. She was leaning forward once more, adding a potato-shaped nose and round eyes. "Sunspots," she said.
"No fingers," said Pa. "No fuckin' Kilroy."
She added eyebrow lines that gave the solar face a glower. She shrugged. "Fuckin's right," she said. "Rain or shine, we're screwed. Storms try to wash us

out to sea. Sun fries the crops."

"Not the apple trees."

Ma noticed where Pa was looking, toward the shelf on which he kept the jugs of

applejack he distilled each winter. "You stay out of that shit," she said.

Pa grunted and scratched his cheek. A moment later he got off his stool and stepped behind the partition that hid his and Ma's bed. Ma made a face and muttered, "Think he listens!"

Watching his father scratch had reawakened Felix's own itches, but he managed to

refrain from repeating his father's gesture. He didn't want Ma picking on him again, or too. Not any more than was absolutely necessary.

It was hard, though. He tried to imagine his own face. Brown eyes, black hair,

narrow nose, thin lips, prominent cheekbones, a bit of Ma, a bit of Pa. He had

just enough beard to use the word, a little more than Ox, not near as much as Pa. Not as much rash there, either, and an imagined finger was approaching, scratching. He tried to tell himself the itch was less.

He sighed. He leaned one shoulder against the barrel beside his end of the sofa.

It gave, betraying how nearly empty it was. His stomach growled, and he thought

of the other two barrels beyond it. Neither one was any fuller.

The faded blue of the barrels' substance whispered that they could not last forever. They were remnants of another age, irreplaceable until someone learned

how to duplicate them in wood. Their scanty contents, on the other hand, could

be renewed, even though it would be months before the next harvest. He grimaced

and wished potatoes were not the hardiest crop they had.

Besides the apples. They had dried enough of them last fall. But the winter rains had been constant, the air heavy with moisture, and the mold had eaten them.

Uncle Alva leaned toward the bucket near the fridge. "Full," he muttered as he

picked it up by its bail, carried it to the sink beside the fridge, and emptied

it. The water gurgled down the drain and through the pipe to empty on the mossy

edge of pavement outside the wall. From there it ran into the same ditch where

they dumped the ashes from the fireplace as well as other garbage.

"Will you put that bucket back? The carpet was wet enough before, and...."

"Can't just let 'em overflow." He obeyed, but then he was fetching and dumping

the others.

Felix wished it were later in the year, just enough that the apple trees at least had green apples. But the blossoms had fallen far too recently. The future

crop was no more than nubbins, inedibly hard.

Imaginary scratching wasn't working. He dug at his chin, and again at his arm,

inspected his fingernails, and did it again.

Pa reemerged from the bedroom, licking his lips. Ma glared at Felix and said, "Don't do that. You'll make it worse."

"It is worse," said Felix.

"I know." Her voice was as sad as mothers' voices had always been when their children ailed and they were helpless.

And it was worse. The rash had spread on Felix's body since the previous fall, growing thicker on his elbows and knees and the backs of his fingers and hands. Each new patch began bright red. It swelled and blistered and cracked and settled down to thick scale and itch. Sometimes pockets of pus grew beneath it, swelling and hurting and bursting with relief and a little blood. And all she could do was say, "Don't scratch." Ox had it too. So did she and Pa and Uncle Alva. But not as badly. "Poison in the soil," said Uncle Alva. "In the food we eat. The water we drink. Bastards put it there before they died. When they made the storms and the youvee." "Shh," said Ma, and she patted the fridge as if that could somehow placate the gods Uncle Alva had to have offended. But the effort was futile. The wind howled. Wood creaked somewhere outside the house. Something crashed. "Shit," said Pa. "There goes the shed roof again." "Can't put it back now," said Uncle Alva. "Too much wind." When neither man moved or said another word, Felix volunteered. "I'll get the animals." "I'll help." Ox was on his feet already and offering Felix a hand to pull him from the sofa's grip. The broad-brimmed hats were made of greased leather. So were the long cloaks, and if the wind weren't blowing, they would keep the rain from cloth and skin. With the wind, however, they were as much a burden as a blessing. Felix needed one hand to keep the hat in his possession, while the cloak, even as it warded off the lashing blows of the rose tree beside the door, became a sail that threatened with every gust to carry him to some other land and as it flapped admitted torrents. For a wild, rose-scented moment, his blood sang. Some other land, he thought. Some other life. One with hope and promise, perhaps even destiny. But then he let himself see the storm-lashed farmstead before him, and the bloodsong vanished as if it had never been. The pavement on which the house sat extended to the shed fifty feet away. In dryer weather, it was gray. When wet, it shone black, flecked with bits of stone. Near its edges it crumbled into a black cheese that, if one used it to ring a fire or build a fireplace, burned with a black and greasy smoke. Cracks were filled with moss and tufted with grass. Holes revealed a bed of gravel beneath. Here and there, where ditches once had flanked the road, he could make out depressions in the ground. There was no mud except for whatever might have fallen from feet or hooves or wheels. Even that, and whatever settled from the occasional flood, washed away in the rain. To the left of the strip of pavement lay the family's small burying ground. The stones were no more than rounded boulders, each one marked by a painfully chiseled name. Two marked Ma's stillbirths, who would have been Felix's brothers if they had lived. Three more, the smallest, marked miscarriages. "Poison in the soil," Uncle Alva had said on each occasion that Felix remembered, just as he did for rashes and poor crops and hens that wouldn't

lay.

"Bastards put it there before they died."

"Infections," Pa had said once. "Love bugs. Everybody had 'em before the end."

Sometimes he just said, "Youvee," as if the word were a curse.

On the other side of the pavement was the family's privy, and just beyond that

the garden plot, puddled and runneled by rain. Young potato plants bent before

the storm. Some had washed out of the soil, but they could be replanted. Some were broken, but Felix knew they would regrow. Potatoes did that when nothing else would.

More worrisome was the yellow that stained their green rows, and that end of the

patch where they had once plowed up scraps of brown-red lacey rust and lumps of

some ancient, blue-green powder, solidified by time and wet.

Ox and Felix had wanted to play with the pretty stuff, to pound it into mush with sticks and stones, to paint their skins, even to put it in their mouths. But the adults had not let them.

"Poison in the soil," had said Uncle Alva, and he and Pa had dug out the lumps

and carried them as far from home as they could. Then they had refilled the holes with cleaner dirt. But still nothing would grow in that spot. Similar bare

spots, large and small, pocked the land everywhere.

Thunder crashed and rumbled. Lightning lit the clouds. The wind roared and flapped their leather cloaks. The rain soaked sweaters and shirts and pants and

skin. Panicked bleats and squawks emanated from the roofless shed. The youths leaned against the wooden wall, panting, grinning at each other as if to say that even this was better than sitting on the couch and watching Pa wish for and

sneak his jug, Ma adjust her fetishes, Uncle Alva....

Something slammed against the other side of the wall. The wet boards shook and

trembled under Felix's hands. He looked up at the corner posts that jutted a foot above the shed's walls, the slanting lines of rain, the clouds above.

Then

he laughed out loud. The roof was indeed missing, and he had seen it nowhere on

his way from house to shed.

Ox seemed perplexed by Felix's outburst. He shook his head, made a face, and opened the shed door. Felix laughed again when the billy pushed through the widening crack. He had jumped the bars of the goat pen and butted the wall to urge them to hurry. He was wet, he didn't like it, and he knew what was supposed

to happen next.

Now he bleated as if to order them to let his two ladies free immediately.

Felix

and Ox obeyed, lightning illuminated three patchwork hides, and the animals promptly bolted for the house, where Uncle Alva waited to let them in. There were no kids this year; the goats were as helplessly infertile as the people. Felix wondered sometimes if he would someday wear a cloak made of strips of bark. Certainly, if the goats died out, there would be no more goatskins.

Water was everywhere, but nothing seemed to have been damaged by the storm. The

door to the outside pen was closed, and everything was where it should be.

The two scrawny pigs seemed not perturbed at all. If anything, they were enjoying the pouring rain, tipping their snouts toward the darkened sky and

rocking their heads as if to let the storm wash their faces clean. The chickens were another matter. The hens were squeezed together on the trundle, where they squawked and muttered disconsolately. Two roosters, their feathers matted and soaked, perched on the handles of the plow. When one of them sneezed, Felix licked his lips. Ma surely wouldn't wait for the bedraggled thing to get any sicker. He would be stew before another day was gone. Uncle Alva had built the trundle. It was about the size of the cart on the other side of the shed, but it had no shaft or singletree by which goats or men could draw it. Instead, its bed was covered by a canopy of solar cells. Beneath the bed were several heavy batteries and an electric motor. Both the trundle and the cart had fat air-filled tires made of some shiny, black plastic. Felix had heard Uncle Alva swearing when the youvee rotted the plastic and he had to dig another tire from the wreckage of some rust or youvee-eaten car. A dozen spares were stacked in one corner of the shed. The storm slapped skeins of harness and coils of rope against the wall. Ox jerked his head at the sound and made a face. If the Webbs had had a horse or donkey or cow, the harness would have served to hitch the beast to the cart or plow. But they had only goats, which could pull only light loads. Ox was the family's strong and uncomplaining beast of burden. Sometimes Felix hauled as well. "Where's the chick?" Felix had to shout to make himself heard. Ox didn't even try. He simply pointed at the lump of yellow the billy goat must have trampled into the shed's dung-covered floor. Ma wouldn't like that, Felix thought. The dozen chickens hardly produced enough eggs to be worth the trouble of tending them, and far too few of the eggs the Webbs didn't eat ever hatched. If both roosters caught cold and died, none ever would again. The chick, which had been a little cockerel, had meant one more thin thread for hope to cling to. Now that thread was gone. They couldn't afford to make stew out of the sick rooster. They would have to worry over it. They would have to nurse it just as desperately as if it were a baby. Or Ma would. The animals were her thing. Just as the apples were Pa's and things like trundles were Uncle Alva's. They all worked the garden. He glared at the pigs. The goats at least hauled some loads and supplied wool. "Make shoats," he cried. "Or we'll eat you both." They ignored him, and then Ox poked his arm and indicated the chickens. The birds did not protest when the youths gathered them up and bundled them beneath their cloaks. Like the goats, they were used to this treatment. Storms that exposed their quarters to the sky were by no means rare.

* * *

Ma had just wrapped the sneezing rooster in a towel. She held him in her lap and stared him in the eye, her nose against his beak. "You hear," she said. "You ain't supposed to get sick and die. You've got a mission in this life, you hear?"

Shake that cold out of your head and get back to treading those hens."
"Try a drop of applejack," suggested Pa.
Ma glared at him. "I'm going to put him beside the fire. The heat will do him good."
Pa cackled and coughed and spat. "Motivate him, anyway. Give him a taste of what you'll do if he don't get better."
Ma snorted but said nothing more as she fitted the rooster, towel and all, into a net bag and hung the bag from the pot-hook beside the fireplace. The bird did not struggle but was still, only its head moving, cocking an eye at Ma, at the fire, at the picture frame that clung to the wall above the mantle. Ma glanced at the frame too, and she grimaced. The Memory of the Webbs, sacred to the family, the only link to a happier past that yet remained, was no more than a stained and yellowed sheet of paper covered with the tight curlicues of ancient handwriting.
The other chickens had found perches on shelves and furniture. The nannies were sharing Felix's cot behind the sofa, which itself had been preempted by the billy. He kept an eye on them even though he knew that if they decided to munch on his blanket or the goat-hair sweater he had hung on a barrel lip to dry or the thin sack of dried grass that was his mattress, it would already be too late for him to stop them.
Ma was now unfolding the blue shawl that had been on top of the fridge and draping it around her shoulders.
Uncle Alva tossed a stick on the fire. "Hot it up a bit," he said.
"That won't help," said Ma. "It's hot enough already."
"Then what are you doin' with that shawl?" asked Pa.
She glared at him. "You know."
Then she turned to face the fridge, and her face seemed to grow smoother, younger. She arched her head backward until she was staring at the ceiling and whatever supernal powers might dwell beyond it. She touched wishbone, feather, brick-dust drawing, foil, fabric, herbs, her own poisonous purple sun. She set one hand upon the appliance's handle.
A goat burped. The chickens--dry now, and sleepy--made contented noises. The humans were quiet.
Until Ma cried in a voice more suitable for some outdoor amphitheater: "We are our ancestors' chil...." She broke off as something bubbled in her throat. She made a face, hawked, and spat, this time into the sink.
"...children," she continued. "We suffer for their sins! Forgive us! Forgive even them!"
"Even them," responded Pa and Felix together.
"Let us live! End the dying of our world!"
"Let us live."
"Make the storm stop!" She lifted the shawl above her head, tenting it like a canopy with her fingers. She dropped her hands, and air filled the cloth, billowing it like a cloud or like a dome of azure sky before it drifted down upon her head. "Let the sun shine and the sky turn blue!"
"Blue sky," said Uncle Alva, and a note of ineffable yearning seemed to fill

his
voice.

"Good crops! Good health! Fertility!"

"Clean up the poisons," said Ox.

Ma nodded as if to say that his addition to the litany was worth preserving. Then she concluded, as she almost always did, "And a wife for Felix."

Felix did not bow his head like the others as the last step in the ritual his mother had invented approached. Instead he grumbled to himself: A wife? He did

not remember ever meeting even one girl near his own age. If he ever did, he would hardly know what to do. No, he admitted. "Do" was fine. He had watched the

goats, after all. And the pigs. But "say"? That was something else again.

His mother's hand was tightening on the fridge's handle. There was a click, and

the door swung open.

As always, the light that would prove the gods had heard Ma's prayers failed to

come on.

Felix glanced at Uncle Alva. As always at this moment, he wore the slightest of

smirks.

Ma's face tightened as she knelt and reached for the icons of prosperity, relics

of another age, that she kept on the fridge's top shelf.

There was a yellowed plastic container with a faded pink lid. There was an empty

can with a colorful label. A foil packet marked with a stylized, helmeted head

recalled a time when, Ma had told him once, fertility was something to control.

She had never told how the packet or its contents worked.

A tattered piece of paper showed what Ma said had been called a supermarket: a

room, a building, filled with shelves, and the shelves piled high with cans and

jars and packages of a thousand times a thousand things to eat and drink.

She touched the paper with a reverent finger. "My Ma gave that to me," she murmured.

The bottom shelf held several antique glass jars containing those seeds left over after planting this year's garden: cabbage, turnip, squash, bean, none of

which did as well as the potatoes. Sometimes they hardly harvested enough seed

for the next year. Or a storm washed out the garden and its seedlings. It was therefore essential that they always save some for another try. The fridge kept

it safe from mice and other pests.

There was also a pot of corn kernels, but they did not plant those anymore.

The

youvee killed corn before it was as high as Felix's knees.

* * *

The clouds were thick all day, and the inside of the house remained dark and cavelike. When night came, the dark acquired an almost palpable density, for the

only light came from the fireplace. The Webbs had dishlike oil or tallow lamps,

but they used them only in emergencies. Oil was scarce, its only source animal

fat, its supply renewed only when they could afford to slaughter a pig.

For the Webbs, as it had been for their most distant ancestors, the night was lighted only by moon, stars, lightning, and sometimes aurora. Supper was meager. There was no meat, no eggs, no milk or cheese. Each one had a single shriveled potato, boiled in its skin, and a piece of turnip. Last year's small harvest of cabbage had vanished months ago. And no one had ventured into the storm to find those shreds of wild greenery that sometimes adorned their plates.

"Felix?"

Ox was looking eager, expectant, hopeful. "You want to sleep in the ell with us tonight? It's drier."

"An old-fashioned sleep-over," said Uncle Alva. "And you won't have to share your bed with goats."

He looked at Pa, who said only, "Up to you."

The last time they had asked, Pa had shaken his head.

He looked at his cousin, the hope so bright in his eyes that it hurt. He thought

he knew why.

He looked at his uncle, and his spine crawled.

They were not really his uncle and cousin, even though he had been taught to call them so. They had appeared one day when he was six or seven, walking up the

trail of overgrown pavement that extended beyond the shed. "Uncle" Alva had made

himself useful. "Cousin" Ox--though he had been called something else then, something long forgotten--had seemed a welcome playmate for Felix.

Then Uncle Alva had built the ell.

And the noises that occasionally came from that place were as rhythmic as those

his parents made.

Felix knew what those signified.

"Uh-uh," he said, and he looked away when Ox's face fell. There would be no relief for the other boy. Uncle Alva would not be inhibited by the presence of

another person. Nor would his attentions be deflected.

Felix felt ashamed of himself even as he seized upon the goats for an excuse:

"I've got to keep them from eating my stuff."

CHAPTER 4

"Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!" screamed Delivered of the Lord into

the storm as his kilt thrashed around his knees. He was echoed by the screechings of the gulls that scudded overhead, riding the gusts, supremely confident of their ability to survive whatever Satan, God, or nature threw their

way.

Trees struggled to either side along the shore, their limbs flailing at air and

ground and sea. Wood creaked in protest and snapped in final submission.

Wind-driven waves boomed against the pier. Spray needled across the Haven congregation.

No one flinched, just as the high cross at the end of the pier refused to bow to

the demonic whims of a world gone berserk.

Wind roared, and dark clouds churned overhead as if something in them fought to

reach through the sky and descend on the congregation. Delivered of the Lord arched his back, thrust his bush of curling beard and shaven scalp into the

driving spray and rain, and spread his arms in a warding gesture. Like the men of his audience, he had a round hat of fishskin stretched across a wicker frame; at worship, it hung behind him, held in place by a thong around his neck. Unlike the others, his had a golden rim. Now he seemed to wear a halo, though the wind made it bounce and thrash as if it were trying to escape. The preacher opened his mouth and screamed again: "He harrows the unbelievers! He washes poisons from the soil! He prepareth a world for us!" This was their church. A vertical wall. Roof enough to keep the sun and its deadly youvee from bared heads. A tier of rough benches, bleachers, seats enough to hold fifty or a hundred men, faced west against pier and cross and the wide bay that separated the island from the mainland. "He blesses us with children!" He waved a small black book, wrapped in fishskin against the rain, high in the air and slapped it with his other hand. "He commands us! Go forth and multiply and replenish the earth! Fill the earth with His worshippers!" "Amen!" cried his audience in a single wind-torn voice. Consideration Wiggin surveyed as much of the bleachers as he could see without moving more than his eyes. Room for fifty or a hundred, yes, but holding no more than thirty. Every one of them still and erect and attentive to the discipline of God. All were men. The women and children were hidden away in the houses further back from the shore. They were not to be risked when God baptized the world with the waters of His storm. Another wave crashed against the pier. More spray fountained into the air and was snatched by the wind. Lightning and Saint Elmo's fire made the golden balls on the cross's three points gleam like flames. Beside him, Gatherer of Souls Davies murmured just barely loud enough to hear, "Kids." His thin blonde hair was smeared by wet across his forehead and gaunt cheeks. His eyes were dark hollows beneath hedge-like, dripping eyebrows. Consideration Wiggin said nothing in reply. He was as aware as his friend of the contradictions between the preacher's words and gestures and the world around them. The storm was both God-sent and demonic, to be both welcomed and warded off. Children were a sign of God's love for Haveners and mankind, but they were few, very few. But the storm was a test, and it scourged the unbelievers as well as the faithful. If few children were born to Haven, then the Haveners must seek them elsewhere, rescue them, adopt them, raise them up in Haven's way. Then God's other blessings could reach more widely, and all mankind could be brought once more beneath the wing of the Dove. If the numbers of the Haveners were declining, that was only a sign that the

Haveners were not doing the work of God with the vigor of true believers. It was not, as Gatherer of Souls sometimes said when they were far from Haven and listeners who might repeat his words, a sign that the devil was winning or that God had withdrawn his favor or even that God played no part in the game of physical survival.

"We must struggle harder," screeched Delivered of the Lord against the storm. "Be zealous in our faith! Serve the Lord! Go among the heathen, bring their children home to God and Haven! Rear them in righteousness until they can go forth to reclaim the world! Until we can make all of Earth the One God's domain!"

"Amen!"

The exhortation was too familiar to stir the blood any more, not when God Himself--or perhaps the devil--was shaking sky and sea and land with wrath to make the preacher puny and only the gulls could screech with joy.

Consideration

Wiggin stared into the murk of the storm. There, anchored in the bay, its mast whipping against the clouds, was the small boat he and Gatherer were blessed to

use. When the storm quieted, they would join the other Haveners in fishing, netting whatever the waves had chased into the bay. Later they would go to the

mainland. Perhaps they would find....

Once, the oldest Haveners said, the bleachers had been full to overflowing and

the fish had been more plentiful. But children were few. The community maintained itself in other ways. Consideration himself had come....

His belly rumbled loud enough, he feared, for Delivered of the Lord to hear. Soon, he thought. The women would have fish and potatoes waiting when the service was over. Mostly potatoes, with maybe a bit of sea lettuce for flavoring. He wished the servings could be larger.

"Sing!" cried Delivered of the Lord. "'Mine eyes have seen the glory...!'"

While the din of voices rose around him and warred against the storm, Consideration Wiggin let his thoughts run on. Haven had more children than any

community on the mainland, but it still did not have many. The women were not fertile, not even when they were blessed by Delivered of the Lord himself.

CHAPTER 5

The man's body still lay beside the steps where he had fallen, attended by flies

and beetles and ants. The hair was plastered flat against wax-white bloodless skin. The blood that had covered body and clothing and ground had been washed away by the rain. The only stains that still showed were where blood had splashed the house's weathered wood.

Yet even those would not remain much longer.

"Hey, Kiwi. She satisfied yet?"

Kiwi gave Hussey a sour look as he hitched his pants. "She ain't complainin'. You want another go at her?"

"Hell, no. Not now."

Kiwi laughed and glanced over his shoulder. There was complete and utter silence

from the bedroom.

"Idiots," said Ron. He was squatting in front of the woodstove, stuffing it with

small sticks of wood. Mildewed books and old clothing were piled nearby. "You jerkits ready to go yet?"

"Anytime, boss."

"Yassuh." Hussey took off his hat and stared at it thoughtfully for a moment.

The leather was stiff and new and unblotched, promising much better shelter against rain and youvee than his old one had managed to provide in years. "Guy made a pretty good hat, kid," Ron had said. Kiwi had snatched the old despite his automatic grab and protest. It was stained and limp, sun-bleached, sun-cracked, but it was molded comfortably to his head. The new one was not. It pressed here, scratched there, and it would be weeks or months before it felt right. But his friends had let him have it. They had given it to him even though their own hats were nearly as worn as his own. "Yassuh," he repeated. He hefted the sack of potatoes and dried apples in his hand. There hadn't been much else in the house worth looting. Except.... He looked around the kitchen. It was warm and dry, and there were seasons and days when any wanderer would like to have such a haven in his pocket. When any bandit must remember times past, childhood, a place like this all his own if he had ever been so lucky. "Like to stay put, would you?" asked Ron. "People do." "Until we come along." Kiwi showed his teeth. "You want to be a pussy, boy, just bend over." Hussey glared at the other man. There was far too much truth in what he said. Ron stood up. He surveyed the room and swore and grabbed his knife from the table. Then he eyed the stove. Its load of kindling was already roaring. "Get outa here," he said. A moment later the stove was on its side and blazing wood was scattered across the kitchen floor.

* * *

"No more bodies," said Hussey. He had noticed the row of three small stones to one side of the clearing. "Nothing to bury." "No evidence." Ron was smiling dreamily and scratching in his beard. His other hand once more held his walking stick. "Who gives a shit," said Kiwi. "It's not like there was any cops around." Police and law and order had vanished with all the rest of civilization. Now they were no more than myth and legend. "I like a good fire," Ron said. "Even if...?" Hussey was staring at the pillar of smoke rising into the yellow sky above them. "So they know we're here," said Kiwi. The flames reflected off his bare scalp and even in daylight gave him a demonic look. "It's not like they can do anything about it." The roof fell in. Flames shot high into the air. A moment later, the walls collapsed as well. Burning lumber covered the householder's forlorn body. They had never learned his name, nor the woman's. Names did not matter to them. "Time to go," said Ron. "Just in case the neighbors get nosy." Hussey picked up the small sack of food they had looted. "What neighbors?" "Didn't see any, did we?" said their chief. "But there gotta be some. Always is. Somewhere."

The path from the house led them to an overgrown road with a narrow trail down its center. That in turn led them to a wider, clearer strip of pavement from which they could see a dip in the land, a glint of water, a stream or small river, and a trio of chimney smokes. They were not all that far off. Kiwi pointed. "We goin' that way?" Ron shook his head. "Too close together. Not enough of us." They turned the other way on the road. Soon the pillar of smoke was out of sight behind them. Almost as soon, they were beginning to look for the marks cartwheels and feet might leave on the road, printed on thin sheets of mud, crushed into grass or moss, the spoor of their favored prey. If they found a larger settlement, they would pass it by, pretending to be the most innocent of travelers.

CHAPTER 6

Perhaps Ma's prayer had done some good. Near midnight there was a flourish of thunder and lightning, none close by, and the rain tailed off and stopped. The storm had passed. By morning the sky was clear, and only a few drops of water were plunking from the ceiling into the buckets. The sky was not blue, but no one had really hoped for that, no matter what the color of the shawl Ma flourished as an emblem of all that had vanished. Felix didn't think he had ever seen a blue sky. Yellow was normal. Yellow, said Uncle Alva, with dust blown from deserts their ancestors had made. Yellow with poisons. Yellow with so much filth that a thousand years of rain would not wash it clean. "Open the windows," said Ma. She was standing over a bucket, eying the ceiling, shrugging. She picked it up, spat in it, and dumped it down the sink. "Get some air in here. Dry the place out a little." "'N' useless," said Pa, even as he hammered with his fist against a window frame swollen with damp. "Don't swear. It's a good day today!" "Won't last." "Doesn't matter. You want this place to fall down around our ears?" "It's doin' that anyway." "You built it. Felix!" Ma was swatting at a nanny that had climbed up on the sofa to lean into the potato barrel. "Get those goats out of here." She swung toward the fireplace and its near-dead bed of ashes. She plucked the rooster in his bag from the pot-hook and held him high before her face. He gaped his beak and blinked at her, but he did not sneeze. "And the chickens," she added. "This guy's okay now, but make sure he gets a little sun. Not too much, mind!" "C'mon." He clucked to the goats, grabbed his hat, and opened the door. They followed eagerly, knowing that the storm was over. When he had them near the shed, Felix grabbed the billy by his horns and steered him inside and through the gate to the pen. The nannies followed obediently. Once he had slid the gate's bars back into their places, he scratched his tingling, crawling rash vigorously. For the moment, the only thought in his head was that Ma wasn't there to see and say, "Don't." He did not waste energy wishing that he had no rash or that it had not got worse. It was normal, a fact of life to be accepted.

On the way back, he stopped at the privy. Leaning over the reeking hole to watch

his stream, he made a face. The mess that filled the pit was only partly rainwater. They would have to dig it out soon, spread their own manure between

the garden's rows, and spade it under before the next storm washed it all away.

He did not look forward to the task. The flies that now covered the walls and door of the privy would swarm around him then, and....

"Felix! The chickens!"

He turned them loose in the burying ground to dine on weeds and bugs. When he got back to the house, Uncle Alva and Ox were just emerging from the ell, blinking against the light. Uncle Alva had installed windows when he built his

part of the house, but he almost always kept them covered with blankets.

Did Ox seem to have a wary look to him, as if...? Or was Felix only imagining it? His cousin never said a word, even though it was plain what happened in the

ell. Would it make any difference if Felix accepted the invitation to sleep with

them? Or would Felix be forced to accept...? What? He shuddered even though all

he had to shudder at was his own imagination. He had no experience. All he knew

was that somehow the noises his parents made in their bedroom held much more attraction for him.

He soon had other thoughts to occupy his mind. All four men climbed on the roof

to tug back into place the sheets of rusted metal that the wind had moved and restore the slabs and boulders that were supposed to hold them down. "You need

nails," said Uncle Alva. He lifted his hat and ran a hand across his forehead.

Felix imitated him. The broad leather brims protected them all against the sun's

youvee but sometimes seemed to concentrate the heat. Perhaps, he thought, it was

only that the metal beneath them reflected the sun. He hoped it did not reflect

the youvee the way it did the heat. He could stand sweat.

"Ain't got enough," said Pa. The breeze lifted his tuft of hair and exposed the

rash on the back of his neck. The small, biting black flies appeared. He brushed

and swatted. He hawked, and there were threads of red in what he spat. "You used

too many to build that ell."

"That was a long time ago."

There was silence while they worked. Finally Pa answered, "We'd have to burn another house down. Sift the ashes." That was how he had obtained his last supply of nails.

Ox looked up. "Can't we make 'em?"

Uncle Alva cleared his throat, and Ox bent his head back toward the sheet metal

he was positioning.

"Tuck the end under, boy," said the man. "Overlap them so the rain runs downhill

and off."

Ox obeyed, but as he moved one sheet of metal, a ragged corner caught his

trousers and ripped the fabric. "Shit," he said.

"Old stuff," said Felix, meaning the fabric of Ox's pants, his own, his Pa's, Uncle Alva's, their shirts as well. "Ma's got more. And yeah, somebody had to make those nails once."

"Plenty of scrap iron around," said Pa. "But we'd need a blacksmith. I saw one

once. Burned coal, he did. Heated iron red hot. Then he hammered it into any shape he wanted."

"Ox could do that," ventured Felix. "He's strong enough. But what's the point?"

Only silence answered his question. They all knew as well as he that time was limited. That the family Webb would disappear in another generation. The family

Man might not last much longer. But this was not something one ever mentioned.

"There's coal," said Uncle Alva. He pointed more south than west. "Last time I

went by the old power plant, there was a regular mountain of it still there."

"It stinks." Pa made a face. "We'd have to haul it. Besides which, we don't have

the tools. A smith needs big hammers, an anvil...." He shook his head.

"Easier

to burn some old house down."

"So pick one." Uncle Alva waved an arm toward the horizon as if to say there were plenty of them out there. Unused, available, rotting, some only heaps of spiky lumber, their ironware rusting into uselessness.

"Too much work. Besides...." Pa bent a particularly rusty corner and broke it off. "These ain't gonna last much longer."

"Then what?"

Pa shrugged. "Shakes. Slabs of rock. Maybe we could find some slate."

"Heavy stuff to haul," said Uncle Alva. "Bad as coal."

Felix set a rock down where it belonged and straightened his back. From this vantage he could see widely across a landscape of forest and ruins. Once, he had

been told, "forest" meant trees massed so thickly the ground would be invisible

from the air except in winter. Now that was true only in spots. He could see bare earth and patches of grass, fern, bramble, and shrub despite the early summer foliage, and that foliage was truly green only where the apples grew. Most other trees seemed less healthy, their leaves yellowed, their trunks dwarfed so that the ancient houses that still survived, or broken walls and isolated chimneys, too often stood above them.

Yet not every trunk was dwarfed. Enough trees were taller, especially where the

land folded downward toward the stream that carried rain toward the sea, to let

Felix believe that once they all had towered over human works. Now those works

showed, and hard by their remnant walls and crumbled stones was the green and violet and white of late-blooming lilacs, the green and pink of the earliest wild roses, the green and cream of honeysuckle, the flaming pink of rhododendrons that loved acid soil, and a very few other plants that could thrive no matter how their world discouraged them.

The pavement on which the farmstead sat stretched northeast and southwest, the

green that covered it thinner than that to either side. The farmstead itself swelled like an egg in a snake, fatter on one side than on the other.

He could also see, more clearly than he had the day before, that the shed was undamaged. Its corner posts jutted unbroken above the walls. And there,

leaning

against the rail fence of the outdoor goat pen, was the roof the storm had lifted off the shed. It looked intact, except for a few shakes missing, a few more skewed.

He pointed, and Pa said, "We'll get that next."

"Maybe not," said Uncle Alva. He was pointing in another direction, toward the

trail that served the farmstead, the same trail on which he himself had once arrived. "Gilbert's coming."

Gilbert was not much older than Felix or Ox. Unfortunately, his arms and legs had been twisted since birth. "Poison in the soil," Uncle Alva had said more than once.

He lived alone about a mile from the Webbs, where he struggled to survive on his

own. He did not seem to want much company, either male or female, although he did occasionally need help. When such occasions arose, he asked, and the Webbs

and the few other people who clung to life in the area gave him what he needed.

They knew that if they needed help themselves, the others would do as much. Certainly Gilbert was more than willing to repay, and sometimes he managed gifts

of wild honey or berry wine.

As soon as the young man was within earshot, Pa called, "What'd the storm do to

you, Gil?"

The other waved a jerky arm. When he was close enough for Felix to see that he

too bore an angry red rash and his hair seemed as stiff as straw, he spoke in a

pleasant tenor: "Blew that dead birch down. It hit the house."

"Shit," said Felix.

"Let's go see," said Pa. "Ox, get the cart."

"I can walk," protested Gilbert.

"Tools. We'll need to cut the tree up."

"Patch the house, too," said Uncle Alva. "You've still got that lumber we left

last time?"

"Yes, but...."

"What'd you come here for then?"

Gilbert hesitated. "I thought you'd say tomorrow, or next week. You've got your

own problems."

"They're not bad," said Pa. "They'll keep for a few hours."

"But not forever," said Uncle Alva. "So you'll ride. We'll get there faster."

"Nails?" asked Felix.

After a moment, Pa nodded. "I guess we can spare a few for this."

* * *

It took them until well after noon to cut Gilbert's dead birch into firewood, clear away the splintered corner of his small house, and rebuild his wall and roof. When they were done at last, their host produced a stew of wild onions and

withered potatoes, flavored by shreds of some small creature's meat, and thanked

them effusively.

"Don't worry about it, damn it," said Pa. A green sprig of onion stuck to his lip. "Felix'll bring you a bucket of blackberries later on, come summer, and you

can make some more of that wine."

"Or we'll set you to siftin' ashes for nails," said Uncle Alva. They had talked

about the shortage while they worked.

"Either way," said Gilbert. "Or both. Sifting ashes I can do. Someone told me once, that's what people used to do, way back before they built the factories,

when there were horses to ride and deer to hunt. They couldn't afford to leave

'em. So it's a deal."

Ma's voice greeted them when they pulled the cart into the yard. "Where the hell

have you been? You weren't done here!"

"Gilbert...." began Felix.

"I know Gilbert! Your Pa told me before you left. But the shed roof is still in

the goat pen, it's getting late, and look at that sky!"

Pa obediently bent his head upward. "Clouds," he said.

"Again! And I don't want those stinkin' goats in the house another night."

"It won't take long to set the shed to rights," said Uncle Alva.

"It better not!"

It didn't. When Uncle Alva first joined the Webbs, the shed had had a conventional roof, tightly fastened to the walls. A year later, a storm had insisted on removing the roof despite those fastenings and had destroyed it in

the process.

"Don't fasten it down," Uncle Alva had said.

"Then every little breeze will flip it off," had been Pa's answer.

"Uh-uh," said Uncle Alva, and he had nailed posts to the corners of the shed, letting them jut a foot above the wall. Then he had rebuilt the roof with corner

holes to fit the posts. "The wind can lift it," he had said. "But then it will

settle right back into place."

Unfortunately, while small winds either didn't budge the roof at all or lifted

it and let it fall just the way he had envisioned it, stronger winds, winds such

as the one that had destroyed the roof before, lifted it, got under it, and lifted it some more.

They had gotten used to leaning logs against the side of the shed, manhandling

the roof onto that makeshift ramp, and then pushing it with poles up the slope

until it landed once more atop the walls. More grunting and straining then positioned it and raised the corners over the posts that had failed to hold it

in place.

"Should the posts reach higher?" asked Felix.

"Shaddap." Pa grimaced as he spoke. He worked his mouth. He spat, and it was redder than the last time. "It's hard enough to lift this bastard over them already."

"It beats building a new roof every other week," said Uncle Alva.

"But...."

"Are there any spare shakes inside this damned shed?" asked Pa. "Then get 'em,

boy. You can do the patching."

When he reached the rooftop with the bundle of shakes, he froze. There was a stream, a small river, a little over a mile from the house, running in a crease

in the land. And beyond that crease, over the shoulder of a distant hill, a pillar of smoke was rising, thickening, roiling dark gray and white.

"Someone just got burned out," said Pa.

No one else said a word. Wandering bandits were a fact of life in their time. They tended to prey on the smaller farmsteads. But sometimes larger gangs would attack even families with as many defenders as the Webbs. The shakes were thin sheets of wood split from blocks of ash, cedar, or pine, whatever was available and had a smooth, straight grain that lent itself to splitting. They differed from the gray and weathered shingles Felix had seen on the sides of some old houses in that they did not taper from one end to the other. Sometimes he wondered how his ancestors had managed that taper. As often he gave up the wondering with a huff of exasperation. It was just as futile as wondering how they made trundle wheels or pavement or any of a thousand other relics of that vanished age.

"Machines," Uncle Alva had said the last time he had asked the question. "Machines," Pa had said, pointing at the trundle. "Like that, but even Alva can't match those."

"Someday," had said Uncle Alva. "We'll work our way back to it."

It did not take long to reposition the shakes that had come loose and replace those that had split lengthwise or flown away on the wind. When Felix was done, he knelt straddling the roofpeak and stared west. That was where the old cemetery lay, beyond the trees, down the path that no one walked any more but he.

He looked at the house. It was a low structure, one edge of its roof bowing, a wall bulging, under the influence of both rot and gravity. Sheets of rusty metal were supposed to keep out the rain, though shakes like those beneath him, he thought, would do a better job. But splitting them was hard work. No wonder Pa kept putting it off. There was quite enough to do without that. Uncle Alva's ell stuck out on one side. His roof too was metal, but neater, smoother, held down by nails instead of rocks. A square glass window gleamed blindly.

The main house's windows were of several shapes, square, oblong, flat, and bulging, as dictated by the materials Pa had had to hand when he built the place. The walls of both ell and house were salvaged boards, weathered gray. On the other side of the house was a small, slant-roofed storeroom for wood and tools. By fall, it would be full of wood, and there would be an even larger pile outdoors.

He sighed. He looked at the yellow sky and the clouds that were spreading across its dome. They were thinner, less gray, less threatening. He did not think they were about to see a repeat of the storm the day before. Not yet. But soon, of course. Pa said the storms came more often than they had when he was a boy. They were stronger, too. And they always came back.

He felt the rough wood between his thighs. He bounced on his hams, trying to imagine, Was this what it had once been like to ride a horse? He had never seen one, but he had heard.... Pa had told him stories. They had been big, but not this big, and fast. Fast enough to take him to Great-Grandpa's stone in moments. He hadn't visited since the week before. He was overdue. Great-Grandpa surely was expecting him and wondering where he was.

Suddenly he thought of Great-Grandpa getting up to go looking for him, and he laughed despite the shiver that ran down his spine.

It was too late now to walk. He wouldn't be able to get back until after dark.

And Ma didn't want him wandering around at night, except to the privy or the shed and back. "It's dangerous," she said. "There's things out there. The dead awaken to chatter and moan and scream. People vanish when they go too far from home at night."

Uncle Alva had laughed at that. He and Ox, and Ox the merest boy, had traveled long without a home. They had been out of doors for days and nights, in fair and storm, and they had survived to find the Webbs.

The bandits survived too, didn't they?

"Felix!"

A horse would bring him back in moments, too. If he heard.

"Don't just sit there, boy!" Pa's voice, and a gesture, and another chore.

Even if it were not nearly dark, he would not be free to go. "There's still work to do."

Ox once more pulled the cart while the men and Felix gathered branches the wind had broken from the trees that surrounded the farmstead. Many of these trees were the apples that provided Pa with the cider he fermented and distilled. They alone seemed to flourish in the face of the changes that had come to the world.

Other trees were stunted, though none were as gnarled as the apples. Their leaves were smaller and yellower, and their fruits or nuts or seeds were few. They too dropped branches, and a few the storm had snapped or uprooted.

The men and Felix used axes and saws to cut the wood into lengths that would fit the fireplace in the house, and the air grew fragrant with the scents of sap and sweat. When the cart was full, Ox hauled it to the woodshed where the others unloaded and stacked. Then they filled the cart again.

Ma was in the garden, poking at the muddy ground with a stick. Felix saw her bend and grub and rise erect once more, a look of triumph on her face and a lump of something in her hand. The mud that coated it kept him from telling what it was, but he guessed a turnip, a potato, even an onion they had failed to harvest the fall before.

"Felix!" she called. "It's getting dark. Get the chickens in the shed. And see if they laid any eggs."

Pa nodded, and he broke a long and slender sucker from the nearest apple tree.

The chickens were still in the family burying ground; it would serve as a switch to chivy them toward their nighttime roost.

There were no eggs at all in the shed itself. When he searched the burying ground, around the small stones and under honeysuckle and lilac bushes, in clumps of weeds and violets, he found four. Three of them were already broken, their thin shells unable to support either the shock of dropping an inch onto

ground still soft from rain or the weight of their mother hens. Ants surrounded the circles of mess.

"Poisons in the soil," Uncle Alva would say when he heard.

* * *

When darkness fell, Uncle Alva and Ox retired to their ell, this time without asking Felix to join them. Pa, his color better, rose from the sofa and banked

the fire as usual. Then he joined Ma behind their partition. Felix paced the familiar interior of the house for a little while, his feet finding their way despite the lack of light, his hands touching the face of the fridge, a potato

barrel, the sofa.

Eventually he stepped behind the sofa to his cot. The window there had rounded

corners and bowed outward above an ample sill. On the sill rested a dark rectangle with, centered near one edge, a single red spark glowing bright, an eye against the dark.

He sat cross-legged on the grass-filled sack that was his mattress. It smelled

musty and felt damp. He told himself that it was dryer than the floor, but he also knew he would be glad to replace its stuffing come summer's end. What would

he use? Grass again? Or moss, or fern?

His stare could not pass the window glass. The cloud cover made the night outside absolute. He could see no stars, no moon, no hint of shed or privy.

He could hear Ma and Pa settling down. Familiar, quiet sounds came through the

doorway to the ell, and he shivered.

He reached out and laid one hand flat on the red-eyed rectangle, covering the light, one finger hovering over the spot that would, if he only touched it, pressed it gently, depress and click and.... He had left it on the sill to soak

up sun. The red spark said it had, it was ready, if he turned it on it would speak to him.

There were markings on its face. Words, Felix thought. But he couldn't read. All

he could do was listen and guess that the markings matched the first words the

little box would utter if he pressed the switch: Swiss Family Robinson.

It was the only book he owned. Pa had given it to him when he was little, saying, "The Robinsons. That was your Ma's name, eh? So it's our family too." He had heard its story a hundred times since then.

There was a tier of narrow shelves beside the window. That was where he kept his

private, personal possessions, a splotchy mirror, a metal comb, a folding knife,

cousin to the one he always carried in his pocket. He intended the knife for his

someday son, unless he lost or broke his own. He had found it in the glove compartment of a car whose trunk his uncle was prying open for a trundle wheel.

One of the shelves had a space just large enough for the book, and that was where he put it.

He did not want to hear it again, not now, perhaps not until he had that son. Or

a daughter.

It was about his family. He shook his head. Or at least about a family with his

Ma's name. About shipwreck and the loss of civilization. About the salvaging

of

remnants.

It spoke to him, yes, there was no denying that. The life it portrayed had something in common with his. But there was so much that was different. Tall trees and caverns, onagers and bustards, lions and ostriches and peccaries and

sugar cane, minerals and other resources. A thousand things that did not exist

in his world, if indeed they ever had existed in the world his elders' stories

all insisted his own had fallen from.

But those differences were not why he found it so difficult to listen to the story one more time. No, what made the book so difficult, even painful, to hear

was its insistent optimism.

Felix's own Robinsons, even if they were really Webbs, found it a struggle to survive. The book took that much quite for granted and then insisted it was possible for Robinsons to thrive and prosper. Even if they were Webbs.

Perhaps especially if they were Webbs. He looked toward the fireplace. He could

not see the framed Memory of the Webbs in the dark, but he knew it was there.

He

knew what it said, too, even though neither he nor anyone else in the house could read it.

It had been memorized generations before, and its tale recited again and again

until the only possible reason for keeping the frame and its contents was their

status as a talisman, a charm against disaster.

Felix could not help but think it all a lie. Robinsons and Webbs and ancient stories and a world whose rubble sustained his own. All a lie.

CHAPTER 7

_Samuel Webb, a native of Great Britain, in the latter half of the seventeenth

century, was commander-owner of a slave ship, which for a number of years, made

regular voyages to Africa, and purchasing cargoes of slaves, would carry them to

the West Indies by which accumulated a large fortune. He purchased an estate in

Redrift in the vicinity of the city of London, where his family resided, which

consisted of his wife and three children, one son and two daughters, viz Susanna, Samuel, and Margaret. His wife died when he was at sea. In 1708 he again manned his ship, which was of the largest class of slavers, with about forty men, and set sail from London, and arrived in Africa, at a place where he

used to trade for slaves. The African chief came on board, and appeared to be much pleased that he had come again to purchase the prisoners that he had taken

in a late excursion to the territory of a neighbouring tribe. He invited the Captain and as many of the crew as could be spared to go on shore to see his prisoners, and dine with him the next day; and they accepted the invitation._

_The next day, having arrived, they all went on shore, except four men and four

boys, of which, his son Samuel was one, he being about seven years of age.

When

they arrived at the Chief's house, dinner was prepared, and the custom of the country was, that a separate dish was set for each individual. The Chief sat

at

the head of the table, and the Captain at his left, and the other officers according to their rank, and then the seamen. The African chief had contemplated

the capture of the ship, and for that purpose, had ordered poison to be put in

every dish except his own. As soon as they discovered the treachery, they returned to the Ship, cut the cable, and put to sea; and within twenty four hours, every man that went on shore was dead._

_Thus was a large ship on the broad ocean, with only four men and four boys to

navigate her back to England. They had fair weather southerly winds without speaking with a vessel until they arrived in the English Channel. The ship was

sold and the proceeds deposited in the Bank, where he had large funds, and the

children put under guardianship; to be supported at school, out of the interest

thereof until they should become of age._

_Samuel Webb son of Samuel Webb, was born in Redrift, England on Christmas day

1696, and after the death of his father, as above stated, was sent to school, where he remained until the year 1711, at which time a ship, with emigrants, was

fitting out in London, for Newport, Rhode Island; some of the passengers being

his acquaintance, he was persuaded to run away from his guardian, and take passage for America; having barely money, at his command, sufficient to pay his

fare._

_When the ship was off the Western Islands, she was taken by a pirate, which infested the sea in those days, and never before spared a soul that fell into his hands, and the Captain never before boarded a ship that he captured, but sent his officers, who did the work of plunder and death; but at this time he came on board himself, and found one of the passengers to be a lady, to whom he

was betrothed, when he became a pirate. At the sight of her he was melted to tears; he told her he would spare her life, and for her sake the lives of the crew, and gave her money and clothing enough to support and clothe her during life. The piratical crew were in a great rage, because they could not "have the

fun," as they said, "of making them walk the plank." This was the fourth year that the pirate ship had been on the sea; and it was the first time that it was

known she was a pirate; it was thought that she was cast away._

_The ship and passengers all arrived safe at Newport. After arriving at Newport

he found himself without money and among strangers, and had it not been for the

fear of being taken again by the pirate, would have returned to England, he thought that life was better than money, and so he made the best of his situation, and bound himself out to a blacksmith and learned the trade._

--Seth Webb_

CHAPTER 8

By morning the thin clouds and their maybe threat of rain or storm had vanished.

The sky was its normal yellow, though perhaps, washed clean by the last storm,

it was the least bit clearer than usual.

Felix was barely aware of the difference. His face was quite simply too near the

muck, for his current chore was to shovel soggy nanny plums and dirty hay out of the goat pen in the shed. As he worked, he swatted black flies and deer flies and dreaded the thought that Ma or Pa would decide that the privy needed similar treatment. But the pile of manure be~side the garden grew higher without interruption. Noon came and went, and he was out of chores. He didn't linger where anyone could correct his shortage. He put the shed between himself and the house and set out down the strip of weathered pavement that once had been a road. At first it was no more overgrown than near the house, just moss and grass. Once he passed the turn-off to Gilbert's place, young thistles and nettles, shrubs and small trees invaded the edges, their roots crumbling the pavement, and the trail narrowed. A little further, and there was his footpath. His because he came this way more often, he thought, than anyone. Ox sometimes came with him. Pa came only once a year, or maybe twice. If anyone else did, he had never seen them. As he followed the meandering trail, he saw houses in the undergrowth, weathered hulks long since looted of whatever they might hold of value. There were pits full of twisted pipe and wire and bits of char, all bedded in the pulpy mould that rotted wood became. There were columns of brick and stone that had once been chimneys; a few were intact, with squared-off tops; most were ragged stumps. There were pavings where other roads breached the soil. There were clumps of flowers--daffodils and narcissus, rhododendron, violets, clumps of pansies, blues and pinks and yellows for which he had no names--that still bloomed where someone once had dressed a dooryard. There were walls, including a brick curtain fifteen feet tall, its top broken ragged, its ends butted by lesser sheets of concrete. Tall openings had once held windows, and there were no clues to what the building once had been. But people remembered. Felix had first seen the ruins when he was small, with Pa, and Pa had said, "My Pa told me. That was a school. Kids like you went there to learn to read." "What's reading?" Pa had only shrugged and then said, "How to make things, too. Fridges and books, you know?" "Why is it broken?" he had asked then. "No people to take care of it. And the rain." "Where'd they go?" But for that question Pa had had no answer besides the obvious: "Away. All fuckin' gone away." Felix walked on, flanked by the year's new greenery. Apple trees and sickly birches, berry canes, stems and vines. Thick tangles of everlasting, a woody weed that had earned its name because it was impossible to destroy. There was a rusted-out truck, a lower wall, a length of pipe erect in the air, an outdoor fireplace wreathed in cat-claw briar. A car bore no signs of rust, but its plastic skin had been faded, cracked, and pitted by youvee and acid. The ruins thinned as he came to land that had never been built upon. The vegetation thinned too, as if whatever uses to which the land had once been put instead had been no kinder, as if the soil had lost its richness to more than acid rain and youvee. He passed a barren zone, sign of poison, and then a broad swath of ground that grew only tussock grass and weeds. The path bent and approached a knoll covered with brambles and topped by a single apple tree. The path led between two masonry pillars and the remnants of a wrought-iron gate. To either side of the pillars stretched a tumbledown stone wall. Just

past

them began the stones, and from that area emanated music such as Felix had never heard a human being make, though it had in it the buzz of taut strings. From time to time it was overridden by a rhythmic rattle like distant thunder or like rain on a metal roof.

The gate was decorated with strange metal shapes, some of which swung from corroded bolts. A few of them resembled the shapes on the front of Felix's Swiss Family Robinson. Similar shapes were carved into the surfaces of the stones.

If he could have read, he would have known what they said:

Beneath a carved dog's head:

THUNDER

2092-2101

Beneath a staff entwined by a pair of snakes:

VANYA TASHNIKOV, M.D.

2047-2122

Beneath a broken heart:

AMELIE VAN LINDEN

2108-2126

Beneath a portrait of a bird:

CORKY

Called every cracker bigot

Beneath nothing at all but polished stone:

ANDERS WEBB

2035-2111

And more.

But he could not read. He knew only that the first stone past the gate was the

one with the picture of a dog carved into its surface, and that as he approached

it, it barked, "Felix! You went away. Didn't come. Gone so long. Thunder got so sad!"

The stone was a massive thing. It stood as high as Felix's breast, and its square top was as long on a side as his forearm. About a foot below its top was

a line of weathered mortar.

Felix patted the solar cells that covered that top as he always did.

"Thunderstone," he said.

"Thunderstone," said the stone, accepting the correction as it always did.

"Got

Frisbee? Wanta catch! Wanta chase!"

Felix patted the stone again. It was slick with a finish that was not just polished rock. "Idiot dog." There was a catch in his voice. That was what he had

said so often to his Blunda, until that dog had fallen down an abandoned well and drowned two years before. He had not seen a living dog since.

He had wished then that the technology still existed to record the minds of the

dying and let them speak forever after. On the other hand, Blunda had well deserved his name; Felix did not think he would have had much to say, not even

as much as this petrified Thunderstone.

The parrot was nearly lost within the thicket a rosebush had become. As he skirted the thorns, it squawked. It rarely spoke.

Another stone made a purring sound and said, "Got milk? Got mouse? No tongue, no

mouth. But wish and wish and wish."

A voice called from deeper in the cemetery. "Felix? Is that you? I'm glad you made it. We were afraid that storm washed you all out to sea. It was a bad one, wasn't it?"

"I'll be right there, Great-Grandpa." He touched the catstone. It had never suggested that it had ever had a name.

The music he had heard as he approached became brassy, like walking on sheets of roofing metal.

"Amelie!" screamed someone. "Would you stop already with that goddam Wedding March!"

But the music only thickened, deepened, and repeated, again and again. Across the cemetery, the rattling matched the rhythm of the music. It became more resonant, more clearly the voice of some mad drummer.

"Hush, Walter. It's not easy for her, you know."

A snort, as if a stone could snort. "I know, Jenny."

Felix flinched and swatted at a deer fly's sting. He knew the story. Amelie van

Linden had died on the way to her own wedding. An accident of some sort. Then she had been recorded in her stone. Her groom had lived on. Eventually he had married another woman, and in time he and his wife had been recorded too.

Their

stones were side by side in this cemetery, just a few feet away from the bride

who had lost her future and who now rarely spoke, but played the Wedding March

over and over and over in the tones of different instruments.

He had known the story for years. He had been five or six years old when Pa had

first brought him here and introduced him to Great-Grandpa. He had first met Thunderstone and all the others then, and Great-Grandpa had told him some of their stories. They themselves had told him others.

He had come back, with Pa at first and later by himself. But only during the day. Whenever he lingered so long that the light began to fade and the dusk to

grow, panic swept over him, and he ran.

Why? Great-Grandpa was friendly enough and indeed was why he kept returning.

But

Ma had said, "Don't trust 'em, boy. I know he's your Great-Grandpa. Or he was.

But not all the dead like the living so well. They don't all wake up and talk by

day, you know. Night's their time, and some of them are jealous-mad and greedy.

You don't want to meet 'em."

"They do too wake up," he had said. "They talk to me."

"Not all of 'em," she had answered. "They sit there, soaking up the rays like plants. And when the sun goes down...."

Uncle Alva had laughed and said, "Let me tell you about the ghost I met once. She was just as soft and cool as summer fog, but she had teeth, she did...."

"You!" His mother had swung her arm and whatever it was she held--a pot? a rolling pin? "He's too young to hear such things!"

Felix had his doubts that a stone--even a talking stone--could do him any harm.

But every time the dusk began to slide across the land, he remembered what Ma had said, his heart began to pound, and he ran.

Sometimes he tried to resist the fear that swelled within him. But then he would

remember his uncle's tales and tell himself that in a cemetery, in the dark, unknown voices would give anyone the heebie-jeebies. And if that anyone knew

the
voices did indeed belong to the dead, the living dead....
But it was daytime now. Here was Great-Grandpa's stone, a leafy twig dropped
by
stormwind across his solar cells. Felix swept it away with a hand and used a
leaf to wipe off a clot of birdshit. The familiar voice said, "Thanks."
"The next bit of wind would have blown it off. You didn't need me."
"Come on, boy. You know better than that."
Felix shook his head. "They made you to last forever."
"Almost," the stone agreed.
"As long as the sun shines."
"And nothing covers my head."
"Lightning can hit us," said a voice. Felix could not tell which stone it
came
from. "Sometimes it goes KA-BOOM! and one of us goes all to pieces. Ha. Way
to
go. Out with a bang. Though I'd rather be banging a...."
"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after _life_, you know?
I
paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."
The drummer produced a grand, metallic crash, thumping booms, and a flurry of
rimshots.
"Oh, God," said another voice. "Cymbals again!"
"Shaddap, Hammerhead!"
The drumming stopped. The Wedding March played on.
"Hush," said someone. "Don't scare him away. We don't get many visitors."
"Yeah." Felix thought this speaker was the one called Walter, who had not
married Amelie. "It gets pretty lonely."
Felix let his gaze slide over the other stones. The oldest ones were smaller,
thinner, carved into ornate shapes, shadowed north sides covered with soft
moss
and scaly lichens. Some leaned. Some lay flat beneath flattened stems,
wind-blown leaves, and crawling vines. It was the newest stones that stood
four-square, solid, tops gleaming with solar cells.
"I suppose it does." Then, at a loss for what else to say, he touched his
Great-Grandpa once more. "So what's new?"
"Not a goddam thing. What did you think? There's no place deader than a...."
Felix had heard the joke before. He interrupted with, "They're going to set
Gilbert to sifting ashes for nails."
The Wedding March turned metallic, chiming.
"The crippled fellow?" Felix had described the neighbors long before. "That's
an
awfully slow way to go about it. Why don't you make an electromagnet?"
"What's that?"
"You'll need a bar or rod of iron and some wire."
"No problem." He thought of the wire he had seen along his path that
afternoon.
Iron was everywhere.
"Insulated wire," said the female voice that had chided Walter a while ago.
He
had called her Jenny.
"Right," said Great-Grandpa. "If you don't have that, wrap cloth around the
iron
so the wire's metal can't touch it. Grease the cloth. Then wrap the wire
around
the iron. Don't let the loops touch each other."
"If the wire's insulated, you can criss-cross all you want."
"Then hook the wire ends to a battery. Wave the bar over your ash heap. And
see
what happens. Got it?"

Felix nodded just as if he were answering a live human being. He did not wonder how Great-Grandpa seemed to know the Webbs had the necessary solar cells and batteries. But.... "What's 'insulated'?"

Someone made the sound of an exasperated sigh. "The coating on the wire. The wrapping."

"Just tell your Uncle Alva," said a sour voice. "He'll know."

Silence fell and lasted. The Wedding March alone remained audible, although it did grow soft. Eventually the Jenny voice said cheerfully, "Gonna be a nice sunset tonight."

What was going on? The only times when Felix had witnessed such sudden silences and shifts of topic had been when someone said something embarrassing or mentioned something no one wished to think about. Was that what his Uncle Alva was to his Great-Grandpa and the other stones? An embarrassment? A topic to avoid? But why?

Felix said nothing. Instead, he looked at the sky and at last registered its unusual clarity. Directly overhead, he thought, there might even be the merest hint of fabled blue. To the west, the sun's great ball was still above the horizon, but the yellow was already becoming tinged with orange. There were hours yet to go before full dark. He had plenty of time to get home.

But still he felt the surge of panic in his blood.

"What's that red stuff on your arm, boy?"

Now it was his turn to be embarrassed. He slapped a hand over the worst of the rash near his elbow.

"On your hand, too, eh? And your leg. I can see it through the hole in your pants."

It was one thing to have Ma saying, "Don't scratch." At least she had some rash herself. But these stones didn't even have moss or lichen to speak of. "You see too damned well."

"Don't sass me, boy. I've got eyes, haven't I?"

"Not that I can see."

"Hah. But yes, that I can see."

"Where are they?"

"The sparkles," said Great-Grandpa.

"Those?" He touched an inch-wide strip of tiny, shiny dots that encircled the top of the stone. It was not conspicuous.

"Fiber optics." Felix's face must have indicated his lack of comprehension of the words, for Great-Grandpa clucked and added, "Little eyes. I need so many because I can't move them."

"No moving parts," someone sing-songed. "Ain't got no movin' parts."

"That rash," said Great-Grandpa, returning to the earlier subject. "Had it long?"

Felix shrugged.

"Oughta see a doctor, you know."

"Aren't any."

"Oh, yeah." His tone said he had not really forgotten how thin the human presence on the land had grown.

"It's just one of those things," said Felix. "That's what Ma says."

"If you can't fix it, live with it," said a voice from the other side of the cemetery. Felix did not think he had heard this one before.

"It's not 'just one of those things,'" said Great-Grandpa. "I saw some rashes in

my time, I tell you. I served in Africa, and Chile. Refugee camps, people poorer than you ever dreamed a soul could be. Even poorer than you, boy. So poor they died on their feet. No food. No medicine."

The Wedding March was reedy, sad, interrupted by heavy, droning chords. Someone said, "They made more babies, though."

"That was half their problem," said still another voice.

"More than half."

The drummer tapped a rhythmic death march in counterpoint to the mournful Mendelssohn.

"Oh, shaddap awready!"

"Is this all there is? Somehow I"

"Shaddap! Shaddap! I can only take so much, you know."

Felix had heard Great-Grandpa's stories of the days before civilization's final

fall many times. "What...?"

"A lot of the ones that weren't already dead had rashes a lot like yours.

After

a while they lost weight, if they had any to lose. They got weak and cranky.

Their memories went. They saw things."

"It's not like that."

"Yet, boy. Anybody else like that? Anybody acting funny?"

Felix thought of the way his Ma prayed to the fridge, but he didn't say a word.

"What about your Pa?" His grandson.

"We've all got it some. We always did. You just didn't notice."

"It's worse, isn't it?"

Felix nodded reluctantly.

"And there's not many kids, right? That happened down there too, near the end."

Felix shuddered. "I'm the only one I know." Was the human species really going

to die out?

The Wedding March, this time in flutes, swelled louder, and Walter said in an irritated tone, "Did you ever find out what the refugees' rash was?"

"No," said Great-Grandpa. "But it wasn't good. Felix, you have to see a doctor."

"There ain't any. There's hardly anybody around here except us."

The stone made a sighing noise. "There's one in here, you know."

Felix shook his head. "A stone?"

"What else?" said Walter.

"But he sleeps during the day," said Great-Grandpa. "He's a night-owl."

Felix had never seen an owl. He had never even heard the word before. But he remembered his Ma's words about those dead who waked at night, he remembered her

warning about Great-Grandpa, even him, and he shivered.

"You need to see him, boy."

Felix shook his head.

"You come back tonight. Well after dark. Bring a light. And we'll see what he can tell you. If he'll cooperate."

He shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"Scared of the dark?" someone asked.

He managed to nod. He couldn't speak.

"Nothing to be scared of," said Great-Grandpa. "We don't bite, not even the craziest of us. And there aren't any wild animals around anymore. Not around here anyway. We'd know."

Felix believed him, but...

"It's your only hope," said Walter. "He's the only doctor in town."

"Maybe he could help," said Jenny. "Maybe he could keep you from going crazy. Maybe he could save your Ma and Pa. Your cousin Ox."

"Maybe even Uncle Alva," said someone.

Someone else made a disgusted noise. "Right."

Why didn't they like Uncle Alva? Felix wished he knew.

But this was not the time to ask. Not when his heart was racing at the mere thought of coming here at night, and again at the thought of doing something that might save his family's minds and lives. Not when his mind was racing toward the thought that perhaps, just perhaps, the Memory of the Webbs and Swiss Family Robinson could be right.

He hardly spared another thought for the possibility that the problems that his

family faced were also problems for what remained of the human species, that they threatened the existence not only of his parents and neighbors but also of

everyone he might ever meet or care for. That the few close to him were endangered was quite enough to fill him with hope that maybe the worst of fates

could be persuaded to set them free. Maybe they really could overcome their problems and survive and even thrive.

He looked at the western sky. The sun was almost ready to touch the horizon. The

sunset was as brilliant as it had promised to become.

And the biting flies were giving way to mosquitoes. Dark was almost there.

Suddenly he felt as if that were the only reason his heart was racing.

Anything

else--certainly the thought of setting out across the withered landscape in search of hope for better days--seemed sheerest fantasy.

He was terrified.

"Gotta go," he said.

"But the doctor will be in soon," said Jenny.

He had no answer, and he did not care what they thought of his reluctance to brave the dark, his cowardice, his fear.

He turned and ran for home.

The last thing he heard was one more refrain of: "Is this all there is?"

Somehow

I expected more of an after life, you know? I paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."

"Shaddap!"

CHAPTER 9

The air was rank with salt and mud and weed and the after-scent of storm. Sun baked dead fish from the weathered planks of the sailboat.

The women wore dark gowns that brushed against the rocks beneath their feet.

Their wicker-framed fishskin hats were not round but winged like captive gulls.

Their voices were silent. The gulls that circled above their heads were not.

It was impossible to tell who they were. The wings of the hats provided only small glimpses of their faces, and at any distance, that was not enough. The gowns shrouded their figures. All that was left was the way they moved, a curve

of flesh beneath fabric, a hand, a scrap of voice.

Men were not so shrouded. They wore kilts whose pattern of black and white and

gray was an unending repetition of crosses, and laced leather vests that left the arms free to work the boats and nets and lines. Only when the sun was brightest and the island's mists were thinnest or they were away from the sea did they cover their skin more carefully.

Why did women have to wear the gowns that left so little of them visible?

Delivered of the Lord preached that sermon every summer, when the weather was hottest and his wives glared their loudest, wordless complaints: The

coverings shielded men from temptation and preserved their virtue. At the same time, they shielded the women from the deadly youvee and kept the hope of children alive.

There, thought Consideration Wiggin. That one. Bending forward to retrieve something the sea had cast upon the shore. A lock of hair falling past the wings. A smooth buttock beneath the fabric. A slender hand. A voice, attenuated by distance, laughing with an openness never displayed before men.

God's Promise. They had giggled over the name when they both were small and more aware of the difference between Haveners and mainlanders than of that between boy and girl. The laughter had taken a different tone when they grew older and in moments stolen on paths to garden, spring, and shore whispered of a life together. But it had turned to quiet tears when she was taken into Delivered of the Lord's own large house.

Like a best-behaved woman, he hadn't dared to say a word. The way of Haven was as much a burden as the bandits and filth of the mainland sinners, and it was just as incontrovertible. It was also, he had been taught ever since he and God's Promise had been brought to the island, vastly to be preferred. With an effort, he wrenched his gaze from the rocky shore and looked upward. There among the trees, back from the shore and the threat of storm waves, stood the Inner Haven. Four low stone buildings arranged in a square, gates between their corners. One for the boys, one for the girls. One for the three rooms in which they ate and studied Scripture and learned the skills of women and men. One for the teachers. The courtyard was for exercise and welcoming Delivered of the Lord when he visited. It was also where the boys learned the use of knives and other weapons.

Sometimes Delivered of the Lord would say in his sermons, "We must be ready for the day when there will be more of us. When that day comes, we will be trained for God's work, and we will go forth to bring the blessings of His rule to all the world."

His own bunk had been near the end of the boys' dorm, beside a window. God's Promise had slept in the same spot in the very next building. They had been able to peek out their windows and see each other at dusk and dawn, though they had been too far apart to speak a word.

"I wonder what she found," said Gatherer of Souls. He was bent motionless above the gray wood of the gunwhale, the dripping, mossy line to the anchor stone in his hand. "A crab, maybe? A periwinkle?" Both were scarce enough to be treasures when found.

"Or an empty shell. Will you haul that thing in?" Consideration held another line in his own hands. As soon as the bottom of the bay no longer gripped the boat fast, he would hoist the sheet and they would be on their way.

"I'd rather see a crab on the table. Or a fish. We didn't get much

yesterday."

They often didn't, but they had to try.

"Praise the Lord and haul!"

"Aye-aye, preacher."

"Not me."

A moment later they were moving away from the island, leaving cross and pier and

shore and women behind. Swells lifted them, smaller waves made the creaking hull

tremble, wind tipped the mast and bellied the sail. Other boats worked nets, hauled traps, ferried men to islands where the gulls nested and provided a few

fish-flavored eggs for the Haveners. They were to visit the harbor on the mainland, where a small river flowed into the sea and fish had been known to gather.

Near the center of their small boat sat the tub in which lay coiled 500 feet of

fishing line. Smaller lines branched from the thicker parent line a yard apart,

each one tied to a steel hook baited with a chunk of dead gull or other meat. When they reached the harbor they would feed the line over the side and tow it

slowly along the shore. If they were lucky, if God blessed them...

He lifted up his eyes to the hillside where a small city once had lived. Now there were only ruins, though a few buildings of brick and stone and even wood

were still remarkably intact. One bore the pointed steeple of an old-time church, scarred by lightning-fire.

Further up the bay was a bridge. Once it had carried thousands of people every

day on journeys up and down the coast. Now it leaned unsteadily on high legs. He

dreaded those days when his assignments forced him to walk across it.

Gatherer of Souls was standing now, showing himself to be a little shorter than

his partner, but still staring at the shore behind them, even though the women

were now barely discernible against the rocks. Only their hats, a glint of yellow sky-light when they moved.

"You liked her too." For a moment the boat seemed to be resting still, motionless, while the island rode the waves like some monstrous raft.

"Everyone did." A wave broke against their starboard bow. The illusion shattered

as the boat lurched. Both men tightened their grips until their knuckles shone

like ivory. "That's the problem."

CHAPTER 10

"Who's there?"

As soon as they heard the feeble voice, Ron, Kiwi, and Hussey froze in the middle of the overgrown road. Ron raised his stick and drew his knife. The others produced knives as well.

"Who's there? You tell me quick, or I start screaming. Then you'll be sorry." This time the words were underlain by a slight buzz and crackle that betrayed the speaker's nature.

Kiwi pointed at the brush beside their path. Almost invisible in the tangled, arching woody stems of everlasting was a block of stone. Beside it was the merest hint of another trail. It had not been used except by animals for a long

time.

Hussey shook himself. "I'm glad it's daytime."

"Fuckin' deader," said Kiwi. "Can't hurt us now, and couldn't then either."
"Who's there? I'm warning you...." The voice was noticeably weaker.
"Not gettin' enough sun?" Ron stabbed into the bushes with his stick. A solid clack said he had connected. "Been here long? Want us to clear the leaves away?"

"Oh, would you, please? I don't know why...."
"Pretty useless, ain't ya?" Kiwi was pushing branches aside, stepping into the remnant trail beside the gravestone, peering into the shadows.
"No! Don't go in there!"
"It won't do you a bit of good to scream." Ron swatted a blackfly on his arm and wiped away a drop of blood.
"Bet your ass." Kiwi had found a rock the side of his head. He was holding it high. "If you had one."
"No!"

He smashed it down atop the gravestone.
When all that remained was a litter of gravel and bits of shiny metal and plastic surrounding a granite plinth, Kiwi laughed.
"I hope they didn't hear us," said Hussey.
"Ain't nobody to hear us," said Ron.
"What do you mean?" asked the youngest of the three.
In response, Ron just pushed around the remains of the gravestone. As soon as they were past the brush that had flourished thickly beside the pavement they had been following, the trail was more obvious. Yet it was still clear that the trail had not been used in years.
There were ruins beside the trail just as there were ruins everywhere. Broken walls, cellar holes, rusted machinery. Occasional hulks with empty windows and staved-in roofs.
And then, no more than fifty yards from the road, there was a clearing. It was larger than the one they had left the day before. It was also overgrown with scraggly vegetation, weeds and small shrubs. Positioned on its rim were three small houses, half a dozen sheds, and a patch of ground marked by as many small gravestones.

All the structures had been built from salvaged materials. Most of the sheds had collapsed. The houses, though, were still in decent shape. Their windows were intact, there were no holes in their roofs, there were no signs of fire. The only exception was the door of one house, sagging in its frame to say it had been open to rain and wind long enough for rot to set in.
The only sign of human presence was a single skull resting on the sill of the open door. Three teeth had fallen from the upper jaw and lay on the wood beside it. Other bones were scattered on the step and among the weeds below.
Hussey shuddered as if the sights of human bones and vacant houses that had once been sheltering homes to loving families reminded him of something he had long struggled to forget. He set down the sack of food he had been carrying. "What happened here?"
Ron used his stick to block Kiwi's step toward the house. "We're not going in."
"Why the hell not?"
Now he pointed at the remains of the last person to leave the house. The bones

were not intact, for small animals had nibbled on them and rain had weathered them, but there were no signs of violence, no broken limbs, no holes in the skull that did not belong.

"You mean they got sick," said Hussey. "Plague."

"Shit." Kiwi backed off.

So did their chief. "It happens. And I don't want to take any chances."

"Can we burn 'em?"

Ron shook his head. "Let's just get out of here."

CHAPTER 11

The house was dark, but not yet still. The noises from the ell had ceased, but

Pa was snoring. Either he or Ma rolled over and made the bedsprings creak. Felix blinked. He did not want to fall asleep, yet neither did he want to leave

the house. Outside was night, darkness half-moon leavened, ghosts more terrifying than any he had ever met by day in the old cemetery. Ma had told him

so.

He was scared. His pounding heart insisted that the very thought of going outdoors in the dead of night for anything more than a quick visit to the privy

was utter lunacy.

Yet Great-Grandpa had assured him he would be safe, as if either Ma were wrong

or he could give orders to those evil spirits that lay in wait for night-time travelers. Since he was himself a ghost of sorts, perhaps he could.

The boy--and that was all he was, he told himself--touched the stub of tallow candle he had secreted in a pocket. He reminded himself that Uncle Alva and Ox

had survived long travel across the ruined land, day and night, and never been

troubled by the dead. And the wandering gangs of bandits. They were surely a far

worse hazard than ghosts, weren't they? But there were none in the area, were there? Only a plume of smoke in the distance.

His heart was still racing. His palms were sweaty. His breath was coming hard and fast. He struggled to calm himself--deeper breaths, slower--and congratulated himself when his heart no longer seemed to shake the house. Yet his palms were still wet.

He had met the dead, hadn't he? Not the night-wakers, but the dead, ghosts, voices with no power to do more than frighten. Not that they did. They were strange but friendly, kin, concerned for his health and the survival of all their descendants. Weren't they?

He had never met a bandit gang. Never seen its handiwork. Yet he knew such things were real. He believed. They had the powers of flesh, not vapor, and the

very thought that he might meet one in the dark made him shiver.

He told himself that they had to sleep sometime. Surely they would rather travel

in the light of day, pretending innocence until they found a victim. At night they would hide in some den. Perhaps they would even shiver at the thought that

their past victims prowled the dark in search of vengeance.

Felix sighed. The danger was real, or it was not. He would meet it, or he would

not. He would return safely, or he would not. And he had said he would go. No, he hadn't.

Not really.

He had simply run.

And now he had to.... His loins ached and his arm itched furiously, as if to

remind him of what was at stake. He scratched.
He thought of girls and wives and making babies and wondered, Could it possibly be that the same nothingness that had swallowed so many of the animals mentioned in Swiss Family Robinson was about to swallow his family, even all his kind, as well?
And could a doctor, a dead doctor, possibly know anything that would help? The rash, maybe, but the rest?
At last he was sure that everyone else in the house was sound asleep. He crept from his pallet. When the rustling grass seemed to echo in the room, he panicked, froze, sighed when no one stirred. Then he was by the door, hesitating over whether he should take his leather cloak and hat. But he would be back by dawn, wouldn't he? Surely, surely, long before dawn, long before he would need protection from the sun.
Bare-headed, he eased the door open, hesitated when it creaked, eeled through, and shut it again. When the cool of the springtime night and the first mosquito sting struck at him, he wished he dared to pry the door open once more and grab his cloak. But he feared one more creak would surely wake his parents. He took a deep breath and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. It wasn't cold, really. He'd get used to it. The night itself, however.... He was out, the path he must take was visible before him, and his rash was itching once more, but now as if in protest against his wish to heal it. He scratched again. He swore when he felt a fingernail tear through the scaly skin. There would be blood there to draw more mosquitoes, then. Later, he guessed, there would be infection and pus and scar, just as there had been before. Every touch of breeze that made a branch wiggle against the sky, every sound of mouse or rabbit or nighttime bug, every shadow that for a moment took the shape of monstrous flesh, all made his heart leap and his mouth go dry and time stand still. But his feet kept moving, and he knew that the hours that seemed to pass before he heard the first rattle of Hammerhead's drums, the first strains of Amelie's Wedding March, the first refrain of, "Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after life, you know? I paid a lot to be mindloaded, and..." had to be only within his mind.
The iron gates loomed to either side like spiderwebs, unmoving, locked in place by grass and vine. He froze. He had never visited the cemetery after dark, and he was terrified even though he knew who and what dwelt there.
"He-ey," murmured a seductive voice. "I haven't seen a guy like you for a long, long time. Warm and moving. Come over here, baby. Touch me, touch me."

"Don't pay any attention to Ursula," came Great-Grandpa's voice. A dog howled as if the moon were full and he had a world to roam. Across the cemetery, another answered. The stones crouched and loomed in the half-moon's light like waiting beasts.

"If only I had hands."

"I smell a she in heat." That growling voice came from the same direction as the

first howl. "I think I do."

"She can't hurt you, boy."

"Mommy?" Another voice, young and lost and helpless. "Where's my Mommy? I want

my Mommy."

"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected more of an after life, you know? I

paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."

"Mother!" Was that Jenny's voice? His head jerked as the voices leapfrogged about the graveyard. Most were unfamiliar, and no one was saying who they were.

"Don't mind her either. She's regressed a lot."

"Where are you, Great-Grandpa?" His voice was shaking, and he knew that if it were daylight he would see his own skin red with embarrassment at his fear. Something crawled on that skin. Something stung. He swatted, and then he brushed

the feathery corpses of a dozen large mosquitoes from his arm.

"Over here. I haven't moved." Hammerhead increased the tempo and volume of his

drumming, and Great-Grandpa spoke more loudly. "Straight ahead. A little to the

left. Didn't you bring a flashlight?"

"What's a...?"

"Never mind. A candle?"

Felix patted his pocket as the blocky shape of his Great-Grandpa's stone loomed

out of the shadows, right where it was supposed to be, of course. He grabbed at

its flat top, his fingers clutching at the edge. Here was the known, the familiar, the connected, and he felt suddenly safer.

"Lucky bastard," someone said nearby. "You get visitors."

"Remember the flint?"

"Of course." What did Great-Grandpa take him for?

"Then why don't you light it. Then I'll tell you where to find the doctor."

He set the candle on top of the stone.

"No! Not on my cells. You'll drip wax and spoil them."

Hastily Felix moved the candle to the weedy ground.

"That could kill me, you know."

"Over here, boy!" The voice was raucous, rough. "What you got? Spots or stripes?

Pocks or pus? Belly aches or tumors? You're walkin', so I know it's not a broken

leg."

Felix shuddered, but then the spark caught in the tinder. The candle's wick caught next, and light blossomed at the foot of Great-Grandpa's stone. The carved letters of ANDERS WEBB caught his eye, though he could not decipher them.

"That's not him," said his ancestor. "Though he's just as mad as Danny there."

"A mad doctor?" Suddenly Felix was even less sure that he wished to go through

with this consultation.

"Is this all there is? Somehow I expected...."

"Shut up!"

"Mad doc!" cried the parrot's voice. "Maddoc! Maddoc!"

"Mad enough to answer to it," said a smoother, more cultured voice. Its source

was almost straight ahead, several stones beyond Great-Grandpa's. "Come, Felix.

Let me see that rash. Andy told me all about it, and it sounds like you should

have attention."

For some reason, the civil tone frightened Felix worse than anything any other

stone had cried into the night. "No," he said. "I've changed my mind. I'm going

home." But he did not move. His fingers still gripped the edge of his Great-Grandpa's stone so hard they hurt.

The doctor giggled, cymbals crashed, and suddenly Maddoc seemed quite a fitting

name. "Then go. I'm out of practice anyway. Haven't had a practice for a long,

long time. No practice to practice at all! But you'll be sorry!"

The raucous Danny screeched: "Your fingers and toes will rot and fall off! Your

arms and legs and nose and cock!"

"Oh, no!" sighed Ursula.

"Your skin will boil with pus!"

"Mommeeee...."

"Mother!"

Felix took a deep breath. "Where is he?"

"Six stones back, one to the right," said Great-Grandpa.

The candle was bright enough to show the unreadable inscription. "Doctor Vanya,"

said the stone. "But call me Maddoc. Mad for short. Mad forever. I've been here

a long time, too long, much too long, and I don't feel any sign of age, decline,

wearing out, dying, dead again for good and all. Now hold that candle closer to

your skin. Raise your arm. I never thought I'd wish to end it, but there you are. Aren't you? That's what they tell me. No more babies, no more kids, no more

auctions, no more bids. Going, going, gone with the hinea-sores and the doodoos.

But let me see that rash. Hmm."

A little gust of breeze made the candle flicker and go out. Felix fell to his knees, reaching once more for his flint and steel and tinder. "Just a minute...."

"Never mind," said Maddoc. "Wish I had my stethoscope. Nice and chilly. Never really needed it, not when the scanners in the table told me everything I needed

to know. Don't have that now. But it made them jump. Oh! It did!"

"Do you know what it is?" called Great-Grandpa.

"Never saw it before. Not a clue. Can't do a thing."

"I thought a doctor...."

"Hey," protested Maddoc. "I never worked the charity wards. Rich folks only, folks who could pay my bills."

"And look where you wound up," said Walter sleepily.

"What about the babies?" asked Great-Grandpa.

"Or their lack? I'd need hands to check the parents, count the sperms and

peek

the eggs, rotoroot the tubes and feel the...."

The Wedding March became a feedback squeal. "No!"

"Can't do a thing about that. Sorry."

"You're a help."

"Kid oughta see a doctor."

"You are a doctor!" cried Felix.

"'Are' is not the right word," said Maddoc. "'Were' is more like it. Used to be.

Once upon a time. Once upon a long, long time ago, when the world was a very different place and practice meant perfect. My practice, your perfect health. At

least, that was the idea."

"I've seen it," said Great-Grandpa.

"But you had to visit a Living Dead Country. We never had it here. Never saw it."

"We've got it now."

"So now we're an LDC too. No more perfect health. No more babies. Kid oughta see

a doctor."

"There aren't any," said Felix. "I never even heard of doctors until this afternoon."

"What about hospitals?" asked Maddoc.

"Are they anything like doctors?"

The stone made a sighing noise. "There used to be a small one in Stockton.

Just

a clinic, really."

That was a town a few miles north and east of the Webb farmstead.

Unfortunately,

it had burned some years before Felix was born. "I've been there," he said.

"It's nothing but ashes and weeds now."

"Shit," said Maddoc. "Or no shit. Not any more, you know." He giggled madly.

Then he fell silent as if stricken by what time had done, was doing, to the world he once had known.

Walter's voice came through the dark, just loud enough to be clear above

Hammerhead's rattles and bangs. "That was just a little one anyway,

Vanya...."

"Maddoc! That's what the parrot dubbed me, so call me Maddoc! Practice it!"

"Maddoc it is." Great-Grandpa made a sighing noise. "But we can't change your stone."

"That's okay. Nobody around here can read anyway."

Walter sighed. "When we were trying to save Amelie, we sent her to Augusta."

"A bigger city," said Maddoc as sanely and civilly as ever. "A bigger, regional

hospital. Do you know if it's still there?"

"Uncle Alva says the whole place is dead," said Felix. The man had apparently come through that city before he had joined the Webbs. "Nothing but empty ruins.

But I guess it's still there."

"Then the hospital should be there too." Maddoc paused as if he were thinking.

"It's been so long, so long. I used to have privileges there, as well as in Stockton, you know? They had a great library. If that's still working...."

"What's a library?" asked Felix.

"Like a doctor," said Maddoc. "Only bigger. A thousand doctors with but a single

voice. Ask, and a chorus answers. It knows everything, or anyway everything that

was known before it all ended. It'd be worth your while to go check it out.

See

if it's still there, still working. If it is, just look up your symptoms and...."

"Is this...."

"The kid can't read," said Great-Grandpa. "You said so yourself. It's a forgotten skill."

"Probably doesn't know how to use a library either," said Walter's voice.

"I want my Mommy!"

This time nobody tried to answer the regressed stone.

"But I do," said Maddoc. "So take me along."

"Would it know anything about babies?" asked Felix.

"You bet. They had a great fertility clinic there once upon a time."

"Then if the library is still there...." Suddenly Felix felt more hope than he

had in as many years as he could remember.

"Right," said Maddoc. "Maybe it can tell you something useful. Of course, you'll

still have to find a girl."

Amelie's Wedding March grew suddenly louder, baying at the night.

"Maybe while we're traveling?" Felix leaned on the stone. It shifted very slightly in its earthy socket.

"You won't find one if you stay here," said Great-Grandpa.

Felix tugged at the stone. "But how do I...?"

"Get a truck," said Maddoc. "Or a wagon and a horse or two."

No one bothered to say trucks and horses were no longer available. Perhaps they

never would be again.

After a moment the doctor said, "There's gotta be something."

"The trundle?" asked Felix. When only silence answered him, he said, "Uncle Alva

made it. It's like a cart. It uses car wheels, and it has an electric motor. But

it's pretty slow."

A raspy voice floated from the far side of the cemetery. "Solar-powered?"

Felix thought of the canopy of solar cells and said, "Uh-huh."

"Hah! I know how your bastard Uncle Alva got that, I do. He killed my Kirsten!

Smashed her stone."

Felix suddenly realized that this voice's source had to be hard by at least one

of the smaller stones surrounded by broken rubble, plastic lumps, and corroded

metal that marked the cemetery. But before he could say anything, the voice turned reflective and less raspy: "I tried to tell him don't, but he did it anyway. Smashed her all to hell and took the cells. Said if I didn't shut up, he'd take me too."

In his mind, the boy compared the size of the trundle's canopy with the size of

the patch of solar cells on top of each of these talking gravestones. How many

stones had Uncle Alva had to destroy? How many voices had he silenced forever?

How many cemeteries had he looted before he came to this one and found he did not need it all?

"Uncle Alva wouldn't do that!" Yet he knew--

Several of the stones sighed ostentatiously.

"I expected an after _life_, you know? It ain't much, and I complain a lot, but

I sure don't want it to end that way."

No one told the stone to shut up.

"People do what they must," said Great-Grandpa. "The world declined and fell

apart and collapsed. It's still collapsing. Poison in the soil."
"Uncle Alva says that."
"He's right, of course. There's poison in the air, too. So many people died and
went away. The Great Die-Off, they called it. There's no more commerce, no more
factories, no more grocery stores, no more hardware stores."
Felix did not understand the words his Great-Grandpa was using. Commerce? Factories? A store was a supermarket. Ma used both words for what was
pictured
on that piece of colored paper she kept in the fridge. But grocery? Hardware? He
said nothing.
"He got what he needed where he could find it," said Jenny's voice. She sounded
sour. "That meant us."
"Eventually...." murmured Great-Grandpa.
"He'll smash us all," said the late Kirsten's husband. "For solar cells and gizmo bits."
"At least he'll make us useful," someone said.
"Useful!" said Maddoc disgustedly. "Get that trundle. Bring it here. Load me on,
and then we'll visit the library together."
"Just the thing," said Great-Grandpa. "He'll make it work for you. No problem.
Then you'll be...."
"But I can't lift him!" cried Felix. "I can't lift any of you. You're all too heavy."
"That's easy enough," said Maddoc. "Just bring help. And get back here by dawn.
We've got places to go! Things to do!"
"Hardly time enough," said Great-Grandpa. "Dawn's almost here."
"But I'm not sleepy," said Maddoc. "Something interesting is going down at last.
I want to stay up and see it all."
Felix stared up at the sky. Was it indeed yellowing the least little bit to the
east? Then he had to get home before anyone realized he had been out all night
and his mother began to scream that the dead or the demons had eaten him. They might as well have done so, he thought. There wasn't any help to be had. Gilbert would surely be willing, but he would not be able to do much.
"There isn't anyone to help," he said at last. He would have to keep his rash.
He would never find a girl. If he did, they wouldn't be able to make babies. No
one would, and the human species would disappear.
"What about your Pa?"
"He wouldn't let me go off like this. If he would, Ma wouldn't let him let me.
And Uncle Alva wouldn't let me take the trundle. It's no use."
"Then don't tell them," said Maddoc.
"Bring rope and poles," said a voice that Felix recognized after a moment as belonging to the false doctor who had raved about pocks and pus. "Four poles. We'll tell you how to use them."
He shook his head. The sky was definitely growing lighter. "I've got to go," he
said, and he turned and ran.

CHAPTER 12

The path was not one that was often used. Indeed, where it left its bed of

ancient pavement to cut across some curve or angle it almost vanished. The trail remained because no matter how cracked and weathered pavement must become in time, it made thin, poor soil. Even moss and grass and weeds grew but slowly in its interstices, while shrubs and trees did well only if their roots could reach better soil to one side or the other. Even then, the trees did not tower as once they had. The shrubs were sparse. At its best, the soil was poor, robbed of nutrients by time and mistreatment and the acidic rains of years gone by. At its worst, it was toxic. Everywhere the sun was a youvee torch. Yet there were places that seemed less desolate, more fertile, almost lush. Where the trail rounded the side of a hill, they had a hazy view of the sea and a long island a mile or two offshore. Despite the sea-haze--or perhaps because of it and its filtering of the sun--the island trees seemed greener, taller. A few low houses were visible, intact, their sides and roofs clad in silver cedar shingles, their chimneys smoking. Half a dozen high-masted fishing boats bobbed at anchor near the shore. At the end of a long pier stood a tall, white-painted cross. The peak of its shaft and the tips of its arms gleamed with golden metal balls. "Someday," said Ron as the three men stared at the tempting vision of prosperity. "We couldn't do it, just the three of us. But a couple dozen. If we had some boats." "We could get there," said Hussey. His gaze seemed less hungry and more yearning. "Ask them to take us in. They call it Haven." "You want your mommy back, kid?" asked Kiwi. "Forget it. They don't like strangers. Unless they're women." "Or kids." "Yeah. Anyway, we'd have to swim." "I've seen them," said Ron. "They come over here. If they find a boat, even a canoe, they either take it or wreck it. Women and kids, they just take." "Wonder what they do with 'em," said Hussey. "Don't have enough of their own." "So who does?" Ron turned away, setting his eyes once more to the trail they had been following. The others imitated him, though Hussey kept glancing over his shoulder until trees and ruins and the very land they crossed blocked the view once more. A little later, Kiwi flipped a hand at the ground in front of them. "No tracks," he said. "Nobody ever comes this way." "Someone must," said Hussey. "There's a trail, after all." "Guys like us. Everybody else stays close to home." "Used to be animals, Ron." "Still are." Kiwi kicked at a small pile of rabbit droppings and made a show of peering into the underbrush beside the trail. There were small rustlings, mice and ground squirrels and other rodents. A bird sang not far away. "Not many. Not enough to make a trail. Not big enough to need one." "There's pigs and goats and dogs."

"Dogs," said Ron. "Huh."
"Haven't seen a pig in..."
"Not since that place by the shore."
"Didn't even know it was there till after we torched the house."
"Noisy bastard."
"The old man too." Kiwi laughed.
"Smelled good."
"But we only ate the pig."
"You're making me hungry." Hussey patted his stomach.
"So eat something."
"Oink," said Kiwi. "There's wild pigs too. I'd like to find one now."
"We didn't bring much," said Hussey.
"They didn't have much to take."
"Think they hid it?"
"They sometimes do."
"Should have made her tell us." Kiwi had a knife in his hand now, and he was grinning as he twisted it in the air to show how he would have used it to make
the woman talk. He had done so before.
"Potatoes and apples," Ron said. "Who's got the sack?"
"Gave it to the kid." Kiwi gestured with his knife. "As usual."
"Shit," said Hussey. He looked disgusted.
Their chief sighed. "You mean you set it down somewhere."
Hussey nodded. "Back at the..."
"So go get it." The knife was pointing back the way they had come.
"Yassuh." The younger man was already turning when Ron said, "Forget it.
We'll
find something soon enough. Or we'll set some snares for rabbit."
"Bull." Kiwi made a face. "There ain't been a sign."
"Right there." The chief was pointing at the path a step or two ahead, where the
thin soil held the print of a single booted foot. It was not as fresh as their
own tracks, but it was no more than a day old and clear enough to show the
thong
laces that held together sole and upper.
"Another fuckin' bandit, I just bet," said Kiwi.
"Then he'll share."
"Unless there's more than one. Or three."
* * *
They saw no more tracks in the trail. Nor did they see any sign of habitation before they came upon a farmstead that had been burned out a year or two before.
The yard was thick with burdock and thistles and blackberry canes, and vines were crawling over the mound of charred wood and weathered ash. But there was also the remnant of a small garden in which Kiwi recognized the tops of parsnips, potatoes, and carrots growing from old roots. Not many of the vegetables had survived the loss of their caretakers or the attentions of rabbits and other small wildlife, but there were enough to provide a meal. Afterwards they prowled around the ruins. Ron discovered a patch of weeds growing thick and rich beside a second pile of ash and char. He kicked at the weeds to expose black earth and dug in the ground with his heel. The stink of rotted manure came to their nostrils.
"Pigshit," said Kiwi. "They had a pig."
"Not anymore," said Hussey. He too sounded disappointed.
"I hope they didn't clean the neighborhood out," said their chief. He meant whoever had destroyed this farmstead and presumably, like them, gone looking for
more.
He needn't have worried. Almost as soon as they set out again in the morning,

the trail joined a broader path with more exposed pavement and the signs of recent passage. One patch of dirt held a footprint that looked much like the one they had seen before. Another, longer stretch to one side was punctuated by a series of small holes.

"Walking stick," said Hussey. The others just grunted.

A little later there was the mark of a narrow wheel.

Not long after that, they smelled smoke.

CHAPTER 13

When the Webbs needed rope, they generally braided strips of cedar bark or scraps of worn-out leather and cloth. The result was strong enough for most purposes.

There was real rope in the shed, ancient and rare and precious. Bright yellow plastic, still strong even though its surface was powdery with age and broken fibers made it so splintery that no one dared to touch it without wearing gloves. So precious that no one dared to use it except at direst need for fear

it would break and then they would not have it at all.

There were poles too. They kept a few for repairing the animal pens and for pushing the shed roof back into place after a storm. Unlike the rope, they would

be easy to replace if he took what the stones had demanded.

He did not touch them that day, for there was work to do.

Nor did he touch them that night, for he was both tired and uncertain. Did he have any right to take what the family needed? Did he have any right to run off,

chasing something that might not even exist? A cure for his rash would be as well a cure for Ma's rash, and Pa's and Ox's and Uncle Alva's too. But he had only the word of a ghost that such a thing existed at all.

Not just a ghost, but a mad ghost. Perhaps a demon. Perhaps just a mad, mad remnant of the ancient days when the world was a blessed place of peace and fertility, of ample food and wealth and health.

And what that mad ghost or demon or remnant would have him seek might no longer

even exist.

Yet, he asked himself as he dug and chopped and hauled and finally lay on his pallet staring at the dim glow of the ready light on his Swiss Family Robinson, what other hope did he or any of his family or even all the rest of

their kind have?

In the morning, when he was searching out the few eggs the chickens had laid the

night before, he checked the rope. There were three coils. Would one of them do?

How could he take more?

He started the trundle's electric motor. It hummed quietly, strongly. He had never seen it refuse a job, though it moved only slowly under the heaviest loads, and then the motor groaned.

Something moved in the corner of his eye, but when he turned it was only Ox watching him with a quizzical lift to his eyebrow. Felix turned off the trundle

and hefted the small basket and its burden of three eggs. He said nothing.

Nor

did Ox.

* * *

"Will you put that goddam jug away?"

"Shaddap, Ma. Have a drop yourself." Pa grabbed a filthy glass from the counter

beside the sink and filled it full of liquid as clear as water. The woman grabbed it almost before he lifted the neck of the gallon jug out of the way.

She choked on her first swig. Pa laughed. "Alva?"
The other man grinned and opened one of the cupboards on the wall to find a cleaner glass. He had three in his hand when he said, "Boys?"
Ox and Felix both shook their heads.
A little later, Ox got up from the ancient couch, said, "I'm going to bed," and headed for the ell.
Felix remained, watching the adults laugh and remember other days no better than today but somehow filled with more hope. They grew bleary. Pa sat down at the table and laid his head flat. In a moment he was snoring.
Ma emptied her glass and went into the bedroom.
A little later, Uncle Alva followed her.
Felix was not surprised. It had happened before. And soon the house would be quiet. No one would wake until late in the morning.
If he did not leave, he too would come to refuse to see the trouble they were in. He would turn blind, deny the threats of rash and infertility, refuse to look for solutions, simply struggle on from day to day and finally die.
Yet there was a thread of hope. All he had to do was pick it up and follow it.
Perhaps it would lead him--and everyone--from the labyrinth of despair, away from illness and death and extinction.
How could he refuse the quest?
At last he sighed and got to his feet. He found a small sack and filled it half full of potatoes from the nearly empty barrels. He added his Swiss Family Robinson and a stub of candle that clung to a windowsill; he had forgotten to pick up the one he had taken to the cemetery. Then he searched the house with his eyes. His father still snored. His mother giggled in the bedroom. The fireplace. The fire dying. Above it, the Memory of the Webbs.
He lifted the frame from its hook and tried it in the mouth of the sack. It fit.
There was room. And it felt very right to take it with him.
He scratched and thought, perhaps it would bring him luck.
After all, his ancestor had survived treacherous chieftains and murderous pirates and reached a safe shore at last. Perhaps his memory would help Felix survive bandits and other hazards and come home again with answers for rashes and dead babies.

* * *

The open door of the shed let in just enough light of star and moon that he could find the things he sought. Still, the place was dark, and he could not help but stumble and clatter and swear at the thought that the noise might awaken someone in the house.
The noise did not bother the animals. His mere presence had been enough to provoke the hens to querulous complaint, the goats to stamp, the pigs to grunt.
But they were quiet now, surely watching as he chose a set of harness he thought would do and selected the strongest coil of rope. He was turning to lay them both on the trundle with his sack and hat and cloak when the blackness of the night suddenly deepened and one of the hens cackled again.
He raised his head. A figure was silhouetted in the doorway, blocking the dim light. For a moment he thought it must be Pa or Uncle Alva. He was caught even before he had finished loading the trundle. He would not be allowed this expedition, not have to go once more to the midnight graveyard, not have to leave home and brave a hostile world on a fruitless mission.
A sigh of relief had almost reached his lips when the shadow whispered: "I want

to go too."

He was glad the dark hid his face. He should have known. The size and shape of the silhouette should have told him.

"You don't even know where I'm going, Ox."

"Doesn't matter." After a brief silence, Ox added, "I watched you from the ell.

You're not coming back, are you?"

"Of course I am." Where else could he go, after all? What else could he do other

than become a bandit? "Eventually. If nothing...."

"I still want to come." The other boy stopped and picked up a broken length of

wood. "I can fight off demons for you."

Felix did not say there were no demons, no matter what Ma said. Instead he eyed

his cousin's shadowy bulk and thought of his strength and said, "It's a deal."

Then he turned back toward the darkness inside the shed. He groped. There was an

old axe, its blade chipped and its handle weathered. No one used it, though Pa

or Alva would surely fix it one day. The poles he wanted were where he thought.

But....

"I brought my hat and cloak." Ox tossed them on the trundle's bed with Felix's

own.

"Then let's get this thing out of here."

They left the motor off because he feared that even its quiet hum might be enough to attract unwelcome attention. But it was not so heavy and its wheels were not so stiff and hard to turn that he and Ox together could not roll it outside. Only then did he lay the poles on the trundle's bed, using lengths of

homemade leather cord to anchor them to the uprights that supported the canopy.

"Where are we going?"

Something creaked in the house. Felix froze. Had someone already noticed that he

and Ox were not indoors? Would the next thing he heard be a voice calling out,

"You boys get in here!"

Silence.

Finally, he whispered, "The cemetery."

The trundle rolled so easily that as long as the ground stayed flat and smooth

they left the motor off. But almost as soon as they left the ancient pavement and began to follow the footpath, small shrubs began to seize at the wheels and

slopes of land forced them to struggle and pant.

"They can't hear us now," said Ox softly.

"Then why are you still whispering?" But Ox was right, and Felix was already reaching for the switch that would tap the energy stored in the trundle's batteries.

The motor hummed and groaned against resistance and rolled the wheels over shrubs and up slopes. Ox displayed night-white teeth in a grin that said,

"See?"

Felix nodded and grinned himself and when the trundle seemed to balk and strain

laid hands upon its frame and pushed until it sped ahead once more. When his

hands were free, he swatted mosquitoes.

"Here they come!"

The voice echoed from beyond a moonlit apple tree and skeletal iron gates. It was followed quickly by Great-Grandpa's jubilant cry, "Felix! Did you bring...?"

Organ music swelled into the night. Drums rattled. Thunderstone barked and howled: "Who's that? Hear stranger! Chase and bite and tear! Make him run away!"

"That's Ox," said Felix. He glanced at the other boy. Ox was hesitating, holding back, grimacing with the temptations of terror and flight. He had visited the cemetery before, but neither recently nor often, and never at night. Then he added, "Uncle Alva's boy," even though he wasn't sure it was really true. He gave the trundle another push and watched as it entered the cemetery, found a rut, and banged into a stone.

"If I was still alive, I'd say ouch," said the stone in a voice Felix had not heard before. "Did you chip me? If you did, I'll sue. Or I would, if there were still any lawyers."

"That's what he used to be," said Great-Grandpa.

"What's a lawyer?" Felix turned the trundle off and jerked it back onto the path

it should have stayed upon. Then he looked over his shoulder. Ox was still standing just inside the cemetery's entrance, staring toward the stone that had

threatened to chase and bite him.

When he noticed Felix's attention, he pointed. "A demon?"

"Just a dog," said Felix. He tapped his forehead. "Been dead a long time, except

for his thoughts. They recorded him."

"Waste of money," said a familiar voice. "I paid a lot to be mindloaded, and...."

"Like your book," said Ox. He breathed more easily as he recognized something more familiar, perhaps as memory returned to tell him he had been here before,

he did know what the stones and voices were, they could not hurt him.

"Yeah."

"Why are we here?"

"There's a doctor. He said...." Felix explained about the hope that had been offered him, the distant hospital and its library, the help it might hold for rashes and other ailments.

"Mad doc!" cried the parrot's voice. "Maddoc!"

"Over here, boys," cried Maddoc.

"You want to take him with us?" asked Ox.

"That's the idea." Felix led the way and pointed at the stone. "But...."

"He just wants a free ride. Ha."

"Shaddap, Danny," answered Great-Grandpa.

"Uh-uh. Make a tripod with those poles, now...."

Felix turned toward the trundle, but Ox ignored the voice. He squatted and wrapped his arms around the block of stone. He heaved and grunted. "Help me!" Felix added his strength, and Maddoc tore free of the ground. A few minutes later, they slid the stone up a ramp of poles and stood it erect in the trundle's bed.

"Thanks," said Maddoc. "You can't know how long I've been looking forward to getting out of here. One way or another."

"Me too!" someone cried, and then the chorus rose. There was even a "Prrrt!" from the stone that once had been a cat.

"Forget it!" Maddoc shouted them down. "There's not enough room up here. Let's

get out of here, boys."

"Not yet," said Felix. "What about you, Great-Grandpa?"

"I suppose we can take a couple," Maddoc said, though his tone was grudging. The organ was replaced by a piano, and then the music turned clangorous, as if

someone had dropped chains on the strings. "I can't listen to Walter anymore."

"You didn't used to have any problem," said the stone named Jenny.

"Or her. I can't stand it. Take me? Please?"

"Yes," said Great-Grandpa. "Take Amelie."

"Belle enough to make music wherever she goes," said Danny. "But none of us got any toes."

"I want Thunderstone too," said Felix.

The dog's electronic voice was the soft "Thump! Thump!" of a tail on soft ground.

"Ox?"

But Ox was no longer beside Felix. He had moved away, gravitating toward the source of the strangest voice in all the crowd, whatever it was that had said,

"Prrrt!" and now was murmuring, "Go out? Catch mouse, spray bush, climb tree, run and run and run?"

"I want this one," said Ox. "It's a kitty, right?"

"It used to be," said Great-Grandpa.

"I knew a kitty once." He sounded wistful, and Felix knew that he had to be remembering a time before he and Uncle Alva had come to the Webbs. A time neither of them ever mentioned.

"Not Kitty!" insisted the catstone. Its voice changed as if it were replaying some long-gone mistress's call to dinner: "Heavy!"

* * *

Even with five massive gravestones aboard, the trundle still moved. But now its

motor strained even on the level stretches, even after they had reached what was

once paved road. The surface was harder, but there were so many small bushes and

saplings forcing their way from the roadway's cracks, heaving the paving into humps and pits and obstructing the way with their bulk. On hills both boys had

to strain, pushing from the sides and behind, to keep it crawling at its slowest

speed, while Amelie's Wedding March, endlessly repeated, timed their heaves.

When they stopped to catch their breath, Ox took his stick from the bed of the

trundle and hefted it in his hand. "Do you think we'll see a demon?"

Felix shook his head tiredly.

"A lion?"

Great-Grandpa laughed. "The last time I saw one of those was at the Bronx Zoo. A

long, long ways from here."

"A wolf? A deer? A moose?"

"You might see a wild dog. There's some of those around."

"There used to be." He thumped his stick on the ground.

"What happened to them?" asked Felix.

"Too many people," said Great-Grandpa. "There wasn't any room in the world for

predators like wolves and lions. Then there wasn't any for the deer and moose.

And there never were any demons. Or unicorns."

"What's a unicorn?" asked Ox.

"Didn't you boys bring any guns?" Maddoc's voice sounded incredulous. "No swords? No spears?"

"I've got a knife," said Felix, though he knew it was not large enough to be much help if they met bandits. "And an axe."

"Huh. It'll have to do."

"Then let's get moving again," said Felix, and his cousin never did get an answer to his question.

They were laboring with the poles they had brought to heave the trundle and its

massive cargo out of a low spot on the path when Maddoc said, "Some trundle. I

wish we had a phone. Then we could just call the library. Find out anything we

wanted, just like that."

Felix did not ask what a phone was.

"Haven't been any phones for a long time," said Great-Grandpa.

"I know that, Andy." There was silence. "Or cars, either. Used to be, that city

was only an hour away." Silence again, while Ox and Felix grunted and strained.

"Can't you boys speed this thing up? At this rate, you'll both die of old age before we get anywhere at all."

"It's overloaded," said Great-Grandpa.

The motor quit. Felix looked at the trundle's small control panel. "We've drained the batteries."

"You think I don't know that?"

Amelie's music changed for the first time.

"That's 'Rock of Ages,'" said Great-Grandpa.

"'Cleft for me,'" sang Amelie.

"Of course!" cried Maddoc. "Stop, boys! Stop!"

"We're not moving," said Felix. "And we're not about to. Not till the batteries

recharge. So now they'll find us, as soon as the sun comes up. We didn't make it

far enough."

"You got a toolbox in this thing? A hammer? A screwdriver?"

"Break the mortar," said Great-Grandpa. "That's what she's telling us. Keep our

tops, and throw away our bottoms."

"Ah." Felix recalled the lumps of stone in the cemetery, each one surrounded by

the rubble of Uncle Alva's salvaging. He realized what he had not before: The tops of intact gravestones were only boxes built of stone slabs to contain

the plastic-bedded mazes of circuitry and wire that held the minds of the dead. The

line of mortar that marked each stone joined the top to a pedestal of solid rock

that accounted for most of the weight they had been struggling with.

Half an hour later, they were making much better time even without the motor.

The trundle still deserved its name, for it was never speedy. But now it bore much less weight. Ox had deployed the harness so he could pull while Felix

pushed from behind, and it no longer crawled. And when their overgrown road met

another, larger one with an open trail down its center, sign of at least occasional traffic, they found they could move still more easily.

The stones did not complain again until dawn began to color the eastern sky and

Felix steered the trundle off the road. He stopped when a broken wall screened them from the view of any other passersby. Amelie immediately hushed her endless repetition of the Wedding March as if she knew it might betray them all. Now it was a quiet thread of ever-varying instrumental sound, now organs, now violins, now brass or woodwinds. From a distance, Felix thought, it might pass for wind in trees or water running down a hillside.

"Get us out from under this canopy," said Maddoc. "We need the sun too." When Felix and Ox had obliged, he added, "People shouldn't have to travel like this.

So slow. Takes forever. Used to be, we flew around the world, thousands of miles, in just a few hours."

Ox laughed.

"I've heard of airplanes," said Felix. "Cars with wings. But around the world?

You might as well tell me people used to go to the Moon."

"They did," said Great-Grandpa.

"Moon!" said Thunderstone, and the stone that had once been a dog howled twice.

The landscape fell quiet as even the bugs hushed their voices. There was no answer.

* * *

It was only a little while before the day was bright enough to reveal the weedy

shore of a small lake no more than fifty feet beyond their camp.

"Hah," said Great-Grandpa. "You ever go fishing?"

Felix did not say that of course they did. The stream not far from home held fish, though they were neither many nor large.

"I used to," said the stone. "There were still trout and salmon and bass in this

state when I was alive. Maybe even in this lake. You didn't happen to bring a rod, did you?"

"We use a net."

"Did you bring it?"

Felix shook his head. The family owned only one, and he had not even thought of

taking it.

"Did you see that?" cried Maddoc. "A rise!"

"Then the fish are there," said Great-Grandpa.

But Felix saw only a circle of ripples on the water, as if someone had thrown a

small pebble. He scanned the shore. There was no one there, but among the small

trees he glimpsed a sparkle as of an intact window and a shape that might have

been the edge of a roof. When he pointed them out, Maddoc said, "Summer homes.

Just ruins now."

Ox indicated the sky and a sheet of gray cloud spreading toward them. "Is it going to rain?"

"We've got our hats and cloaks. And we can sit on the trundle, under the canopy."

"It'll slow us down," said Maddoc. "The batteries won't charge if the sun isn't shining."

"You've got batteries too," said Ox. He was pointing at the stone.

"Not enough to share. Or to make much difference."

"Besides," said Great-Grandpa. "There's no way to do it."
Amelie's quiet music stopped. "We have data plugs," she said.
"They're for uploading us," said the other stone. "Or for downloading diagnostics."
"And power," said Amelie.
"I don't see a plug," said Felix.
"It's there, all right," said Great-Grandpa. "But I'll be damned if I'll pull my pants down for another man, even if he is a relative."
Ox looked away.

CHAPTER 14

Mist hung among the trees as it had all morning. Rain pattered around them, dripping from the trundle canopy and their hatbrims, almost the only sound in the landscape around them. It softened the moss and lichen that covered the ancient pavement of the road. It muffled their voices and steps and the creaking of the trundle's joints.
More mist clung to the surface of the stream before them. The slightest of breezes curled it over the bank and the edge of the bridge. Ox, his wet leather cloak snugged close against him by the straps of harness, did not take the step that would have set him on the cracked concrete of the bridge. From where the two boys stood, they could see the trail on the other side, broader and clearer of vegetation, the ancient pavement showing. Yet that meant the trail was more used, and neither one was eager to confront strangers who might not be friendly.

Not that there were any strangers in sight. There were no footprints in the mud, no clots of mud tracked onto the bridge, no sign of a house or farmstead. Yet they could not see far. Across the bridge, the path ran along the base of a bank just high enough to keep them from seeing anything beyond. It then bent around the end of the bluff and disappeared. An army of bandits could be waiting for them just out of sight.

"Smoke," said Ox.

"I smell it." The other boy thought the stream in their path must be the same one that passed near the Webb farmstead, though it was smaller here. Their path had taken them upstream.

Felix sniffed again and scratched his arm beneath his cloak. He thought the smoke was fresh, not stale, close instead of far. And it was no more pungent than might float from a chimney with the hint of boiled cabbage just strong enough to make his mouth water and his stomach clench. He did not think it could mean danger.

"I can smell a privy, too." He pointed downstream, into the breeze. Amelie shifted key and rhythm, and her incessant song became cautious, uncertain. Across the bridge, the road bent in the direction they wished to go. There was

no other choice. They moved forward cautiously, their feet slipping in patches

of mud and sodden leaves. As soon as they rounded the end of the bank that had

blocked their view, they found a low, boxy building whose wooden walls were encased by brickwork pillars. The roof was a patchwork of salvaged metal,

wood,
and other materials; a gap in the patching emitted a wisp of smoke. Head-high bushes crowded the ground before it except for a narrow footpath. There were several small gravestones among the bushes.
"I ate there once," said Great-Grandpa. "It didn't used to be boarded up, though. And there was a big sign out front."
Amelie's voice was organ now, with a touch of string.
"That's purty music, but if you ain't friendly, move on."
Felix dropped his half of the harness and spun as a woman even older than his Ma stepped out of the shrubbery beside the footpath. Her hair was thin and white and plastered by the rain to her scalp, her eyes grimly narrowed, her clothes faded jeans and shirt. Where her skin showed it was as red and scaly as Felix's own. Her throat was swollen with a goiter. In her hands she cradled a crossbow.
Thunderstone began to growl.
The woman swivelled both eyes and crossbow past the trundle. "Where's the dog?"
No one spoke.
"You heard Sissy."
There was a second woman on the other side of the path. She was identical to the first except that she was taller and thinner and her crossbow had no bow. She wore a flat-crowned, broad-brimmed hat.
"Yes," she said. "It works." She pointed her weapon at the ground near Felix's feet and pulled the trigger.
The sound was sudden, sharp, a bark rather than the loud boom he had thought a gun must make. It still made him jump. Yet it did not frighten him. He knew the women were not bandits. They were only defending their own.
"It's a rifle," said the woman.
"We're friendly!" cried Maddoc from the trundle.
Their heads spun.
"What the hell are you doing with those things, boys?" An ancient man had appeared in the path between the women. He too had both rash and goiter. His eyes were wide and soft, as if....
"Shut up, Franklin."
"Yes, Sissy."
Ox closed his eyes and bowed his head.
"Just passing through," said Great-Grandpa. "Don't want to bother you. Nossir.
Not at all."
"Well?" The woman with the rifle was glaring at Felix. Now she licked her lips.
"The dog!"
"One of them stones," said the man.
She made a disappointed face and aimed the crossbow at the trundle. "Where you goin'?"
"Going to the city." Felix could feel more sweat forming on his chest and back than the stickiness of the day could account for. He felt cold. He wished he could move out of her line of fire, but the best he dared to try was half a step as he turned to point at Maddoc's truncated stone. "He says there might be a cure there." He clapped his hand on his other arm and scratched at the rash.
"For this."

The other woman laughed harshly. Franklin shook his head.

"Chumps," said Sissy, but she let her crossbow sag and scratched at her own hip.

"You boys look tired. Hungry too?"

"We've got soup," offered Franklin.

"We can smell it." Felix was already turning the trundle into their path.

"Ever shot anybody?" Ox was looking at the weapons so intently that he nearly fell over when the trundle pulled his harness tight against him.

"Bandits make good fertilizer," said the taller woman. "I'm Lizzie Gregg."

"They kept me, though," said Franklin.

"Sometimes I wish we hadn't," said Sissy.

"And Eddie. But a snake got him."

"Shut up, Franklin."

The inside of the building was a single large room, poorly lit, its walls darkened by woodsmoke. A fire burned on a stone platform in the center of the room; the only chimney was a hole in the roof through which spattered a little

of the rain. The floor was covered with ancient rugs, just as at the Webb farmstead.

Lizzie Gregg reached for the pot beside the fire. "There used to be a kitchen out back."

"But the roof fell in," said the man.

"A long time ago," added Sissy. She lay the crossbow across her lap when she sank cross-legged onto a thick cushion. She was prepared to be hospitable, but

she was not about to be too trusting.

Felix stared into his bowl. The few cabbage leaves in the thin broth showed black spots of mold. The bits of potato were withered even after cooking. The shreds of meat were not identifiable. Yet the soup was hot and gone too soon.

"We don't see many folks come by."

"You look like decent sorts."

"There's bandits out there, you know. Ain't safe to wander around."

"Specially at night."

"Ought to stay right here."

"The Baptists don't bother us much, not anymore," said Lizzie Gregg.

"We're too old," said Franklin.

"Baptists?" asked Felix.

Sissy pointed toward the coast to the east. "Over that way somewhere." She shook

her head. "They send teams out, looking for stuff. They'd love that cart of yours."

"Women and kids, too," said Franklin.

Felix could understand why someone might like to take the trundle, but people?

Sissy answered his puzzled look by saying, "One of 'em told us once. They're saving the world. The kids they teach to love their God and to live their way.

The women they use to make more kids."

"Or try," said Franklin.

"They have to," said Lizzie Gregg, and Felix suddenly realized just how widespread must be the problem he had glimpsed already. It was not just the Webbs and their neighbors and their animals that had few babies, or whose babies

died at or soon after birth. It was everyone, everywhere. "Poison in the soil,"

Uncle Alva would say. "Love bugs" would be Pa's answer.

"It makes sense," he said. If any group wanted many children, it would need many

women. He wondered if there were any place where people could have babies easily, where the babies lived, where there were no rashes.

"Maybe so," said Franklin. "You still want to watch out for them. As well as bandits."

"You could stay here," said Lizzie Gregg, and she was staring at both boys with

a hunger that made Felix increasingly uncomfortable. He did not dare look at Ox

to see if he too was squirming.

Then Sissy licked her lips and said, "We could do a lot for you. Make you comfortable. Keep you safe."

"Though we're not much help for rashes." Franklin scratched at his wrist.

"You could help us too," added Lizzie Gregg. "We ain't as spry as we used to be."

"No," said Ox.

"Those rashes." Felix grinned with relief that Ox had answered as he had. He shook his head. "If we find anything, we'll let you know." He got to his feet.

"We have to get moving."

Sissy began to get to her feet, the crossbow once more in her hands.

His eyes widened.

She laughed and pointed it carefully at the floor. "No," she said. "We wouldn't

keep you. Though...."

"Too young." Lizzie Gregg was grinning too.

Felix was not at all sure he believed them. He glanced at Franklin, who seemed

somehow disappointed. Then he gestured toward the soup pot and fire. "Nice to get warm. Thanks for the soup." Then he backed toward the door.

No one followed them, and a few minutes later they were back in harness, pulling

the trundle along the old road that paralleled the stream.

"I didn't like them," said Ox after a bit.

Felix grunted and shook his head and slipped in the wet.

"What happened?" asked Great-Grandpa. The stones had remained on the trundle.

"They fed us. But they seemed awfully hungry."

"Were they going to eat us?" Ox's eyes were suddenly round.

"I don't think so."

"People do," said Maddoc. "Feed you and lull you, and then some night, when you're sound asleep...."

"Bite," growled Thunderstone. "Chew bones. Eat dog and cat and...."

"If you were really here," said Felix. "But they did warn us about--"

"What?" interrupted Maddoc.

"The Baptists." He repeated what they had been told.

Great-Grandpa made a snorting noise. "Bible pounders. In my day...."

Amelie's Wedding March stopped just long enough for her to say, "They were lonely. Just lonely."

Felix thought she sounded wistful, as if she recognized that loneliness. "Why don't you talk more?" he asked. But the only answer was a return to Mendelssohn.

"If they were younger," said Maddoc musingly. "You could have stayed the night.

Given them a little fresh blood."

"What about that Franklin?" asked Felix.

"Didn't look like he'd dare object."

"First time I've been out of that cemetery in a long, long time," said Great-Grandpa as if he thought it best to change the subject. "Aren't many people around, are there? No wonder they're lonely."

The music stopped. "I'm not surprised," said Amelie in a tone that suggested effort, as if she were finally answering Felix's question by forcing herself to

speak. "As long as we were stuck where we were, we didn't get much sense of the

world. We couldn't see very far, and we didn't get many visitors."

"Squirrels," said Maddoc.

"Not very chatty," said Great-Grandpa.

"The world has certainly declined," said Amelie. Her music began once more.

"Gotten hungry too," said Maddoc.

No one answered that. Felix wished silently that the rain would stop and the sun

would come out and the trundle's batteries would charge. Lacking that, all he and Ox could do was lean into the harness, hauling slowly toward a destination

that might or might not hold hope for a better future.

* * *

By the time the road bent away from the stream, the rain had diminished to a drizzle. As they struggled up a slope, it quit entirely. When they reached the

top, they could see a band of light ahead of them, and before long sunlight was

reaching the cells on the trundle's canopy.

"Don't stop here," said Maddoc. The road had turned almost bare of plant growth,

though the pavement was as cracked and holed as ever. Beside it, the grass was

thin. To either side stood ranks of limbless tree trunks. Thistles and nettles

and brushy honeysuckle and everlasting were thick around their bases, but leaves

were yellow and twisted.

"Poison in the soil," said Ox just as Uncle Alvah would have if he were with them. Felix nodded, thinking again of Baptists stealing women and children in order to maintain and even increase their numbers, wondering if he would ever have children of his own. He was not tempted to stop here, even if a few hours

in the renewed sunlight could make the trundle able to move under its own power

once more. Besides, now the road was nearly level. With the lack of plant growth

in their way, it was easier to keep moving than it had been since they had left

the cemetery.

Here and there he could see patches of healthier green. "Apple trees," he said.

"They're tough," said Great-Grandpa. "Them and brambles."

"Complicated genes," put in Maddoc. "I never was a botanist, but I picked up a

little. The genes mixed up a different way in every seed, so every seed produced

a different kind of tree. Different flavor fruit. Different shape. Different tolerance for poison or youvee."

"I know they had to graft," said Great-Grandpa. "If they wanted more than one of

something. And the woods were full of wild ones. It's no wonder some of them do

so well."

Felix had no idea what the stones meant by "genes" and "botanist" and "graft."

Yet he thought he understood enough: Apple trees did well even in this toxic landscape because they had more potential for variety. Those variations that were vulnerable died. Those that were not remained.

He said nothing, however, until the grass and weeds and small shrubs and saplings were once more growing in the roadway's cracks and the worst of the blight was behind them. That was when Ox pointed at a pile of ruins that seemed

crouched beneath the branches of a dead tree and said, "We could have a fire."

Soon the stones had been set on the ground to soak up what sun they could before

the day ended. The fire was flickering in a ring of stones taken from the ruins.

A chunk of rusty sheet metal taken from what had once been an automobile reflected heat toward the boys. Two potatoes were roasting in the coals. Ox had found an iron bar as long as his arm in the rubble. Now he squatted beside the fire, scrubbing the rust away with handfuls of sand.

Felix used a stick to arrange coals around their dinner. Then he looked toward

the stones. "Where did all the poison come from?"

"People," said Great-Grandpa. "There were so many of us, just before the end. And everyone wanted a house, a car or two, a television or maybe three, wall-to-wall carpeting, electric toys of a thousand sorts."

"Making all that stuff made poison too," said Maddoc. "Like the shavings from a

whittler's knife. Except it wasn't good for anything, not even kindling."

"Some of it went into the air and made the youvee."

Amelie interrupted her endless song to say, "Didn't make it. Made it happen."

"Whatever," said Great-Grandpa. "I never understood it, really. But we didn't have to, did we? It was enough to know that the youvee made plants and animals

and people sick."

Felix nodded as he listened. That was why they could not plant corn, why he wore

his broad-brimmed hat and leather cloak.

"And some went into the soil," said Maddoc. "In the water, in the dirt, into roots and food and guts. Making cancers, stopping dancers, begging answers."

"We knew the answers," said Amelie. "But we didn't like them." She sounded an emphatic chord and the music resumed.

"Not so loud," said Maddoc. "Not allowed when folks are talking."

The Wedding March hesitated.

"Someone might be listening, too."

The volume declined to a whisper.

"We'd rather dig a hole," said Great-Grandpa. "Bury the garbage, the poisons, even the toys, as if that made them go away. Bury our heads, too. That didn't help."

"They wore them out and threw them all away and then bought more."

"We weren't any better, were we?"

"Just look at us." Great-Grandpa laughed. "At least we were built to last."

"They wore the soil out too. Just feeding so many people."

"That didn't help."

"Not a bit."

"It got warmer, too."

"Bigger storms."

"More trouble for the plants."

"They had to move to find the kind of weather they liked."

"Except they couldn't."

"Unless something carried their seeds."

"The wind," said Felix. He had seen maple seeds blowing, spinning, to land some

distance from their parent tree. "And sticktites."

"Burrs," said Ox.

"I'm nodding at you." Words were the closest Great-Grandpa could come to any gesture at all. "That's it exactly. And birds eating berries and shitting seeds.

It's a slow process, mostly, but it's how those cat-claw briars got here."

"Adaptation," said Maddoc. "Perfectly natural. We fuck up the world, and the world adjusts. Moves on, without us if need be. Maybe just as well."

The stones fell silent. Felix thought of the scenes they had passed that day, the trunks of trees that had not been able to tolerate the changes in climate and storm and youvee. Large trees that somehow lingered, casting their seeds upon the wind in hopes that they would land further north, on cooler, less toxic

ground, and sprout and prosper. Small ones struggling for their footholds in new

lands.

"How do you know?" asked Ox, and Felix felt oddly ashamed of himself for not asking the same question. He had always thought himself quicker than his more muscular "cousin."

"We remember," said Maddoc.

"We were never eggheads or ecofreaks," said Great-Grandpa. "But it was in the papers and the magazines and on teevee. They were talking about it when I was a

kid. My parents said they had been talking about it when they were kids."

"Then why didn't they do something about it?"

Silence was the only answer. Felix thought he knew why, but all he could do was

lay another stick on the fire, scratch his leg and arm, and check the trundle's

power gauge. He was pleased to see that the canopy had intercepted almost enough

sunlight that afternoon to bring the batteries to full charge. It wouldn't have

if they had been using the motor. Tomorrow they would be able to handle a hill

or two, or heavy undergrowth. Or, if the road stayed as passable as it had been

this day, they could take it easy, simply walking, chatting with the stones while the trundle rolled itself along.

When he turned back toward the fire, Ox had rolled himself in his cloak and stretched out beside one of the stones. A purring noise made it clear which stone he had chosen.

Felix bent to pat Thunderstone. Then he sat down once more and fished his Swiss

Family Robinson_ from his sack. Its ready light still glowed red. His finger hovered over the book's switch. But no, he didn't need to turn it on. He knew the story well, quite well enough to see in it exactly the attitude that the stones said had destroyed the world.

The Robinsons had not destroyed a world. They had built one. But they were people, and people never were content with what they had, whether they had a little or a lot. They wanted more, and to get it they would rearrange the world

around them however they must, digging and building, using and discarding.

CHAPTER 15

They made rapid progress the next day. The road remained smooth, the vegetation

in its cracks was little more than grass and thistles, the trundle had enough power to roll itself along, and the sun stayed out in the yellow sky, bright enough to keep the batteries from draining too rapidly.

The sounds they heard were the hum of the trundle's motor, Amelie's endless Wedding March, now loud, now soft, now organ, now strings, now a single pure sweet trumpet, now the fullest of orchestras. Maddoc and the catstone slept.

Great-Grandpa murmured the names of Amelie's instruments in a drowsy voice. Thunderstone made tail-thumping noises and said, "See a bush, see a tree. Oh, wish a smell! Wish a sniff and search, find trail and chase. Throw ball! Throw

Frisbee! Chase and catch, catch and fetch!" Ox and Felix said very little, concentrating on steering the trundle and lending it their own strength to hasten it along the trail. When the land tipped down some gentle slope, Ox would

take his iron bar from the trundle bed and swing it at weed tops or rest it on

his shoulder, doing his share of the steering simply by leaning against the trundle's side if it tried to leave the trail.

The land was empty but for ruins. Most were ancient curtains of brick or stone,

cellar holes half full of rain water, concrete slabs heaped with rubble. A few

intact buildings remained, including one built of massive stone blocks beside a

field of headstones overgrown with everlasting. As they passed, shrill voices called after them, "Has he come yet? Is it time yet? Have you seen the whore, the pit, the crown?"

Ox laughed as if the words touched some chord of memory. He might have spoken,

but at that moment they came upon a large blacksnake sunning itself on a near-bare patch of pavement. It was already sliding out of sight when Ox smashed

its head with his club and flipped the body into the trundle.

"Has the trumpet blown? When do we rise?"

Maddoc roused then, just enough to cry, "The trumpet blew, but no one came. The

game was called on account of rain."

"Vials of wrath!" someone screamed. "Blood and death! Four horsemen riding across the land!"

"Horses are extinct," replied Great-Grandpa.

The voices shrieked and called them names, but then others cried out, "What do

you mean? What happened? Why doesn't anyone ever visit? We haven't seen the sexton in simply ages, and the weeds are...."

When the voices faded behind them, Maddoc laughed. Felix asked, "What were they

talking about?" Great-Grandpa said, "They're mad. You'd think by now they'd have

figured it out. They aren't going to get out of bed again."

"But...."

"Ask one of those Baptists," said Maddoc, but after that he would say no more,

no matter how Felix pressed.

Later they passed in quick succession three one-time farmsteads much like the one where Felix had been born and raised. Every house and barn and shed had been

reduced to a pile of weathered ash and charcoal. The gardens and yards and rubble were overgrown with burdock and nettles, thistles and blackberry canes,

the new season's growth always lushest where the privies and manure piles had been.

"Bandits," said Ox as Amelie's Mendelssohn slowed to the pace of a dirge.

"I'm nodding," said Great-Grandpa. "Nothing else it could be."

* * *

It was another day before they saw another sign of living people.

They had camped the night before beside a tiny stream, set out the stones to

catch the last of the day's light, and made a fire. This time they did not bother to cook potatoes. The snake was enough. Clouds hid the moon. Thunderstone felt no need to howl. The night was quiet except for the smallest of noises and, once, near dawn, a distant cry that might have been a human voice.

In the morning, they could see a column of smoke ahead, in the direction they planned to go.

"That's not a cookfire," Felix said.

"You'd be fools to go any closer," said Maddoc.

Felix remembered the cry in the night. "Maybe we could...."

"No," said Great-Grandpa. "They're dead, whoever they are. Or were. But the bandits are still there."

Ox said nothing, but he did pick up his iron bar and smack it against his palm.

Amelie muted her music to the merest of whispers but laid down a martial beat behind the tune. It sounded almost as if Hammerhead had somehow joined them. Felix checked the trundle's control panel. The batteries were almost fully charged.

When he picked up the ancient axe he had brought, Great-Grandpa said, "You're going to get us killed."

"Just us," said Felix. He knew there was a risk, but he felt quite wordlessly that it was a risk he had to take. He glanced at Ox; he seemed to agree, for he was grinning, showing teeth, and waving his iron bar in time to Amelie's beat.

"You already are."

"It's worth it," whispered Amelie. "We can't just cover our eyes."

With the boys adding their strength to the trundle's motor, it was not long before they could hear the fire as well as see and smell its smoke. A moment later they could see flames through the scrubby trees and hear shouts and cries.

The road passed by a farmstead like all those they had passed already, but this one was not yet, not quite, in ruins. To the right of the trail was an open space, bare dirt beaten hard by wheels and the feet of humans and animals. A rusted box bearing traces of faded red paint was all that remained of an ancient truck. Hay was scattered across the yard between a low shed or barn and a house much like the Webbs'. From the house's windows flames gouted and smoke poured.

The metal roof glowed red in spots. From the branch of a tree beside the house swung the body of a goat, its hide smoking in the heat of the housefire. The body of a man lay in the yard midway between shed and house. A small animal was spiked to the shed wall with a pitchfork.

A gust of smoke brought them the stench of burning goat hair. When that whisked away, there was still the stink of a privy that would never be used again, of manure that would never be spaded into a garden patch, of burning meat that said someone had been left within the inferno that had been a home.

The fire crackled and rumbled and roared. A piece of roof fell in with a crash.

Flame and sparks spouted high. Embers landed near the boys. Ox brushed several off the canopy of the trundle before they could do any damage.

The three men watching the fire were completely unaware of the boys. Two held a struggling figure clad in denim shirt and jeans, clamping her arms behind her back. The third occasionally reached out with a long stick to set the swinging goat to spinning. All three wore broad-brimmed hats and leather cloaks which, when they swayed, revealed long knives slung from their belts. "They're not looking this way." Maddoc's voice was almost inaudible against the roar of the flames. "Let's just keep going." Felix shook his head and scratched tensely at his arm. The captive, the only survivor of the bandits' raid, opened her mouth and screamed. One of the men clubbed her with a fist. She kicked backward with her heels, and he swore. She screamed again, and the other man tore at her shirt, exposing a small breast. She alone wore no protection against the youvee of the sun. Felix pushed the trundle's throttle as far as it would go, leaned into its side, and began to run toward the bandits. On the other side of the trundle, Ox screamed shrill ululations. Thunderstone howled. The catstone screeched. Great-Grandpa and Maddoc did their best to imitate a horde of moaning, gibbering demons. The bandits spun and gaped. They hurled the girl aside and reached for their knives. Now Felix too began to scream. He let go the side of the trundle and flourished his axe over his head. The bandit who had been turning the goat on its twisting spit poised his pole like a spear. Ox smashed it aside with his iron bar and caved in the man's skull. Felix used his axe to knock a knife aside. Then he struck at a skull, but an arm got in the way and the axe handle snapped. The head flew toward the shed. He struck wildly with what he still held and pounded an arm, a leg, a shoulder. Ox spun toward the remaining pair of bandits, his iron bar dripping blood above his head. Maddoc shrieked, "Save his soul for me!" They ran. Silence fell, except for the crackling of the flames and the panting sobs of the girl. They stared at her. She crouched on the ground where the bandits had hurled her. Her mouth was open, her teeth showing, her eyes wide and wild and dry. Her exposed breast heaved as she panted. She was about the same age as the boys. Like them, she had a rash. When Ox reached for her, she gasped and leaped backward. Then she stopped as if she knew there was nowhere to run. The tendons in her neck showed like tree roots or wires. Felix looked past her, trying to see where the axe head had fallen. After a long moment, she said, "The shed." Her voice was staccato with tension. It squeaked. "A better axe. In there." She looked at the body the bandits had left in the yard. "Take it," she said. "Papa'd want you to." Ox turned away toward the bandit whose skull he had split. A moment later, he said, "He's still breathing." "Throw him in the fire," said the girl. Now her tone was vicious.

The boys silently obeyed. Felix barely wondered whether the man might have been able to survive or should have been spared or could feel the agony of the flames.

Then Felix checked the shed. There was indeed a better axe, double-bitted, freshly honed, solidly hafted. There were also files, whetstones, saws, and other tools.

When he emerged with his arms full and a shovel over his shoulder, the girl had

rearranged her clothing. When she saw the shovel, she froze and half-closed her

eyes. Her face twisted with knowledge and grief. Then she stood up and pointed

toward her family's garden. "Over there."

He and Ox dug the grave for her Papa where she indicated, near a small cluster

of headstones. While she watched, tense, white-knuckled, they eased his body into the hole and filled it in again.

Afterward, she said, "I'm Luanna."

The boys named themselves. "Do you want to go with us?"

She touched the stones on the trundle. She hesitated. "I haven't got much choice. What...?"

"Gravestones," said Maddoc in a rumbling voice.

She jumped.

"He's an idiot," said Great-Grandpa. "Crazy too. That's why we call him the Mad

Doctor, Maddoc."

Amelie's music resumed, soothing against the sound and stink of the fire.

Thunderstone made tail-patting-floor noises and woofed gently.

When the catstone purred, Luanna's eyes finally filled with tears. "I had a cat."

Felix looked at the shed and the small creature pitchforked to its wall. He thought they should have buried it with Luanna's Pa.

"Leave it," she said. She pointed at a single crow that had settled in the tree

that still held the roasting goat. It and its fellows would clean up whatever remained when they left. "What's this one's name?"

"Heavy," said the catstone. A hint of a smile flickered on Luanna's mouth despite the trauma she had just endured. "Butt chin and cuddle-curl."

* * *

For the rest of that day, Luanna rode on the trundle, curled against the catstone's side. She hardly said a word, and once Felix noticed that her thumb

was in her mouth and her cheeks were wet with tears.

He thought he might respond much the same if bandits murdered his Ma and Pa and

burned the house he had grown up in. He left her to her grief, saying nothing,

only steering the now heavier trundle along the trail, wishing he had noticed which way the surviving bandits had run, getting out the harness when the batteries ran low and, with Ox, hauling the trundle onward.

He could hardly forget she was there. His eyes kept going back to her. He noticed the slenderness of her form, the contours so unlike his own, even so unlike his Ma's. She was a girl his own age, or near enough. She was just what

he had hoped he might find on this journey.

Yet she was hardly in a frame of mind to share that hope. He understood that.

There was a bruise developing on the side of her head. Her features were so twisted by pain that he could feel his own face cramping in sympathy. He

wished

desperately to see her smile.

So did Ox, he guessed, for the other boy also kept glancing toward Luanna, and

his face too echoed the pain in hers.

Felix's mouth watered when a breeze brought him the aroma of the roasted goat.

Luanna had made no objection when they removed it from the tree and draped it over one end of the trundle. Like them, like the bandits, she recognized its value as food.

Yet she also watched Felix and Ox warily. They were men, strangers, and even though they had driven off the bandits and shown no sign that murder or rape was

on their minds, she clearly did not trust them. She had come with them because

she truly felt she had no choice.

"She'll come out of it," said Great-Grandpa.

"Tough little thing," said Maddoc. "'Throw him in the fire,' she said. Let him

suffer, if there's anything left to suffer in that skull you smashed, Ox.

Fuck

him, and the horse he rode in on, too."

Amelie interrupted her music to say, "Not that. Not after what they must have done to her already. And her mother, in the fire."

"Maybe even her father," said Maddoc, and Ox leaned into his harness as if he could get further away from the voices.

"Both of you, shut up," said Great-Grandpa. "Can't you see she's shaking?

She's

not used to us."

Felix looked over his shoulder. He thought Luanna had better reasons to shake and even scream than being surrounded by talking gravestones. After all, she had

lost everything she had ever known and loved. Parents, pets, and home. Yet Great-Grandpa was right: She was still curled against the catstone, but her eyes

were shut and she was quivering with obvious distress.

Silence fell except for the boys' heavy breathing, Heavy's purr, and the creaking of the trundle under its load. Felix thought that he had never known how fortunate his family had been. They knew of bandits, of course. But they had

never been attacked, raided, slaughtered. Neither had their few neighbors.

When he next looked back, Luanna was watching him and Ox, and her expression showed a trace of puzzlement, as if she wondered how anyone could travel with the dead the way they did, where they were going, and what their mission was.

Later, he thought. Later, when they were as far as possible from wherever the surviving bandits had fled to lick their wounds.

CHAPTER 16

"Now what?"

The two surviving bandits had stopped running not far from the farmstead they had just torched. They could even smell the goat they had been roasting in the

fire's heat, and it seemed very natural for Hussey to ask the question. He had

always been the junior member of their small gang. Now the leader was dead.

Kiwi

was the next in line, even if he did not seem to have his mind on leadership.

"Fuckin' kids!" said Kiwi. "I don't believe it!"

Blood was still trickling from a gash in his scalp down the side of his head and

neck. His soaked shirt was already stiffening.

"Damn good thing that axe handle broke." Hussey wiggled his fingers and felt

the forearm that had stopped the blow that should have left him on the ground with Ron.

"Fuck the axe handle." Kiwi's right wrist was covered with drying blood from a smaller gash, and it made an awkward angle with the rest of his arm. It was already swollen. He touched it with the other hand and winced. "I think it's broken."

"We shouldn't have run," said Hussey. "There was only two of 'em."
"And a bunch of demons."

"Gravestones from some cemetery. If they hadn't surprised us...."
Kiwi did not answer but looked down at his injured arm. He could not deny that

Hussey was right, any more than Hussey could guess why their attackers should be traveling with the stones.

"Now what?" Hussey finally repeated.

"We get those bastards. And the girl." When Hussey eyed his wrist skeptically, he added, "I don't need two hands to cut their throats. Wait till they're asleep. Then...." He gestured one-handed. "And we'll smash those fuckin' stones just like we've done before."

* * *

When they could no longer hear the fire and the aroma of roasting meat had dimmed almost to a memory, they crept cautiously back toward the farmstead. Hussey went ahead, for Kiwi was clumsier and swore aloud every time his broken

wrist touched a branch.

As soon as he could see the clearing, he froze. A single man stood in the middle

of what had been a farmyard. He was thin, darkly bearded, scowling. His broad-brimmed hat swung from one hand. A pack made the small of his back bulge

beneath his cloak.

He was just one man. Hussey was sure he could take him.

Or was he? Could others be waiting out of sight, hiding until someone dared to

attack? Was he with those kids, and were they not gone after all?

When the stranger looked away, Hussey dropped to all fours. He held his breath,

listening, trying desperately not to be noticed. He heard footsteps, the brush

of leather on branches, a curse, silence. Long minutes later, he crept slowly through the brush. When he finally had a decent view of the yard and shed, he breathed a sigh of relief. He needn't have bothered. Their attackers were gone.

So was the stranger.

He stood up, and a dozen crows took wing from the ground in front of the shed.

"Fucking thieves." He jumped when Kiwi's voice sounded right behind him.

"They took the goat."

"Looks like they buried the bodies."

"Not Ron." The skull of their late leader, already stripped by the fire of every

trace of flesh, was nestled in a mound of ashes. It seemed to wear a sardonic grin. Behind it, the remainder of the skeleton traced lines and curves among the

still-glowing embers.

Kiwi found a rock and threw it. The white bone-ash of the skull shattered where

it struck, exposing a black cavity and releasing a puff of steam. "Fuck him, too."

Together, Kiwi and Hussey studied the hard farmyard soil. In a moment, Kiwi pointed out the trundle's tracks, one set atop another and leading toward the trail. The stranger's boots made a line of tracks beside them. "We'll have to hurry."

"What do you mean?"

"Or he'll get them first." Their eyes met, and Kiwi showed his teeth in a wolfish grin that quickly collapsed in a grimace of pain. "Yeah, I saw him too."

Hussey looked at the other man's wrist. It was more swollen than before, and it

looked agonizingly uncomfortable even though the fingers were now tucked into Kiwi's belt. "Maybe they left something you can use for a sling."

Kiwi's other hand now held his knife. He was pointing toward the shed and the single crow that had already returned to perch on the edge of its roof. "Skin the pussy. We'll do the other one later."

"It'll just stink."

CHAPTER 17

Felix and Ox strained at the trundle long after the batteries were drained, until the sun went down and a half-moon dimmed by thin clouds made the land seem

to glow. Amelie's Wedding March, like the trundle, kept rolling along, a rhythm

by which to pace both legs and breath.

"Aren't you going to stop, boys?" asked Maddoc.

Felix didn't answer, but Luanna spoke for the first time since they had left the

ruins of her home and childhood, crying in a panicky voice: "No! They're behind

us, following! They want me!"

"They want the boys too," said Great-Grandpa. "They've got a grudge, eh?"

Maddoc chuckled nastily. "You might say that."

A shadowy rabbit lolloped across the path in front of them. Thunderstone barked

and said, "Chase!"

"You trying to spook her?"

"Just trying to make her get out and walk. Or push. We'd make faster progress if

she did. If she doesn't...."

"Need hat," said Thunderstone. "For youvee."

"Not at night, you dumb dog," said Maddoc.

"It's not night yet," said Ox.

"Close enough."

"Leave her be," Felix panted. The aroma of roast goat made his mouth water and

his stomach growl. His feet and muscles hurt, his lungs burned, and he wished she would indeed lend a hand, or at least make the load lighter. But he also thought she must have little attention or energy to spare for the moment.

"For now."

"What's this?" Felix looked, and her hand was on the sack that held both their

small supply of potatoes and the Memory of the Webbs. The frame that held the Memory was straight and rigid against the cloth. So was the smaller contour of

his Swiss Family Robinson. But it was the frame that emerged in her hand.

"I'll read it to you, my dear," offered Great-Grandpa.
"No," said Felix. He leaned into his half of the harness once more. In a moment,
he added, "It's the memory of my family," and began to recite the text. When he was done, he looked over his shoulder and saw Luanna carefully returning
the Memory of the Webbs to its sack. He thought the tears in her eyes must mean
she wished she had such a thing for her own family. Even words on a paper she could not read. But they were gone, and all their possessions were smoke. The only memories that remained for her were those in her own head.
Saying nothing more, he concentrated with Ox on hauling the trundle up hills and
through brushy stretches of the road where past floods had covered the pavement
with silt enough for roots and growth to match the ground to either side. Intent
on putting as much distance as possible between them and the bandits who had fled their attack, they kept their heads down and their minds blank. They breathed, pumped, adjusted harness straps when they grew painful, and stared at
the ground ahead of them. Thunderstone barked whenever something rustled in the brush beside their path.
The dog quieted only when Luanna tensely murmured, "Hush. They'll hear you." The boys barely noticed such things, nor when the trees shrank until they were
little more than brush, when cellar holes grew more frequent, when piles of tumbled brick and rusty steel crowded all else aside and then diminished, giving
way to cellar holes once more, to trees that for awhile grew much taller than usual and hemmed in the trail like walls. They hardly saw those few buildings that remained intact, or nearly so except for broken windows and rotted or storm-battered roofs. Most of these survivors were built of stone; only a few were wood or brick. There were none that had the look of salvage, that said any
heir to the lost age of wonders had ever tried to scratch a living from the soil
in this vicinity. They stopped only when Felix found himself lagging behind the sturdier Ox, his
own harness drooping and his cousin being forced to carry all the load. They were at the top of a slight rise in the landscape, and twilight was by then well
advanced. Night was near. He needed rest and food. Surely his cousin did as well.
To one side of their trail extended an expanse of low growth much like that which struggled to penetrate the surface of the road. He stepped aside long enough to see that here too was pavement, and among the bushes were the rusted
and youvee-faded hulks of dozens of ancient automobiles. When he kicked a plastic panel, it split and crumbled.
He looked back the way they had come.
"See the smoke?" said Maddoc.
"Yeah," he panted. A dozen close-spaced threads were a band of smoke against the
horizon, tattering into nothingness as it rose. He guessed it must mark the place where Luanna had lived until.... It was surprisingly distant.
"See the other one?"
A second thread, thinner, bright near its top where the last rays of sunlight

caught it before it thinned to invisibility. Only a little closer than the first. The bandits? Shouldn't they have made more progress? Or was it someone else?

When his breathing calmed, he forced himself to resume the pace for a little longer, but then he saw another farmstead to one side of the road. Its yard was

as overgrown as those of other farmsteads destroyed by bandits, but a house still stood. In the near dark, it was hard to tell but he thought the roof might

be intact. Certainly there was a glint of moonlight on window-glass. A pillared

porch faced the yard. He could see nothing of what might lie behind the house or

to its sides. "There," he said.

Ox turned off the road so promptly that Felix knew he too was tired.

They stopped not far from the house's porch, stripped off their harness, and sat

down without taking another step. Once his breathing had returned to normal, Felix said, "I'm hungry."

"Food," said Thunderstone. "Chew bone. Go walk."

Ox snorted. "We've walked enough for one day."

"The goat," said Luanna. She was now sitting up beside the catstone, which murmured softly, "Catch mouse, catch bird." She patted it as if it really were a

cat named Heavy. Her voice started tentatively but quickly firmed. "Or it'll spoil."

"I told you she was tough," said Great-Grandpa.

"Practical," said Maddoc.

"We shouldn't waste it," said Luanna. She closed her eyes as if that was all it

now took for her to accept them. They were talking stones, strange and frightening, but once they had been people, just as Heavy had been a cat. If she

didn't look, they still were people.

Felix forced himself to rise once more to his feet. He winced and gasped when his muscles spasmed in complaint. He took a painful step toward the trundle.

"Was it a pet?"

The girl's head-shake was just barely visible in the shadow of the trundle's canopy. "She was pregnant. The billy got away."

Felix shooed off half a dozen flies that buzzed near the meat and tore a strip

from the animal's thigh. He passed it to her. She accepted. He handed another to

Ox. Finally he took some for himself.

* * *

When he first opened his eyes the next morning, Felix thought he must have dreamed the events of the day before. He never would have thought he could go charging into the midst of even a small gang of bandits, much less make them flee and rescue a maiden and then haul the trundle for so many miles and hours.

Yet he could still taste the roast goat in his mouth and smell it on the air. The abandoned farmhouse loomed over his head, the edge of its broad porch almost

close enough to touch. There was a bank of rhododendron to one side, its fallen

flowers pink rags in the grass. Roses pouted red, white, pink buds on the other

and promised to fill the air with sweetness.

Now he could tell that the pillars that held up the porch roof were no more than

logs stripped of bark and cut to size. Across the yard was a small barn, its closed door sagging in its frame.

"No sign of the bandits," said Great-Grandpa's voice. "But you've got a flat."

"We kept watch, would have waked you, screamed 'FIRE!' at the tops of our speakers," said Maddoc. "But they haven't caught up yet. If they're even following."

"They are," said Amelie in an ominous tone that played counter to her music. "And flats can wait," added Maddoc.

Felix looked at the trundle and swore. So did Ox, who had slept on the other side of the trundle and was now also awake. It undoubtedly leaned toward its left rear corner. When he checked the tire, he found that its rubber was cracked

and fissured. The youvee did that, Uncle Alva had told him.

The other tires proved not much better. He hoped he could find a car with a replacement in its trunk, still sheltered from the sun. Tires were impossible to

repair once they had rotted.

And soon they would need more replacements. They would have to find them as soon

as they could and then carry them along. He made a face at the thought of adding

still more weight to the trundle.

But there was the girl, Luanna, half under the edge of the porch, poised to roll

out of sight if the bandits had indeed showed up. Or if he or Ox had had the energy or will to....

He felt his body quivering in response to Luanna's presence. He had never known

a girl so near his own age. He thought he might never meet another in this world

so devoid of people.

Would he and she eventually grow closer? Become friends? Could she possibly become what Ma so prayerfully and so often wished for him--a wife, a mate?

Felix climbed to his feet, suppressing a groan when his abused muscles protested, and checked the trundle's control panel. The batteries had only just

begun to charge. They would need every bit of sun the day would give them.

Yet

they could not remain here long. The surviving bandits were surely following.

If

they caught up....

The house's windows were closed with plank shutters. The door was shut. It looked as it might if its occupant had just gone away for a day or two. Yet there was more than one season's growth of weeds and everlasting in the yard. Felix stepped onto the porch. It creaked alarmingly. It creaked again when Ox followed him.

The door was not locked. Inside, enough light came through the shutters to show

dust and worn furniture, much with the gnaw-marks of the mice, rats, and other

rodents whose droppings littered the floor. The light also showed that the house

had been kept up, repaired, protected from the elements long after most other houses of its age had succumbed. In some of its rooms, the walls were still plaster and wallpaper hung in curling strips. In others, the plaster had fallen

and been replaced by rough boards taken from other buildings.

A short hallway led to a kitchen with a sink and an ancient fridge much like Ma's. Before Felix could obey the impulse to open its door and see if its

light

came on, he registered the remains of a body on the other side of the small room. It lay in a nest of rags produced when rodents had chewed through its clothes to get at meat and bone. What was left was scraps and splinters and an

almost untouched skull the color of fried potatoes.

"Disease," said Ox. "Bandits would have burned the place."

A shelf above the table held several ragged-edged books. Felix looked at the shutters over the windows. Whoever this person had been, he--or she--could not

have lived alone. There must have been someone else to close the house up and walk away. The disease had not been one of those that struck down everyone who

came near a victim.

Perhaps it had been like the rash. He fingered his wrists and elbows. It was still there, as scaly and red as ever. But did it perhaps tingle and itch a little less today? He had no idea how that could be, unless.... He poked at the

swelling where he had gouged his own skin. It hurt, and he had known one pain to

cancel out another. It also oozed pale, cloudy liquid. There would be pus in another day or two.

"I think we're okay," he said. Now he did open the fridge. It contained only a

bone that had been pierced several times along its length. One end was carved into a mouthpiece, the other into a tiny replica of its owner's skull.

"Look!"

He turned. Ox had found a ring set in the floor. Now he was lifting a trapdoor

to reveal a cache of cans and jars whose labels bore mouth-watering pictures of

food. Some of the jars had burst, some cans had swollen and others were stained

by rust, but many seemed intact, undamaged.

Felix shook his head. "We can't use it." Ma and Pa and Uncle Alva had all warned

the boys against sampling such things. They were too old to trust.

Someone screamed.

The boys' heads jerked up. Their eyes widened. Felix felt his heart leap within

his chest.

"Luanna!" said Ox.

Thunderstone howled desperately.

They ran from the house. "Out back!" cried Great-Grandpa, and they saw where she

had trodden grass and broken stems on her way around the house, past another door and a rotted-out stoop and a privy half collapsed into its hole. The lack

of stink betrayed how long this farmstead had been abandoned.

They almost collided with the girl. She stood rigid, berry canes and everlasting

and honeysuckle surrounding her, facing the near-bare skeleton of a long, low house or barn, curved ribs and straight cross-pieces all of rusty, paint-flecked

metal, its only remaining flesh scattered panes of glass. Within the space the

frame enclosed, rows of weathered concrete platforms were visible among the weeds.

Now Luanna screamed again: "Greenhouse!"

She bent and grabbed a rock. She hurled it through one glass pane. The crash

and
tinkle made surprisingly little noise.
Ox made a roaring noise and used his iron bar to smash another pane.
Felix did nothing. He had never seen such a structure before, and he had no
idea
why it should be destroyed on sight.
The others did not end their destructive rage until every pane of glass had
been
reduced to shards. Then Luanna turned, one rock still in her hand, and saw
the
house and its still intact panes. She raised her arm to attack this too, but
Felix grabbed her wrist.
Ox was already standing still, shoulders sagging, the rage gone from him like
an
arm from a sleeve, leaving him limp, drained of motive. Now she too gave up.
She
dropped her rock. She looked at the ground. The bruise on the side of her
head
was livid black and purple.
"Why?"
Neither could answer him, but when he repeated the question to the stones a
little later, Maddoc laughed mockingly. "Idiots!" he said. "It's a greenhouse
you're in, for sure, but not that sort of thing."
"Greenhouses," explained Great-Grandpa, "were used to grow flowers and
vegetables when the outdoor weather was too cold. They were covered with
glass
or plastic to trap the sun's heat."
Felix nodded. He had felt the heat just within the windows of the Webb
farmstead.
"That's what bugged the Earth," said Ox. "Uncle Alva told me once."
Maddoc laughed again, as insanely as ever. "Greenhouses gone wild, gone
berserk,
cook the whole wide world to a crisp and leave only us, the talking dead
bored
stiff not stiff enough."
Felix looked at the sky. There was no sign of a metal frame, much less the
endless spread of panes of glass that might enclose the whole world in a
single
gigantic greenhouse.
"No," said Great-Grandpa. "Not quite. But long before the end we were putting
in
the air gases that could trap the heat in something like the same way."
"Carbon dioxide," said Maddoc. "Methane and chloro...."
Felix was glad when Great-Grandpa interrupted. He had no idea what Maddoc's
words meant. "From burning coal and oil. From factories. Even from making
talking gravestones. And then those gases made the whole world warmer. Ice
melted in the far north. The seas warmed and swelled and rose. Storms grew
fiercer. Deserts just grew."
"People died," said Luanna. "Mama told me, and it was so nice then. Lots of
food. Lots of neighbors." She hesitated and looked away and trembled before
she
added, "No bandits."
Felix understood. Her family had had memories just as had his own. The
conditions of her life had been much like his, though without an uncle and a
cousin and even the few neighbors the Webbs had near their farmstead.
And a greenhouse was a greenhouse. The one behind the house they had slept
beside was a symbol, and if no one could attack the greenhouse that had
changed
the world, they could its namesake.

* * *

When Felix brought the books he had seen in the kitchen outdoors,
Great-Grandpa
said, "What have you got there?"
"Paper." That was all they were to him, something with which to start a fire
to
ward off the coolness of the morning and warm a little of the goat meat.
"Let me see," said his ancestor. "Some books are just paper, but...." Felix
held
his finds in front of the stone's vision strip. "The covers are too chewed by
mice. Open it up. Ahh."
"What?" asked Maddoc.
Great-Grandpa read out the titles: "_The Housewife's Home Medical Assistant,
Dr.
Spock's Child Care, Herbs and Health_." You should save these, boy. They're
precious."
"Can they talk?"
"Like your _Swiss Family Robinson_? No."
Felix shrugged. "Not good for much, then."
"'Cause you can't read? But I can." Despite Felix's protests, Great-Grandpa
then
insisted he flip the pages while the stone recorded every word. "It won't
take
long," he said. "And maybe I'll find something about that rash of yours."
Maddoc made a snorting noise. "If I don't have a clue, those things won't.
Kitchen reference books. Laymen!"
Great-Grandpa ignored the other stone. Luanna took the first book he finished
with and built a fire. Ox sliced off pieces of goat. By the time Felix could
set
the third book down, breakfast was ready for them all.
Amelie interrupted her music long enough to ask, "Did you find anything?"
"Hmp. Now I can tell you how to burp a baby and make a tea for headaches and
when a bellyache means stones in your gall bladder."
"I can do that too," said Maddoc. "And without wasting memory on that sort of
stuff."
"Then why don't you go do something useful?"
"Me? Do you see me pointing at the legs I don't have?"
"At least I'm using what I've got," said Great-Grandpa.
"At least you didn't say, 'Get a life.'"
Felix sighed. "We need to find a tire."
"We passed a lot of cars yesterday." Ox was pointing back the way they had
come.

Luanna shook her head. "They're waiting for us to do just that. They'll get
us
one by one."
"We could go all together," said Felix.
"Then...." Ox gestured toward the trundle and the stones.
"Or you could use your eyes," said Maddoc. When no one responded, he added,
"The
shed over there. The barn. There's a crack beside the door."
Then Felix saw what the stone meant. Rot had weakened the barn's frame until
it
sagged and the door dug into the ground and hung askew. The crack was a long
triangle of darkness in the shadow of a lilac clump whose flowers were
turning
to brown clusters of seeds. Near its base was the shine of metal.
"A bumper," said Ox.
But no matter how hard they tried, they could not budge the door. They had to
use the axe from Luanna's place to chop a hole large enough to reveal....
For a moment Felix hardly recognized what the barn held. Every car he had

ever

seen had been riddled by rust and youvee, its paint and chrome remaining only in dull, flaking patches, its plastic faded and split. This one was coated with dust, but light reflected from paint or plastic that still gleamed almost as it

must have done when new. The shed, decrepit though it was, had shielded the ancient car from the ravages of time.

Ox sighed. "It looks like it still runs."

"We just need a tire." The four on which the car stood were as limp as the one they had to replace.

"Uncle Alva would love it."

"We'll tell him where to find it when we get back."

Felix stooped to enter the hole in the door, but Ox blocked him with an arm as

if his closeness to Uncle Alva gave him a greater right to repair the man's device. "I'll get it."

While Ox pried open the trunk and replaced the trundle's flat, Felix returned to

the house. Luanna followed him, and together they explored every room.

They found no other books, but in a closet they did discover a short leather cape and a hat. Both were stained with mildew, dry and cracked with age, but they would serve to protect the girl against the youvee.

In another room they found a small bed with barred sides. In it lay the bones of

an infant.

CHAPTER 18

The trundle moved much more easily when Luanna no longer rode but walked beside

and lent her effort when clumps of brush got in the way and a hill rose up ahead

of them. At the top of the hill all three paused for breath while Felix checked

the batteries: they were not yet charged, though they would be some help in an emergency.

"Quite a view," said Great-Grandpa.

Above their heads thickening clouds fled rapidly across a dirty yellow sky. The

air was cooling.

Wind gusted and yanked at the trundle's canopy. Felix swore as he and Ox and Luanna all grabbed at the small vehicle's sides to keep it from tipping over.

"We need shelter," said Maddoc. "Forget the view."

All three of the humans looked back the way they had come. There were no lines

of smoke against the clouds, no signs of pursuers. They turned, and there was the sea, recognizable by its sheer expansiveness, its waves and whitecaps, the

sound of its impact on the shore, even though not one of them had ever seen it

before. There was an island, a pier, a pillar with a cross whose arms were tipped with gold, three small sailboats scudding toward it across the bay as if

toward shelter from the coming storm. A pair of white-winged birds screeched and

soared above the watchers.

Salt and mud and decay scented the air from the sea as it always had, as if the

world had not changed from the time of the first Webb.

"Sea gulls," said Great-Grandpa. "There used to be millions of them."
"My parents hid me," said Luanna. She was staring at the island. "There were four men. Haveners, they said. I heard them asking about children, families with children."

Felix felt a shiver march down his spine. Ox was the one who asked, "Why?" She shook her head. "Papa never said. Mama neither, though she did say she was glad they hid me." Her eyes were filled with tears, and her voice was tight, full of grief.

The two boys reached for her shoulders simultaneously, and Felix caught his breath. Could his cousin have feelings just like his own? Was it merely sympathy? Or was it something more, even though Ox was a year younger, even more

a boy? Could he too be thinking of her as a potential mate?

Ox glared as if to say age did not matter. He was larger, stronger, and if need

be.... Felix let his hand fall back to his side.

Luanna twisted out of the space between them, and a moment later Ox let his hand fall too.

Felix wished he could know what they both were thinking.

Luanna pointed ahead, down the hill, to where a broader road still kept enough

of its solidity to bar all growths but moss and lichens from its surface.

"The

way gets better."

* * *

"The foundations shifted," said Great-Grandpa. "I remember when...."

He did not have to complete the thought. The fissure just before them said it all. Once the road had continued as if there were not 200 feet of air below it.

Now it ended just before the bridge, where a crack in the earth had eroded into

a six-foot wide chasm. Through it was visible a steep slope covered with brambles and wild roses and everlasting, studded with boulders, dropping toward

the water far below.

On the far edge of the gap, the pavement tilted so that the lefthand side of the

road was a foot above the right. The tilt grew worse a little further off, tipped back the other way, and then grew worse again as if a wave were passing

down the length of the bridge. Many of the holes that pocked the concrete surface were deep enough to expose the corroded metal rods that bound the bridge

together.

"It's flat enough," said Ox. His leather cloak was flapping in the growing wind,

and he was tying the thong that anchored his hat to his chin. "And there's a railing. We can make it."

Felix pointed at the chasm. They might be able to jump it, but not with the trundle, not with the stones, perhaps not even with their meager possessions in

their hands.

"Boards," said Luanna, and she pointed back the way they had come, toward the last cluster of ruins they had passed.

Thunderstone woofed. "Hide," he said. "In bushes."

"Why?" asked Felix. He could see no hazard anywhere, except that there were more sea gulls in the air here, and the storm was closer, the wind harder, the air colder. He shivered.

"There's a boat." Ox was staring to the left of the bridge, where the brick and stone remnants of a town still climbed the slope of the hill across the narrow bay. Waves marched in from beyond the island they could see in the distance and smashed against the buildings at the bottom of the hill. Missing roofs and walls told of the fury of past storms, as did a row of broken pillars that once had supported another bridge closer to the level of the sea. Seaweed and barnacles clung to the shadowed northward sides of what was left. Further up the hill many buildings were intact.

Amelie's Wedding March stopped entirely. And there, yes, there was a boat, mast erect, sail furled, tossing in a slot between two brick walls. There was no sign of the boat's owners.

"No," said Thunderstone. "In bushes."

Luanna stepped off the road. It took her only a few minutes to discover a simple bridge of logs and planks. "Someone comes this way," she said. "Often enough to need this."

"Don't use it," said Great-Grandpa. "There's someone down there. We don't know who."

"Baptists and Haveners and bandits," said Maddoc. "We've been warned. 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.'"

"We still need shelter," said Felix grumpily. He wished he had been the one to realize the limits of a dog's intelligence--even despite the aid of gravestone technology--were what made Thunderstone so cryptic.

* * *

"It's a library," said Amelie softly.

Felix's heart leaped as he realized she was reading the words carved in the stone above the door that had once been blocked by the broken glass that crunched beneath their feet. High windows, their glass intact and covered by tangled ivy vines, loomed above and to either side. Still higher was a roof of

mossy slate with green metal borders. On its ridgeline perched half a dozen pigeons despite the building wind.

"Then we're there!" he cried. The journey was over. Soon he would know what his

rash was and how to heal it, how to heal Ma and Pa and Uncle Alva and everyone

else. Babies would no longer die. The Webbs would thrive once more.

"Uh-uh," said Maddoc. "I'm shaking my head. Nothing here but a dinky little town

library. I bet it can't even talk."

Disappointment washed over Felix, but before he could speak, Great-Grandpa said,

"Nothing here but books. Thousands of them."

"Or mush," said Maddoc. "If the roof leaks."

Luanna was a few steps ahead, peering within the building. "It doesn't."

"How much longer?" Felix asked. "How far?"

"A few days. Lots of miles."

"And it may not even be there."

The first heavy raindrops were already striking the ground around them, the trundle's canopy, their leather cloaks and hats. Wind rocked the trundle and made Maddoc swear and the catstone hiss.

"Get in here!"

The trundle barely fit through the doorway. Inside, they found a short corridor

that effectively kept wind and rain from reaching the main room beyond. Storm noise was also muffled, and the flagstone floor was dry.

"Animals," said Ox. At least one of the building's recent tenants had been a skunk. The smell of its presence was unmistakable.

"Primitive place," said Maddoc. "No better than a cave."

"Unless you can read," said Great-Grandpa. "That was always true."

"Huh."

Gusts of storm wind rattled the library's windows just as they had made the bridge tremble until they feared it would tilt still further and plunge them into the waves so far below. They had all been relieved to find that the far side of the bridge was firmly connected to the land beyond and there was nothing

to delay their rush to solid ground.

On their way to the library, a handful of starlings taking flight had drawn their eyes to a field of brush from which emerged a tangle of rusty pipes and an

angular frame from which hung lengths of chain. The two longest still held a seat of thick, gray fabric, its edge turned to fringe by time and youvee. The seat jerked in the wind as it had for decades--for generations--but Felix thought the chain looked too thin to last much longer.

Beside this field was a heap of fallen brick. Across the street was the open-fronted, roofless shell of what had been...."

"A shopping center," Great-Grandpa had said. "A playground. A school."

Now home to roosting pigeons.

A little further on they had passed a building with a high, pointed tower.

Even

though it was wood, even though the dark tracks of past fire climbed the side of

the tower, it had survived when other buildings had not.

More pigeons. Seagulls screeing in the air. A raven croaking from a tree limb.

The light from the library windows was dim and growing dimmer as the clouds outside thickened, rain pounded, and wind battered the walls and thrashed ivy vines against the glass. But they could see shelves full of paper books, empty

shelves whose books were jumbled piles upon the floor, wooden chairs and tables,

armchairs and couches. Everything had been gnawed by rodents, shredded for nest

materials, and covered with dust, seed hulls, and wastes. There were even small

bones among the litter.

Felix chose a nearly intact book from the nearest shelf and began to tear out and crumple pages.

Great-Grandpa groaned, "It's too dark in here! I can't even tell what that was."

Ox used the axe to smash a pair of ancient chairs. Luanna arranged paper and kindling near the door and used their flint and steel to start the fire.

Rain was pounding the library's shell. Wind roared in nearby trees and around the town's remaining buildings. Gusts whipped the flames of their fire high.

Smoke whirled around their heads and made them cough and wipe their eyes. With the last of the daylight, they broke more chairs and a table and stacked books beside the fire for fuel. They found a metal cart and used it to hold the

last of the goat meat over the flames.

Later, when the windows were black and wind gusted through the library's doorway

and rain hammered the roof harder than ever, Luanna retrieved her leather cape

from the table where they had all tossed their gear. She fingered the dry, cracked leather and shook her head. Ox handed her a piece of goat fat.

"That should help." She began to work the fat into the leather.

Felix picked up a book to feed the flames. The sheets of glossy paper separated

in his hands, and he saw pictures instead of words. Mutely, carefully, he spread

the book where the fire could illuminate the pages.

"I remember that one," said Maddoc gently. "A classic."

"_The Family of Man_," murmured Amelie. Her Wedding March resumed with a plaintive, yearning tone.

Ox leaned over the book on Felix's left, Luanna on his right. Together they studied the pictures of a world that had vanished forever. Young women in white

veils, babies, birth, death, tall trees, intact buildings, people in numbers Felix could hardly believe had ever existed, smiles and scowls, desperation and

joy.

"That was old when I was alive," said Great-Grandpa.

Ox pointed at a face so dark it looked like char. "A rash worse than ours."

"No," said Maddoc. "People come in different colors. Pink like you. Black like that."

Something crashed in the distance. Felix thought of home and wondered if the farmstead's roof would need repair again in the morning, if Gilbert would need

help once more. For a moment he wished he had not left, for he was needed there.

Yet this journey, this quest, was also necessary.

"Like me," said Amelie, and her words brought him back to the fire. He shook his

head. Even with the book and its pictures laid flat before him, he found it hard

to believe that such a thing could be.

* * *

"Look!" cried Ox against the din of the wind and rain that still continued outside the building. One hand brandished half a dozen small black boxes in the

morning light and gestured over his shoulder. The other cradled a larger box whose face looked like dark glass. "Just like yours. There's a whole rack of them back there."

"Look!" cried Ox against the din of the wind and rain that still continued outside the building. One hand brandished half a dozen small black boxes in the

morning light and gestured over his shoulder. The other cradled a larger box whose face looked like dark glass. "Just like yours. There's a whole rack of them back there."

Only two of the talking books showed even the dimmest of glows in their ready lights. Felix lay the axe on the table he had been using for a chopping block and took one of them. Yes, he thought. Just like Swiss Family Robinson, though

along one edge there was a line of cryptic lettering. If his had ever been marked the same, it must have worn off long ago.

Luanna straightened from stacking firewood, took the other, and promptly pushed its button. The voice that said, "_101 Tips for Healthy Skin_" was weak, but its words were more than enough to make her look at her arm and touch the patch of red and angry rash that grew there. Then she pressed the button again, and again, but the voice got progressively weaker.

Felix touched the button on his own and heard, "_Greenhouse Revelation_" just once before the girl cried, "No!" and smashed her book against his. Both fell in pieces on the floor.

"Let me see the rest," said Great-Grandpa, "The edge first. The one with the marks." When Ox held one before his vision strip and tilted it, he read aloud, "U. S. Robotics. Palm Pilot. They've changed since my day. Now the fronts." Ox obliged, and Great-Grandpa read again, "_The Sacred Animal_ and _The Talking Holy Bible._"

"Heresy," said a strange voice.

Luanna yipped in surprise and terror as she and the boys spun toward the library's doorway.

Amelie fell silent.

Two dripping wet men faced them across the remnants of their fire. They wore two days' stubble and round hats of translucent leather stretched on a basket-like framework. Instead of anti-youvee cloaks, they wore laced leather vests and knee-length kilts.

The taller of the two had dark eyes that burned with fire. He was staring intently at Luanna even though his stained forefinger and its blackened, ragged nail pointed unwaveringly at Great-Grandpa. "Only the Delivered of God can speak the Scripture. Never the demon dead."

"That's my Great-Grandpa," said Felix.

The other stranger shook his head. Neither was much older than the boys, but their faces were already set in lines that spoke of wind and sun, hard labor and stern beliefs. "If they speak, they must be demons. Else they would be in heaven with Christ."

Were these the Baptists, the Haveners? They stank of fish and salt. The boat they had seen on the shore must be theirs, sheltered from the storm by broken walls. They themselves must have sheltered beneath a roof, and when they smelled the fire and the goat meat....

It was no mystery why Luanna was shaking and edging backward, away from the strangers, one hand on a dusty chair, solid wood, making it a barrier and a refuge.

But why was he staring at Luanna? Was it the bruise that spread around one eye and across her cheekbone to her ear, barely beginning to turn yellow around its edges?

Now the shorter stranger was looking at the floor and the remains of the books Felix and Luanna had broken. "You did good," he said. "There is only one

Revelation."

The first man's finger shifted its aim to The Talking Holy Bible in Ox's hand.

"Destroy it. Destroy them all. We should have burned this building long ago." For the first time, Felix noticed the long knives they wore on their belts. Where had he set the axe? Behind him, but....

He backed a step, reached as if to support himself on the edge of the table, and

the handle of the axe was in his hand.

They did not miss his move.

Nor did they miss the iron bar Ox now held beside his leg.

Both strangers kept their hands away from their knives, but the shorter one reached toward Luanna. His fingers were cupped quite gently. He seemed to be looking at her bruise. "You will come with us."

Luanna shook her head and trembled harder than ever and backed still further from the tableau.

The catstone hissed.

The taller of the two licked his lips. "You must. The Lord requires you."

Thunderstone growled.

The strangers ignored the stones, but they made no move to attack and seize the

girl.

"Why?" asked Felix.

"Women cannot be exposed to the world and its dangers. They must be protected and cherished in the Haven."

"The young ones," said Luanna.

The shorter Havener nodded. "Of course. And the children."

It made sense, thought Felix. He remembered what Lizzie Gregg and Sissy and Franklin had told them. Older women would not be fertile. Young ones might be.

Suddenly the taller stranger had his knife in his hand and was lunging toward Ox. With one hand, Ox raised The Talking Bible as a shield, and the stranger

shifted his attack to follow it. That was his target. He struck, and new shards

joined those already on the floor.

At the same moment, Ox swung his bar with his other hand. With a metallic ping

the Havener's blade snapped.

The Havener kept his grip on the hilt and stub of blade that remained, but he stepped back. "When the storm ends," he said. "We will come back, with others."

A moment later they were gone.

"Enough to take her," said Great-Grandpa.

"They're n-no better than the ban-bandits," said Luanna. She was shaking.

Ox was licking blood from a small cut he had taken in the encounter.

"At least their intentions are honorable," said Maddoc.

"Hah." The Wedding March resumed, organ with an overlay of voice so that for the

first time in his memory Felix knew the words that went with the tune.

"We have to run," said Maddoc. Now he sounded frightened. The Haveners seemed quite likely not only to seize Luanna for cherishing and breeding but also to burn the library and smash any stones that harbored demons. "We have to get away

from here."

"When the storm's over," said Felix. Ignoring the others, he stepped to the library's doorway and looked out at the ruins of what once had been a town, a community of scenes like those in The Family of Man. There was no sign of the

Haveners. The pointed tower he had noticed the day before had fallen,

splintering in the road. There were broken tree limbs too, and other debris. Rain and mist veiled any more distant view. The next time he checked the weather, an hour later, Luanna pushed past him to run into the street before the library. Before she reached it, he saw beside one of the fallen branches a sodden mass of gray fur. "A squirrel," she cried as she retrieved it. Back in the doorway she pushed her soaked hair back from her face and smoothed the fur. Its eyes were white. "It was blind," she said. "Youvee," Felix murmured when he saw the cataracts. "It won't go far," she said. "But we've almost finished the goat." Felix stared at her for a long moment. Such a short time ago, she had lost everything she had ever known, parents and home and all. The shock had curled her helplessly upon the trundle. But by the time the Haveners had appeared, she had already been coming out of her paralysis and grief. The Haveners had then given her the shakes, but only for a little while. She was already recovered enough to cope, to seize the opportunities that came their way. He thought she might be a fine mate for him. He also thought Ma would agree. But he had sense enough, after the encounter with the Haveners and after what he had sensed in Ox, to keep his mouth shut.

* * *

The rain stopped in mid-afternoon. The wind continued, whipping clouds across the sky and driving the ocean's waves to crash against the shore so loudly Felix wondered if the Haveners' boat could survive. "They can't get back to the island yet," said Maddoc. "We're safe for awhile." "Let's leave now," said Luanna. "The further we can get before they come looking for us...." "The more likely they won't find us," said Great-Grandpa. "We'll leave tracks," said Ox. Felix tucked The Family of Man and two pictureless paper books in the sack with his Swiss Family Robinson and the Memory of the Webbs. Ox stacked the firewood they had made from broken furniture and among the sticks braced a dozen of the talking books, including The Sacred Animal, as well as the larger, glass-fronted box he had found. The trundle's batteries were charged enough to get them to the top of the hill on which the town was built. From there they could see that the bridge they had crossed the day before was now gone. Two of the pylons that had held it aloft were all that remained, tilting like grass stems in wind. "I'm shivering," said Great-Grandpa. "We walked across that just yesterday." The living and the dead both stared at the remnants of the bridge and thought of how close they had come to disaster. Finally Ox said simply, "Can't go home that way." Felix shook his head. Ox was right, if they came home at all. If the Haveners did not catch them, if they ran into no bandits, if no building fell on their heads, if no bridge collapsed beneath them. The hazards they faced were more

varied and more real and more serious than he could ever have dreamed before he left home.

That had been just days ago. It was already impossible to believe that he had worried more about demons than about bandit gangs. He had never heard of Haveners. Other hazards had simply not occurred to him.

The clouds were thinning. The light was growing brighter. The wind was a little less than it had been. Felix took a moment to arrange all the books where the sun could strike their surfaces. Then he and Ox leaned into their harness, Luanna pushed from behind, Amelie gave them a lively, rhythmic Wedding March, and they moved on as fast as they could.

They did not stop until after dark.

There came a point when a narrow gap between the bushes beside the road, barely visible in the glow from the rising moon, was more inviting than the trail ahead. They turned aside, forced their way into a small thicket, and collapsed on the damp ground. Amelie's music stopped.

"No fire," said Felix once he had caught his breath. The Haveners were surely following them by now, and smoke had betrayed them once already.

"Just a small one," said Luanna. She had the squirrel she had salvaged in her hands, skinning it. "We have to cook this."

Felix's stomach rumbled its agreement with her point. He climbed stiffly to his feet and fetched some kindling from the trundle and tore a few pages from the paper books in his sack.

He was working on the fire when Great-Grandpa said, "Some of these books are alive."

"What do you mean?"

Ox got up to look. He said, "Their lights are on."

"Of course they are," said Maddoc. "They got a little light."

"What are they?" asked Great-Grandpa. "I couldn't see their labels."

Ox touched buttons and voices murmured, weak at first but gaining strength as they awakened:

- _"The History of Peterboro."_
- _"Introduction to Economic Calculus."_
- _"The Last Hero."_
- _"Classic Wonders of Animation."_
- _"The Sacred Animal."_
- _"A Flash of Green."_
- _"The Rapture at Hand."_
- _"Love Beyond the Grave."_
- _"Gravity's Angels."_

The inventory ended, though Felix could see that the other boy was still pushing buttons. "Pitch 'em," said Maddoc. "They can't take a charge."

Great-Grandpa made a grumbling noise. "I wish.... But we can't fix them, can we?"

We should go back and get all of these things we can."

"It's too late," said Amelie. "Look."

Felix looked back the way they had come. A red glow flickered against the scattered clouds racing overhead.

The seas had quieted enough, then. The Haveners had fetched their fellows and returned to the library to collect Luanna. He felt pleased that they had chosen to leave when they had.

"They're burning it now."

The glow of the flames was not nearly far enough in the distance to let him feel

safe.

"We don't need the talkies anyway," said Maddoc. "Teach 'em to read, and...." Great-Grandpa laughed. "Wasn't very popular, was it?"

"Tell me a story," said Amelie as if she were quoting. "Don't make me do the work."

"Literacy was on the skids even when the books were on paper," said Maddoc.

"They'd rather drink and smoke and watch TV and movies," said Great-Grandpa.

"If it expected them to think, they didn't like it," said Maddoc. "Reading and

education just couldn't compete."

The chatter continued while two small potatoes cooked in the fire, the squirrel's carcass steamed and dripped, and the last of the goat meat threw a sour smell into the air.

When the food was gone, Felix smothered the fire with dirt. Then he retrieved The Sacred Animal from the trundle. It identified itself when he touched its

button.

"Shh," hissed Maddoc.

Everyone obeyed, and the book spoke its opening line very gently: "Is human life

sacred?"

"Of course it is!" whispered Luanna.

Amelie murmured, "That's why we...."

The book went on, but almost every sentence was interrupted by someone's objections.

To Luanna, human life was unquestionably the highest good. Any hint that it could be disposed of, for any reason, made her protest.

Felix did not disagree with her, but he did not help when he said, "Hush. I want

to listen to this."

Great-Grandpa laughed. "It's useless, boy. Women have a stake in life. Even in

my day, they cared more than men about the concrete, the immediate, the short-term survival of the family."

"Men are just as bad," said Amelie dryly. "They want power and wealth and sons."

"Billions of sons," said Maddoc. "Daughters too."

"How many is a billion?" Ox looked puzzled.

"I'm calculating," said Great-Grandpa. After a moment's pause, he added, "The number of seconds in thirty-two years. Close enough."

"Shh," said Felix, but then the book's voice weakened and quit, and he had to set it aside until another day's sun could recharge its powers.

The half moon scudded among thin clouds, and Thunderstone howled once before the

others shushed him.

CHAPTER 19

Is human life sacred?

Go ahead. Ask the question. Don't try to answer it immediately, even though your upbringing, your traditions, your religion, and your political ideology all

surely supply you with an automatic answer.

Just ask it. Think about it. Consider possible alternative answers. If we insist that human life is sacred in and of itself, with no reference to other people's attitudes toward it, without considering its deeds, we find ourselves

saying as a logical consequence that human life deserves protection whatever the

form it takes, whether that of a fetus or that of a mass-murderer.

If we say that human life is not so sacred, what follows? Do we

automatically

approve of abortion? Of the death penalty? Of mass murder?_

_Surely not. What follows is the thought that life need not automatically, no matter what, be protected. We can consider the value of an individual life in terms of its costs and benefits to society. We can then compare the values of different lives. In appropriate cases perhaps we can approve the death penalty.

We can consider the prospects for a child, and perhaps we can approve forestalling a life of suffering due to birth defect or poverty or parental resentment, neglect, and abuse._

There are reasons to ask such questions and to reject the comfortable, traditional answers. Our world is threatened in a thousand ways.

_One of the worst is sheer human numbers. Some call it _the_ worst because it aggravates every other problem we face. Indeed, if it did not do so, it would not itself be a problem._

_How bad is the numbers problem? How crowded or overcrowded are we? World population was about two billion when I was born. It is now over six billion. It

will be in the neighborhood of twelve billion by 2050._

_This cannot be. It won't be--if only because the Earth cannot support such numbers for long. Every year, we lose agricultural land to development and fertility to erosion, salinization, and desertification, even as we require more

food. We already face shortages of fresh water, not because any less of this life-giving fluid is available, but because we demand so much. We are exhausting

nature's supplies of fossil fuels and mineral resources, and there is absolutely

no way we could make enough available to give everyone on Earth today a lifestyle resembling that of the developed nations._

_Yet if we can't, resentment over the inequities we see in the world today--which can only grow worse as population continues to grow--seems bound to

lead to war, terrorism, and burdensome migrations of economic refugees. We see

such things already._

_It is very easy to see as well that when the world is choked by twice as many

humans as it holds today, a bad crop year, an epidemic, or even a failure of foreign aid could begin the collapse, the Great Die-Off, when perhaps as much as

nine tenths of the human species will die._

In the space of a year or two.

The only growth profession will be mortician. With a backhoe.

A thousand things could begin the catastrophe. One surely will.

Disaster is inevitable because when Mother Nature steps in to control overpopulation, she does not have a gentle hand. Her rod is famine and plague.

Mother Nature does not treat animal life--and humans ARE animals--as sacred.

If we wish to prevent the catastrophe, we cannot treat human life as sacred either. Only then can we hope to prevent the deaths of billions.

_What we need is a concept well known to the families of recovering alcoholics.

It is "tough love," the sort of love that says, "I don't care how much it hurts,

how mad it makes you, how much it makes you hate me, I'm telling you what a mess

you're in, the damage you're doing to yourself and others, and here's your ticket to the detox ward."_

Those families will tell you that tough love isn't easy. Delivering such messages hurts everyone involved. But the pain is essential. If the messages don't get delivered, there is no hope of reform. The patient is doomed. So are the marriage and the family--the environment, if you will--in which that patient lives.

_The same thing is true of the relationship between humanity and Mother Nature.

If humanity doesn't wise up, clean up its act, get detoxed, the marriage and the family--the environment--are doomed. Humanity will be reduced tenfold in numbers. Civilization will crumble._

We may even join other species in extinction.

How can we possibly prevent this catastrophe? How can we protect our future?

As soon as we begin to consider one answer to these questions--population control--we discover that the idea that human life is not sacred in and of itself has plenty of precedent.

_Think about it. The countries with the highest population growth rates treat women worst. They bar women from education, owning property, voting, deciding the conditions of their own lives. Efforts to help these countries control their

population growth by supplying birth control devices and by funding development

have not worked. But educating and empowering the women has. Once women know what they are missing and once they can make their own decisions, they frequently say, "Not tonight, dear."_

Not surprisingly, the men get a bit annoyed at this. Yet the men do not disagree that some human lives are more valuable than others. They just think the more valuable lives are male lives. After all, the victims of infanticide are almost always female infants. Boy babies are the "keepers."

_You don't need contraceptives and abortions to say no. On the other hand, the

contraceptives and abortions certainly help._

_There are, of course, other possible answers to the questions of how we can prevent catastrophe and protect our future. These answers have in common that each demands that we accept that human life is not so sacred. Human lives _can_

be rated against each other. Some human lives _are_ more valuable than others._

--From Alameda Croxford, *The Sacred Animal*

(University of Chicago Press, 1998)._

CHAPTER 20

"Fuckin' Haveners." Kiwi's face was a mask of pain, his wrist a black and swollen mass cradled in a sling made by cutting a pair of holes in his leather

cloak. He had thrown away the catskin as soon as it had begun to draw flies. That hadn't taken long, and it hadn't made the flies go away. Now they came to

the stink of his own rotting flesh and ignored his attempts to brush them away.

He stood where he could see the ancient, lifeless landfill ahead. Hussey stood

nearby. Both men were staring down the road.

They had been fortunate. Hussey had looked behind in time to notice the foursome

trotting toward them half a mile away. They had had just time enough to step off

the road and conceal themselves in the shadows of the trees. Then the

Haveners

had passed them, too intent on the trundle's tracks to notice those the bandits had left.

Or so confident, so cocky, that they had felt free to ignore the signs of their presence.

"They want her too."

"We'll get ahead tonight. Keep moving after they make camp."

Kiwi's grunt showed what he thought of that. He wanted rest. "We should go back

to that town. Ambush 'em when they come back."

"What about _him_?" They had not seen the stranger again.

"He's gone. Off on his own business."

"Back in town. Waiting to ambush _us_."

"Fuck 'em." Kiwi scowled down at his wrist. Hussey knew what he must be thinking: The black would spread, angry red lines creeping further and further

up his arm. It would not heal. In fact, Kiwi surely did not have long to live.

"Cut it off," Hussey said. He touched the knife at his belt. "At the elbow."

"Not without a gallon of applejack, you fuckin' sadist." Kiwi was glaring just

as he had the last time the younger man had made the suggestion. His own knife

was in his good hand. "Maybe not then."

"It'll be too late if I have to wait till you're dead." He felt sorry for his companion, but he also found himself feeling sorry for the three young people ahead. "What'll they do with 'em?"

"No use for the boys. Too old." Kiwi paused to lick his lips. "I'd like to hit

that island. They collect pussy, you know. But...."

Hussey nodded. He knew. Of course he did. But it was too well defended. There were no boats. Two men--or one man and a half, he thought, looking at Kiwi's gangrenous wrist and the flies that orbited it despite the flappings of his other hand--would never succeed.

* * *

The stranger held a small torch in one hand and stared at the tangle of pipe and

wire that filled what once had been a basement. He grappled one-handed with an

ancient bicycle, tugging it into view, but the tires were as rotted as any that

had been exposed for all the years to the sun's youvee.

Yet the rest of the simple machine was intact. The pedals turned freely. The brakes worked.

If he removed the tires, he could ride for a day or two before he destroyed the

rims. It would be noisy and bumpy, but it would be faster than walking.

He blinked when he emerged back into the light. The ruins of the library still

smoldered a little ways down the street. He shook his head at the waste. At least on the downhill stretches.

A pair of Havener boats were tied up to the ruins along the shoreline. Each one

had a guard on board.

He would have to carry the bike until he was out of hearing.

* * *

The Haveners had no need for wheels. They were young and strong and quite fast

enough even with the packs on their backs to carry a few days' worth of food, the rope they might need to bind their captive, the knives that slapped against their thighs. Now, far from their island and its mists, they did not wear kilts

but woolen trousers. Their sleeveless vests had been replaced with shirts, though their chests still showed behind the web of lacings that held them closed. Their hats were the same.

Consideration Wiggin had replaced his broken knife. Now he and Gatherer of Souls

Davies led the small pack. Behind them came Preserved Hanson, so named because

he had been one of the few children of his age group to survive the pox, and Hopewell Conner, a stocky man who was one of the few Delivered of the Lord trusted to use Haven's few surviving firearms. A small pistol rode in a holster

fastened to his belt.

They had known when they passed the pair of bandits in the trees, but they had

seen no threat in them, and they had had nothing the Haven needed. The three youngsters ahead, however....

They did not talk. They saved their breath for trotting.

Consideration did think, though, and his thoughts circled around and around the

prospect of replacing his lost God's Promise. He had seen this girl only once,

and he knew that she could please him well enough, at least until Delivered of

the Lord released God's Promise from his household. If he ever did. If she proved fertile, he never would.

He did not know their names, not hers, not the boys'. But that did not matter.

She would have a new one as soon as she reached the island.

He glanced over his shoulder at the man with the gun. Call her Hope, perhaps. His hope. Even though he knew she was quite pleasing enough to the eye to be claimed by Delivered of the Lord.

He told himself that did not matter. He had his duty, to help the faithful spread and multiply, to replenish the Earth with a holy people.

If he was not one of the fathers of the next generation, that did not really matter.

CHAPTER 21

The yellow dawn sky was streaked with curdled clouds, remnants of the storm, diminishing as Felix watched, promising clear weather and easy travel. Ox, swatting at mosquitoes on his arms and neck, had disappeared into the shrubbery.

Luanna was still curled around the catstone, Heavy, though her eyes were open and blinking.

It was hard for him to look at his companions and think that their lives were any more or less valuable than his own. Or no--it seemed quite natural to put his own life first in value, and then the lives of Ma and Pa. They were dear to

him, of course, but if he had to choose.... He shook his head. He did not like

what he was thinking. But yes, first himself. Ma second, Pa third. Then Ox and

Uncle Alva. Luanna had to come last simply because she was not family. Yet he recognized that this was a matter of viewpoint, or bias. Luanna would surely rate their lives quite differently.

Could he and she agree on anything? Surely they would both put a very low value

on the bandits' lives. The Haveners might rate a little higher. And that was enough to reinforce The Sacred Animal's point. It seemed impossible that anyone could say all human lives were of equal value. Or of the same value all the time, forever. Not very long ago, he had had no least idea that Luanna even existed. Familiarity had given her value and moved her well ahead of Lizzie Gregg and Sissy and Franklin. Love, if it happened, could move her ahead even of Ma and Pa. Hate, if that came, could rob her of any value at all, just as it and its cousin fear did for bandits and Haveners. He looked at the gravestones soaking up the morning light. The people they had been had died long ago, yet they retained a kind of life. Was that life as valuable as the one they had lost? Certainly they would resent being deprived of it. He had heard them say as much. His skin did not itch and tingle and crawl the way it had at home, but he still scratched his arm vigorously, avoiding the infected area. "Doesn't look any worse," said Great-Grandpa. "But don't just sit there. We've got a long way to go." Felix grunted agreeably and got to his feet. A few minutes later, he was setting what remained of his ancestor in the trundle. "What's a contraceptive?" Behind him, Maddoc cackled. "Just a little something to keep your hair from growing." Amelie paused her music long enough to make a sniffing sound. "People didn't always want all the kids they could have," said Great-Grandpa. "They--we--had lots of ways to...." Felix felt a wave of shock wash over him as he realized what the stone was saying. Prevent the birth of children, when children were so rare and precious, so sacred? When without them humanity must vanish from the Earth? In his mind he saw the small stones in the Webb family's burying ground, those who might have been his brothers and sisters. There had been similar stones at Luanna's place. The problem was not stopping children from coming, but encouraging them and keeping them from dying. Yet that was new. The Sacred Animal claimed that once there had been many more people, so many that some people worried more about having too many children than about having too few. So many that cities could be full, that all the ruins around the Webb farmstead and on the road between there and here could be houses and barns and supermarkets full of food. At the thought of food, saliva squirted beneath his tongue and he felt something clench within his belly. So many, he thought, that the pictures they had studied in The Family of Man could fairly represent the world. "We bagged it and blocked it and tied it in knots," laughed Maddoc. "So we wouldn't keep stumbling over the tots." "Idiot!" said Amelie. This time Mendelssohn did not hesitate. Felix did not dare ask what abortions were. He was afraid he knew, and the thought that such measures had ever been necessary, that the world could

possibly have changed so much, frightened him as nothing ever had before. Instead of saying anything at all, he walked away from the trundle and his companions, living and dead, flesh and stone. When he reached the top of a small rise, he looked back the way they had come. There was no sign of the empty, ruined city, no smoke rising from the library that had sheltered them. That fire had burned itself out.

But those? Three threads of smoke, breakfast campfires, spaced along the line they had followed from the city. Three followers, or sets of followers. The Haveners. The bandits. And someone else.

The closest of the three was barely half a mile away.

When he came back to the trundle, he found that Ox had returned. Together he and Luanna had finished loading the trundle. Now they were staring raptly at the box Ox had found. Across its glass face danced tiny, colorful figures with jaunty voices.

"Cartoons," said Great-Grandpa. "Haven't seen them in...."

Ox looked up and saw Felix. He touched the box's controls. The images on the screen changed to show more human figures carrying weapons, running through a tunnel, erupting into a cavernous room filled with what Felix instantly recognized as the heads and skins and tusks of animals, even though he had never seen the animals themselves.

"Elephant ivory," said Maddoc. "Rhino horns. Leopard pelts."

"I remember that show," said Amelie. "'Tunnel Vision.'"

An enormously fat man stepped into view holding what could only be a weapon. "The chief of the poachers."

"Enough," said Felix. "We have to go. Now." He told them what he had seen. The box instantly went dark and joined the books, stones, tools, and meager supplies on the trundle.

"They want me," said Luanna. She now looked frightened.

"Those Haveners," said Ox. He was already arranging the harness for himself and Felix. "But who are the others?"

"The bandits," said Maddoc. "Maybe they'll meet and kill each other."

"And the third?" asked Felix.

"I'm shrugging. How should I know?"

* * *

"Bush-tail," said Heavy.

"Wish smell, wish nose," growled Thunderstone.

Amelie's Wedding March took on an urgent beat.

Felix too felt as if someone were watching them. His back itched, and it was not all sweat. He grunted as he and his cousin tugged the trundle up slopes and over the small bushes that sprouted insistently from the cracks in the time-worn pavement beneath their feet.

"We left just in time," said Luanna, pushing at the trundle's rear. "Didn't we?"

Felix swore as a wheel caught on a log. "They don't have this bastard to slow them down."

"Use the motor," said Great-Grandpa. "There's charge enough for awhile."

Felix obeyed, and their pace increased. Soon he no longer felt that eyes were boring inimically into his back, though he knew he had gained only the least of leads. The batteries would inevitably run down, and then the trundle would only

slow them. Then escape would only be possible if he and Ox and Luanna abandoned the trundle and its burden. That was something he could not do. It would mean abandoning Great-Grandpa and Maddoc and Amelie, Thunderstone and Heavy, as well. Kin and past, history and love, all the context that made human life worth living. And if he lost Maddoc, he would lose destiny as well and he might as well turn around and go home. At the top of the next hill, he paused long enough to look back the way they had come. In the distance, the sea and the island of the Haveners were visible. The road was a furrow across the landscape, a line of more than usually stunted vegetation. Once, Felix guessed, it would have been entirely bare. A strip of pavement, smoothed and cleared for the passage of cars. Perhaps kept clear of brush and saplings _by_ the passage of dozens, hundreds, even thousands of feet and cars. He tried to imagine the throngs of _The Family of Man_, the billions _The Sacred Animal_ had mentioned, but he could not. He shook his head and told himself that on so worn a path a trundle would surely move more easily, more rapidly. He could see no sign of their followers. Ox handed him a raw potato and waved his hand at the black flies and mosquitoes and deer flies that had found them as soon as they stopped. "All we've got." He shrugged. "We'll find something." "Not very soon." He looked where Luanna was pointing, where the road would lead them next, and he felt shock like a physical blow. The trees and brush stopped as if someone had drawn a line and said, "Thus far, and no farther." There were not even stragglers, other than a few sick-looking scraps of grass and weed near the border. Beyond that the bared earth was gullied into a landscape of steep-sided mounds. Where the ground was even approximately level, it was paved with rocks of many sizes, all that remained after the soil had been washed away. Only the road remained as it must have been before, when Great-Grandpa and the other gravestones had been alive, gently curving, disappearing into devastation. Felix wished he had not thought of bare pavement and easy traveling, even though he knew he could not possibly be responsible for what he saw. Whatever had happened to cause this landscape had happened long ago. He swallowed the last of his potato, felt his stomach complain at the meagerness of the ration, and looked at the others. Ox had a hand on _The Sacred Animal_. "It's charged again." Felix nodded. Ox turned it on. As it continued its recitation, they leaned into their harness once more. * * *

_Most human-population experts believe that the best we can do in the way of population control is to stabilize our numbers. The minimum projected final world population, under the most optimistic of assumptions, is in the neighborhood of eight billion, reached in the second half of the 21st

century._

A world population this large or larger poses another very awkward question: How do we take care of them all?

The simple answer is: we can't. We don't have the resources. Not food, not water, not energy, not minerals. Not without enormous technical achievements that seem quite unlikely to happen in the necessary time frame of half a century.

We will therefore be forced to ration our resources.

Political realities will force the rich nations to give up some of their wealth, to share. If they refuse, there will be war.

_There may well be war anyway, because no one could get enough to satisfy even

if all the world's wealth were shared out equally. Currently that wealth is concentrated in the hands of perhaps a quarter of the world's population, the people of the industrialized nations. The people of these nations are by no means equally well off, but even the poorest among them are wealthy compared to

a peasant of Bangladesh._

_Rationing will surely mean something more like tough love. Imagine if you will

two heavily populated, famine-stricken nations. Call one the Kingdom of Doom; its women are property; the birth rate is high; it makes no effort to control its population; indeed, when foreigners offer contraceptive technology or education, it accuses them of attempted genocide. The Kingdom of Doom has real-world parallels._

_Call the second nation the Republic of Hope. It too has a high birth rate, but

it is trying desperately--and successfully, albeit slowly--to bring this problem

under control. The Republic of Hope also has real-world parallels._

_The rich nations see these two nations and their problems and ask, "How can we

help?" The conventional answer is to supply food. But feeding the Kingdom of Doom will only guarantee further population growth and ever-larger future generations. The next famine, or the next, when enough food to help simply cannot be delivered, will kill far more people than the current famine would if

it were allowed to run its course. Furthermore, if this current famine were not

relieved, the people of Doom might be so reduced in number that their own soil

would support them for decades to come. If they learned from the disaster, they

might be safe forevermore._

_What happens if the world feeds the Republic of Hope? This nation's population

problem will not get worse. In fact, considering their success to date in reducing birth rate, it will get better. Foreign aid will therefore not be wasted._

If the world has enough surplus food to save only one nation, the choice of which nation to save seems obvious.

_What we see here is an example of triage. It means using resources where they

can do the most good, not where they will be wasted. It has been called "lifeboat ethics," because you can't put more people in a lifeboat than the boat

will hold or it will sink and everyone aboard will die. It is better to save some than to lose all._

_We can see the same concept in medicine. In fact, triage is a medical term, drawn from the battlefield where a "triage officer" would choose those

casualties likely to die no matter what help they received, fill them full of pain-killer, and park them out of the way. He would then set aside those likely to get better on their own and route to the operating room only those who would recover if and only if they got prompt access to the limited medical help available._

_--From Alameda Croxford, The Sacred Animal

(University of Chicago Press, 1998).

* * *

Only when they were surrounded by the desolate landscape they had seen from the hill could they truly appreciate its nature and its scale. To either side of the weathered pavement steep mounds rose ever higher as they progressed, building toward a single massive dome whose gullied sides revealed layers of gravel alternating with what seemed white bones, scraps of paper, broken glass, and rusty metal embedded in black slime. Yet what at first glance seemed so stark was relieved by bits of color, some faded, some as bright as flowers. The ditches beside the road and small pools between the mounds held gaily colored liquids that reminded Felix of the blue poison Pa and Uncle Alva had dug out of the garden. Some were even blue, others yellow, red, and iridescent green. Many were rimmed with varicolored encrustations. He made a face at the sour, acrid, musty smells of ancient waste that emanated from the land to either side. He kicked at a scrap of cloth that had blown onto the road. It was hard to believe its colors had faded less than those of his own clothes. "From before my time," said Great-Grandpa. "Folks used to pile their garbage up and cover it with dirt." "Filled the land," said Maddoc. "Broken dishes and furniture and toys, worn-out clothes, dead cats, sewage sludge, barrels full of toxic chemicals." "It could be worse," said Maddoc. "Some dumps used to glow in the dark." "Not around here," said Great-Grandpa. "Not before I died, and by then we were pretty well done with nukes." "Had to put it someplace." "What's that?" Luanna was diving down the bank beside the road and leaping across the poisonous ditch. Her hair flew behind her, her arms windmilled to keep her balance, and then she was squatting, reaching for something still embedded in the hillside, tugging. When she returned she held a small, narrow-waisted figurine with yellow hair on one side of its head. It wore a pink dress. Both hair and dress were stiff with filth. "Mine only had one leg," she said. She stroked what was left of its hair with a finger tip, pinched the fabric of the dress, and made a face. "This is better." "What is it?" "A doll," Amelie paused her Wedding March long enough to say. "A toy," said Great-Grandpa. "Little girls loved them. Little boys called theirs 'action figures.'"

"I never had one," said Ox, and Felix nodded.
"Mine burned up," said Luanna, and her voice was suddenly choked. Felix knew she meant that she had had a doll of her own until the bandits destroyed her home.
A little later, a small stream pooled against one side of the road and spilled across the pavement. Its water was clear and cool, but when Ox knelt as if to take a drink, Maddoc cried, "No!"
"Why not?"
"It runs through the dump. There's no telling what's in it."
Luanna squatted to wash her new doll as clean as she could manage.
Felix said, "We need to drink."
"Later. We'll be out of it soon enough."
"The mounds are already smaller," said Great-Grandpa.
Felix studied the land to either side of the road, and he could see that the stone was right. The dump's great central dome was behind them now. Its satellites were spreading out ahead, ever lower, and in the distance, just a mile or so ahead, barely visible before the road curved out of sight, he could glimpse the green of vegetation.

* * *

The trundle's batteries were drained before the first sprigs of grass emerged from the cracks in the road beneath their feet, before the first everlasting appeared to either side and trees brought life back to the land. The boys groaned and leaned harder into the harness, but not before Felix looked behind them as far as the road's curve permitted him to see. There was no trace of followers.
Yet now he felt that there was another follower at his back. One far worse than the bandits or the Haveners or the unknown who had built the third fire that morning. That ancient dump they had crossed had shown him that The Sacred Animal did not speak only of ancient history, only of a time so different from his own that it held no lessons for the present.
Now he could more truly glimpse the sources of the world in which he had grown up. Of ruins and youvee and greenhouses and poisons in the soil. Of people like him and all he knew. Of people who had made dreadful mistakes. He shuddered at the thought that people were still capable of such mistakes. The bandits and their raw greed. The Haveners and their hunger for fertile women and children. Very briefly, he looked at Luanna and then away. After what had happened, she must want safety. For now the best she could manage was to tuck her doll into the sack beside the Memory of the Webbs.
And then there was Ma's and his own wish that he find a mate. It seemed so natural to crave posterity, continuance. Yet was so natural a wish something that humanity deserved?
As the trees once more came to dominate the land around them, Felix looked at them with new eyes. They seemed large enough to him, but he knew they were smaller than those described in Swiss Family Robinson. Now, with the ancient dump added to his memories of blue poison being dug from the Webb family's garden and of his Uncle Alva saying, "Poison in the soil," he had a far, far better sense of why.
The road tipped up before them. Together, he and Ox leaned into their harness while Luanna pushed from behind. "Someone's watching us," she said. She too

was

panting, as tired as the boys.

Amelie's music grew almost inaudibly soft as she and all the rest strained to hear above the sound of feet and tires on the ground.

"I feel it," said Felix. And he did. His back twitched as if something were crawling over it. He wished they could move more quickly, but the hill and their

own fatigue confined them to a walk.

Yet nothing happened to alarm them. No voice spoke from the brush to either side

of the road. No sticks broke beneath a footfall. By the time they reached the crest of the hill, Ox was saying, "We imagined it," and the others were ready to

agree.

The trundle rolled downhill easily, and then along the floor of a valley, beside

a small stream, while the sun settled behind the hill ahead of them. They no longer felt watched, and when they found a spot where the road had crumbled into

a bank of gravel and sand beside the water, they stopped.

Ox gathered sticks that had washed up beside the stream, but they made no fire.

Once more they ate raw potatoes, and Felix shook his head when he realized how

nearly empty the sack had already become.

"It's back," said Luanna.

Once more Amelie fell almost silent. For a moment Felix thought he heard the rattle of everlasting stems disturbed by movement, the click of two stones touching as something or someone shifted weight. The sounds came from just upstream of their camp.

"How far do we still have to go?" He ran fingers over one arm. The rash was worse near the elbow, and when he scratched he released something wet. He thought it might be pus this time, but he did not look. He only wiped his fingers on his pants. "To get to the city and the hospital and its library?" He

now had a better idea of what that must mean.

Amelie answered him this time. "It used to take just a couple hours, but this trundle is so slow."

"If they're watching us," said Luanna. "We might as well have a fire."

Ox obeyed while Maddoc said, "Another day or two."

Flames caught in the wood. Warmth and a feeling of safety spread immediately. So

did light, though it was sufficient only to show the glinting water a few feet

away, the edge of the road, the gravel on which they sat. There was no hint of a

watcher, no hulking shadow, no gleaming eyes.

"It's still there." Luanna's eyes were wide as she leaned against the catstone

and ran her fingers absently over her doll.

"Wish nose," said Thunderstone. "To see."

"Only a dog could say smelling is seeing." Great-Grandpa's voice seemed to smile.

"And teeth. Snarl and bite. Chase and guard." The dogstone's voice was rough, as

if a growl lay not far beneath the surface.

The only sound was the slightest of burblings from the stream and the crackle of

burning wood. The humans and their stone companions were silent. Not even Amelie's Wedding March interrupted the night.

Felix turned his back to the fire and stared into the dark. What was out there?

Bandits? Haveners? Strangers they had never met? Friends or foes? He wished he had stayed home, safe in the house with Ma and Pa and Uncle Alva.

He made a face. If he had stayed home, Luanna would be dead.

But....

Gravel crunched, but not loudly enough to say that whoever was out there was very large.

A child?

"Eyes," Great-Grandpa murmured, and when Felix turned his attention toward the

road, there they were, gleaming in the firelight, almost glowing, so low they must belong to a man who was crouching to spring upon them.

He reached behind him. His hand fell upon one end of a stick whose other end was

embedded in the fire. He tightened his grip even as he glanced to either side,

looking for other eyes, other foes.

Heavy hissed threateningly.

Thunderstone said very gently, "Here, boy!"

The silence stretched. The eyes sank closer to the ground.

They blinked.

A shadow moved, and they could recognize a dog, its scrawny belly held close to

the ground as it crept into view. From it came an anxious whine.

"Scared," said Thunderstone. "Hungry-lonely."

"Body language," said Amelie.

It stopped, stared at them each in turn, seemed puzzled when its eyes fell upon

the stones, and rolled over as if in abjectly pleading submission. Its fur was

matted and filthy and missing in patches. Its almost hairless tail bent oddly in

two spots. Its eyes watered, and it wheezed as it breathed.

"A she!" yipped Thunderstone.

When Ox got to his feet, the bitch tensed but did not run. She seemed to sense

that he meant no harm as he stepped toward the trundle and rummaged briefly within its bed.

"Goat bones," he said. He shrugged. "I kept a couple. Didn't know why, but...."

He tossed one toward the dog. Her tail wagged.

CHAPTER 22

Felix shivered even before he opened his eyes and rolled free of his cloak.

The

morning air carried more chill than usual. He wished they dared to take the time

for a fire, though he knew that exercise would warm them all. More to the point

was food.

The others were stirring too, and trembling as much as he. The stones sat in sunlight, silent. The strange dog lay curled beside Thunderstone, looking and sounding no better than she had the night before. Her head lay snug upon the ground, her nose pointing at him, her ears flat against her skull. She was staring quite as if she had heard his eyelids unstick and was now nervously awaiting his first move.

There was a crease in the fur of her neck. Felix sat up, leaned forward, and reached, but before he could touch her she shied away, her tail between her legs. As she moved, he glimpsed red-raw skin and a black-cruled band.

"A collar," said Great-Grandpa. "It's too tight. That's why she wheezes."
"Poor thing," said Amelie. The Wedding March throbbbed with sympathy. "What happened to her people?"
"Bandits," put in Maddoc. "Want to bet?"
Ox too was now free of his cloak. He made a clucking noise and held out his fingers. The dog did not come to him, but when he got to his feet she let him approach and run his fingers along the collar.
"No buckle. Just a knot. Can't get my fingers under it."
"Use a knife," said Luanna.
The dog was trembling violently now, but this time she did not flee. There was something about Ox that she trusted.
Still, he did not let go of her. "On my belt."
Luanna got the knife and passed it to him. Gently, Ox sawed through the rope and removed it. Immediately the dog's breathing seemed easier.
He passed the rope collar to Luanna, who turned it over in her hand and poked at the crust with a finger. Tears flooded her eyes. "Dried blood," she said. Felix blinked as his own eyes watered, but it was not the dog's pain he shared.
Luanna's bruise was yellower now, fading, but it was still plain how hard she had been hit. Memory reminded him that she had suffered much deeper injuries as well.
Ox's hands were gentle on the dog's neck. He shook his head as he studied the raw flesh where the collar had been. The wound did not seem deep or infected. Finally he scratched behind the dog's ears and murmured something Felix did not catch.
The dog's tail gave a tentative twitch.
"She needs a name," said Amelie.
"Rosie?" suggested Maddoc. "Ring around a...."
"Dotty," said Amelie firmly, and Mendelssohn swelled loud around them. "That was what we planned to call our first daughter. Dorothy. Dotty. Donald would have done for a boy. And then Margaret, Madge, or Meg; Linda; George.... We had a list, we did. And then...."
She fell silent. Even Mendelssohn stopped, while the others said nothing at all until at last she began to sob.
"Okay," said Ox. "Dotty."
The dog wagged her tail once, twice, as if she knew she once more had a name and people.
* * *
As they lifted the trundle's wheels back onto the cracked and weed-grown pavement, Dotty turned to face the way they had come the day before and growled.
Her legs stiffened. The matted fur over her shoulders bristled in irregular clumps. Her ears were flattened.
"Be nice if she could talk," said Maddoc.
"She is," said Great-Grandpa. "Those Haveners are too damned close."
Thunderstone uttered a defiant snarl.
"Run!" said the catstone. "Bush-tail and hurry! Hurry!"
The trundle's batteries were not fully charged, but Felix turned on the motor anyway. Amelie cried, "You too!" and double-timed her Wedding March. The boys did not bother with their harness. Felix pushed against the trundle's rear while Ox leaned his weight against one of the posts that held up the canopy. Luanna

joined in on the other side.

The dog brought up the rear, occasionally stopping to stare and snarl stiff-legged at the road behind them and then running to catch up. Unfortunately, once she caught up she no longer had to run. The trundle was never a speedy vehicle, and the humans were hardly at the peak of their strength. They did well to keep their speed above a fast walk or slow trot. "We're too easy to follow," said Great-Grandpa.

"Tracks in the grass," said Maddoc. "I'm nodding. They lead right up our ass."

"Even without that. We're on a road."

"So they can tell where we're going."

Felix forced himself to speak past his panting and rapidly growing fatigue:

"They can hear you too."

"Sorry."

"Doesn't matter how much we make of noise. They're gonna catch you, boys."

"Shut up, Vanya."

"It's true, Amelie."

Felix twisted his neck to see behind them. They were indeed leaving a trail, but

they had no choice. They had to go where the road led them, for the brush to either side was even thicker. It did not really matter how much noise they made.

They soon left the stream behind. But then the road began to climb out of the valley, and halfway up the hill the trundle's motor quit. "Batteries kaput," said Great-Grandpa.

Felix wasted no breath asking what "kaput" meant, nor on shifting to the harness. He and Ox and Luanna were far too intent on pushing the trundle toward

the crest ahead, even as the back of his neck itched furiously to say they were

being watched once more, that their foes were near, that soon....

"Stop!" The voice rang out behind them.

"Go!" cried Ox, and the hilltop was in front of them and only level ground ahead, not some life-saving steep descent that would let them roll to freedom,

or at least stay a little further ahead for a little longer while.

"Go!" cried Maddoc, and they did their utmost, leaning into the trundle, running, pushing, panting, sweating. But when Felix glanced behind, four kilted,

round-hatted figures were jogging toward them, Haveners, not even running, confident of their ability to catch them and claim their prey.

"There," said Ox, and he was shoving the trundle toward a pile of broken brick,

a crumbling curtain wall against which to set their backs, a corner in which to

make their last stand. When they stopped, Luanna grabbed a brick in each hand.

Felix once more seized the axe. Ox took his iron bar from the trundle's bed. The

stones were silent.

The Haveners stopped a dozen feet away. "Let us have her," said one. Felix thought he was the same one who had done most of the talking in the library.

"Then you can go your way," said a second. "Or...."

Felix recognized the metallic object in his hand as a gun. It was much smaller

than the one Lizzie Gregg had had.

"The books too," said the third. "And the gravestones. Smash them all."

"You sure you don't want the trundle too?"

"Too slow." The third speaker grinned toothily even though the sweat that

soaked

his pants and shirt and made drops on his face and between his laces admitted that their pursuit had not quite been effortless. His skin bore the myriad circular scars of the pox. "We'll be generous."

Ox smacked his bar against his palm.

"Unless you resist."

Felix took a deep breath. He could feel his heart pounding deep within his chest, thudding as if it would break loose. He could smell his own sweat, as well as that of the Haveners. His muscles quivered, but not with fatigue.

That

was suddenly gone as if it had never been.

"I'll go," said Luanna. "Leave them alone."

The Havener who had spoken first held out one hand as she took one step away from the boys. His grin said very clearly what she could expect when she reached

the island.

Felix clenched his jaw.

"Drop the bricks," said the Havener.

One hand opened, and one brick thudded on the ground.

"No," said Ox.

"No!" screamed someone else entirely, and before he could spin a rock struck the

Haverer with the gun on the shoulder. "She's ours!"

Felix recognized the bandits as soon as they burst out of the brush beside the

road, long knives held in their hands like swords, and he marveled that now he

and they were on the same side against the Haveners. But he did not let his gratitude make him hesitate. His first swing of the axe missed, but the backswing slammed into meat and bone. Luanna's remaining brick struck a Havener

in the head. When the gun went off, both he and she jumped, and Felix felt his

heart race even faster than fear and excitement could explain. But no one fell

and then his axe knocked the weapon to the ground. Ox swung his iron bar against

the back of a neck; his victim collapsed.

As soon as the bandits' distraction had served its purpose, Ox slammed one in the thigh and sent him rolling across the ground. A Havener sliced at the other

even as Dotty sank her teeth into the arm he carried thrust through holes in his

cloak. Thunderstone and Heavy howled.

The first bandit got to his feet. The second screamed and tried to run. The first flailed with his knife at a thrashing, heaving Dotty until Thunderstone growled, "Back girl!" She let go. The bandit then helped his companion retreat.

A moment later, the two surviving Haveners retreated as well, leaving their dead

on the ground.

"Couldn't do 'em much good even if I wasn't dead myself," said Maddoc.

"Thank God for the bandits," said Great-Grandpa. "They got one of them."

Felix stared at the nearest body. The mark of either Luanna's brick or his axe-head was a dent in the side of the head. The fatal wound was a gash in the

neck. The dog was lapping the blood.

"Good dog," said Amelie, and Maddoc added, "She adopted us quick enough."

"Ox got one too." Luanna's eyes were wide as she looked from the bodies to the

boy.

So were Ox's, though he did not seem pleased with what he had done.

He held one hand flat in front of his chest; it was quivering. Luanna imitated

his gesture; hers was quivering just as badly.

Felix did not look at his hand. He could feel the same quiver deep within his chest, in the rhythm of his heart, in the shaking of his breath, and though his

life had held no such moments before he had embarked on this quest, he recognized the touch of mortal excitement, fear and dread, blood-thirst and panic. He thought he did not like that touch.

A metallic screech drew their eyes back toward the valley where they had spent

the night, but they saw nothing on the road or in the brush. There was only a crow circling overhead.

* * *

The concrete wall beside the road bore the faded outline of a skull above an X.

"A warning," said Great-Grandpa.

"Used to mean poison," said Maddoc.

"We shouldn't go any further."

"We can't go back," said Felix. The feeling that someone was watching them was

still with him. It had never left after the brief battle, and he was sure the Haveners and bandits still lurked just out of sight, waiting for another chance.

"Dotty says," said Thunderstone. The bitch stood stiff-legged, facing back the

way they had come, growling and showing her teeth.

"We can't stop," said Luanna. "We have to keep moving."

But they had to stop. It was hours since the battle, and all three were panting,

sweating, needing rest. Yet they could not rest, or else the bandits and the Haveners would catch up and attack once more. This time they might win.

"It's an old sign. The danger must be gone by now."

"Then it won't stop..." Felix felt dejected.

"They must be tired too."

And it was nearly dark. Perhaps it would serve both their pursuers and themselves as an excuse to take a break. They could resume the chase in the morning.

They moved ahead slowly, tiredly, looking for a place to rest. Ahead of them the

road looked no different, furred with grass and weeds, small brush and occasional saplings struggling through the pavement. Stunted trees grew to either side, their pallid, yellowed leaves interrupted occasionally by the brighter green of apple trees. There were ruins too, of course, and a few nearly

whole buildings that once had flanked the road. Felix thought he recognized the

shape of one that seemed to match the picture Ma kept in her useless fridge. When they grew closer, he saw that this one contained nothing but windblown debris, fallen masonry and roof-beams, and the stink of small animals.

"Bones," said Thunderstone.

They were there too. Crumbled rib cages. Fragments of skull. A few intact jaws

and femurs and pelvises. A pair of intact skulls sitting on their bases and facing

each other as if to continue a conversation they had begun before disaster had

struck them down.

Dotty abandoned her guarding of their rear to sniff at the bones.

"Don't go any closer," said Great-Grandpa.

"Afraid of plague?" asked Maddoc. "It's been too long."

"Don't take any chances. I've seen...."

Maddoc made a laughing noise.

Once a small town had spread out on either side of the road they were following.

The houses were now nearly all turned into mold and cellar-holes. The skeletons

of many stores remained; one still had an intact roof and a plate-glass window

behind which sprawled three long clubs and a pair of over-sized gloves.

"Sporting goods," said Great-Grandpa.

"Stay out of it," said Maddoc. "Can't you see the bones?"

These bones lay just inside the doorway, laid out as if their flesh had simply

evaporated. Beyond was almost total darkness.

"Keep going," said Luanna. "Don't stop, or...."

But Felix rummaged in the sack that sheltered the Memory of the Webbs and found

the stub of candle that still remained. Soon its flickering light was revealing

a maze of shelves and counters. There were piles of multi-colored rags that had

been chewed by generations of mice. Pictures of guns still clung to one wall above an empty rack. Debris crunched underfoot, and when Felix looked down, he

saw transparent boxes full of fishhooks.

Pa had once shown him a single hook, corroded into uselessness, and told him how

they were used. The last time Pa had taken him fishing, they had spent half a day netting two carp from the stream near the farmstead.

A few feet away lay a litter of fishing rods. Most were broken but he found one

that seemed intact. When he showed it to the stones a few minutes later, Great-Grandpa said, "There should be reels in there too, and line."

"Like this?" Ox held out a spool of dark string so fine that it seemed impossible it could hold any weight at all.

"What's this?" Luanna held an arc of yellow plastic, tapered at the ends, but her mind was more on the trail they had followed into the ruins. She kept glancing back the way they had come.

"A bow," said Ox. "Did you see any arrows?"

"What's a reel?"

Great-Grandpa described a fishing reel as best he could, but the ruin proved to

hold nothing of the sort. Nor did it hold a bowstring, though they did find a bin of arrows, a long-bladed knife that had been overlooked by previous looters,

and a set of nested metal pots and buckets that could be carried by a single bail. By then the candle was gone.

"We've got to get moving!" Luanna's tone was urgent.

"Look at Dotty." The dog was quiet, sitting on her haunches beside the trundle,

her tongue lolling. From time to time she glanced toward the town's edge but seemed to hear nothing alarming.

"No one coming," said Thunderstone.

"Let's go!" She sounded almost panicky.

Felix put hooks, line, rod, bow, arrows, knife, and pots on the trundle, and they moved on until Amelie suddenly stopped her music and cried, "That one!"

"Why?" The building they were passing looked little different from so many others. Where once there had been a sheet of glass, now there was a gaping hole.

The interior was dimly lit by the fading daylight, for half its roof was missing.

"I remember. It used to be a deli...."

Maddoc interrupted her: "Bagels! Lox! Pastrami! Cheesecake!"

"It's ruins now." Felix knew he sounded impatient, but Maddoc's words were meaningless to him.

"On the left!" Amelie made a single note of her suspended song provide the emphasis. "There used to be a counter there."

Felix stepped through the deli's open front. There was no counter on the left,

but against the wall still stood a rack of cubicles, some of which still held bottles. Many more had crumbled under the onslaught of time and weather, and broken glass was thick beneath his feet. There was a strange, faint smell of earth and acid that reminded him of the pressed-dry apple pulp Pa discarded every fall.

"These?" He held up a pair of the bottles. Their glass was a deep, dusty green.

Any labels they might once have worn were long gone.

"Wine," said Amelie, and Mendelssohn began to play again, strings and brass together.

Great-Grandpa laughed briefly. Then he added very wistfully, "I used to love that stuff, you know. And it's been so long.... It should be well aged."

"Get a few more," said Maddoc.

Felix pointed at the trundle and protested, "We have to haul them."

"Do it anyway. They should be worth it."

CHAPTER 23

"One woman isn't worth it," said Preserved Hanson. The two men were several miles past the scene of the battle, staring after the quarry that had defeated

and then outdistanced them.

"We need every one of them we can find." A massive bruise was swelling on Consideration Wiggin's left thigh, just below his hip, but he refused to complain. If the axe had turned just a little, he would not be merely limping.

"So we can do God's will and multiply the saved." Preserved fingered the gash in

his woolen shirt. A knife had done that, and sliced a red line across his skin

as well. One of the bandits who had interrupted them. Fortunately it had not gone deeper.

Consideration nodded. That was what Delivered of the Lord had preached for as long as he could remember and what had bound the island community together through the preacher's predecessors for more than two generations.

Then why was he thinking of the girl? Not of God's plan for the Haveners, not of

her place in the community, but of her face and hair and flesh? Her place in the

void left behind when God's Promise had been taken from him?

"But they don't count unless they're fertile."

For the briefest of moments, Consideration wondered whether fertility was really

all that counted, but then he quashed that heretical thought and said, "She is.

She must be."

"Then she'd have a baby on her hip or in her belly. She's old enough. So are those boys."

"And none of 'em are saved. They can't possibly have any morality or

self-restraint. So to Hell with them, eh?"

"They've seen to that. Two of us dead! And the gun's gone. We have to go back."

Preserved Hanson eyed the road behind them. He did not seem pleased at the prospect of reporting such thorough failure.

Consideration shook his head. "I'm not giving up." Gatherer of Souls had been his friend. This girl was his. "Besides," he added. "We've never explored much

this far inland. There's no telling what we'll find."

"Delivered of the Lord has to give us a mission for that."

"I'm keeping on anyway."

"By yourself." Preserved looked skeptical. The countryside was not safe for single travelers, especially when they were already injured. Both men knew that.

"I'm not," he added a few seconds later. "I can't. And I'll have to say...."

He

did not say his own chances of seeing the boats and the island again would be lessened if he had to travel alone.

"Of course. But I'll bring her back." He slapped his bruised thigh. "This will

heal soon enough. I'll be up to speed. I'll catch them."

Both men faced the way they would go and contemplated the paths ahead of them for a long moment. Then they turned toward each other and said almost simultaneously:

"Good luck."

"God be with you."

* * *

Kiwi's face was pale, but his eyes glittered feverishly as he strode furiously

along the road. "They didn't get her!" he cried, oblivious to the possibility of

being heard. "We'll have her yet. And...." He waved the gun that had belonged to

the Haveners in the air. "Bang!" he shouted.

Hussey kept his distance. He trusted neither the gun nor his feverish fellow. He

envied the fever, for he was cold, his skin covered with goosebumps instead of

the shirt he had sacrificed to bind Kiwi's new wounds. His cloak alone was not

enough, not with the sky darkening toward night. His leg hurt too.

He hoped the dog that had bitten Kiwi was still scrubbing its mouth out with sand. Surely the pus and blood that still leaked through his shirt had tasted as

foul as they smelled.

"Put it away," he said.

"Why? You want it? Just because you're the one who picked it up? It's not for little boys, you know. Besides, I never had one before." He pointed it toward Hussey, who shied away. Kiwi laughed and once more shouted, "Bang!"

Hussey tried to ignore his companion. He studied the road and the landscape. A

curve ahead, a hill, a grove of trees, a broken wall with two jutting fangs of

steel. Around that curve, he thought, they would find a trickle of water, a spring in the hillside, a place to camp.

Why did he think that? He did not remember ever being here before.

Or did he? The land around him now seemed imbued with a haze of familiarity, of

almost vanished memory. At the same time, Kiwi seemed less a companion and

friend than a stranger, even a frightening stranger.

"Give me the gun." That too he suddenly disliked, as if....

"No!"

This time the "Bang!" was real.

He ducked just in time.

CHAPTER 24

Dotty and Ox had gone downstream. Now she frisked around his ankles, stopped to

shake and spray water in all directions, frisked again, and even yipped. She held a stick in her jaws.

When she dropped the stick in front of him, Ox threw it downstream, into the water. The dog raced after it, plunged in, found it, and came racing back to her

friend before she shook once more.

Thunderstone barked excitedly. "Chase stick! Chase ball! Splash and swim and chase and shake!"

Luanna laughed. "You don't need a bath!"

Fifty feet away from her, Felix smiled and leaned against the bridge's crumbling

concrete railing while he worked a grub onto the hook. Then he dropped the line

into the water below.

It was not quite dark. He could see Ox and Dotty and Luanna, now bending over a

spark of flame, laying wood in place, waving smoke from her eyes, standing back

with satisfaction in her stance. The dog had flopped beside the trundle, her tongue lolling. Ox had sat on a rock and begun to braid lengths of fishline. Amelie's Wedding March was audible, a thread of silvery flutework laid over the

throb and buzz of an organ.

None of them had wished to spend the night among the ruins of the town. The hazards of which that crude skull sign once had warned were presumably long gone, purified by time and weather, youvee and storm. But the sense of threat remained, and when they had glimpsed the stream on its other side, they had all

felt on more comfortable, familiar ground.

It was a small stream, running toward the sea over rocks thick with green algae.

The bridge, as flat and solid as the road itself, with no hint of sway or twist

or vulnerability to any storm, held him above a deep pool just downstream from

the road. On the far side of the pool, water foamed over the ruins of an ancient dam.

He was looking past the broken tree trunk at the end of the bridge to watch Luanna lean over the trundle when his fishline tugged against his grip. He jerked, and a small fish, no longer than his hand, was flipping madly on the ground by his feet. He had no idea what kind of fish it was, except that it was

not a carp.

"Get one," Great-Grandpa had said after telling how to use at first a grub or worm or bug. "Then use its guts for bait."

He had known that. Yet his ancestor had insisted on telling him, just as he had

pushed Felix into this journey of hope that hardly seemed worth the hunger and

danger that had so far accompanied it. Pushy old bastard, wasn't he? Felix smiled at the thought and was glad his Great-Grandpa was just a stone and all

he

could do was talk.

When he returned to the camp, the stone laughed. "Chubs and yellow perch. One apiece and one for Dotty too."

Heavy's yearning meow was so eloquent that it hardly needed her words: "Me too,

me too, give fish, oh wish a fish and wish and wish!"

Ox was grinning at the prospect of a decent meal. Luanna.... Where was she? Then he saw her. Crouching beside the trundle, the Memory of the Webbs in her hand, the sack on the ground beside her, staring at him with tears in her eyes.

For a moment, Amelie's Mendelssohn turned portentously slow.

"I broke it," Luanna said.

She held up the Memory of the Webbs. It was no longer stiffly framed, glass-fronted, safe against the hazards of time. The frame twisted now, and a shard of glass dropped, glinting in the firelight.

Her other hand held three tiny potatoes. She showed them to him. "I was looking

for more. Dumping out the sack. I forgot what else was in there, and it fell out

and broke."

He dropped the fish beside the fire and took the wreckage from her hands. For a

moment he wanted to scream in rage at the desecration and never mind that it had

surely been an accident. The Memory of the Webbs had survived intact for generations upon generations, for centuries, only to.... His muscles quivered,

and his chest was tight. But then he recognized a similar tension in her hands--quivering like his--and jaws and eyes and realized that she was terrified

of him.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to say nothing at all. He inspected the

damage, and then he knew he would have no trouble keeping his temper. Two joints

of the frame had separated, but the frame itself was still intact. So was the Memory itself. "We'll need to find another piece of glass."

"The trick is cutting it," said Maddoc from the trundle bed.

"Dotty!" Great-Grandpa's roar made Felix jump, but Ox was already chasing the dog away from the fish.

"Uncle Alva...." He had a tool that could cut glass, but.... He turned the broken frame in his hands. The back had been stiff, a sheet of something like thick paper or thin wood. Now it was creased and torn, and he could see

"There's something...." He held it toward the fire and plucked at the backing while Luanna and Ox watched. "Writing," he said. "More writing."

Dotty was now facing the brush beside the road, stiff-legged, ruff-necked, growling.

"She hears something," said Ox.

Luanna's mouth tightened. She grabbed the axe from the trundle before anyone could beat her to it.

But the dog was already relaxing, as if whatever had alarmed her had now moved

further off.

"We'll need a guard tonight," said Felix. "A watch."

"The stones don't sleep," said Luanna.

"Dotty," said Ox. And indeed it seemed the dog would do. She had noticed whatever it was when no one else suspected, not even the stones, and now she was

telling them they were safe again, for a while.

"Let me read what you've got there," said Great-Grandpa. "Show me."
The writing was on a separate piece of paper from the Memory of the Webbs, thinner, more faded, creased and torn. In places the writing disappeared entirely. In others, the paper itself was missing. Some of the gaps were filled in with words that even Felix, illiterate though he was, could tell had been written by another hand, in darker ink. The same hand had added several lines at the bottom of the sheet.

"Show me!" insisted Great-Grandpa. "I never suspected that was there when I was alive. Let me see!"

Felix lifted the stone from the trundle and set it near the fire. Then he held the sheet of ancient paper in the best light he could manage. During the long silence that followed, Ox began gutting fish and flipping the guts and heads to Dotty with the tip of his knife. He laughed when she snatched

them from the air before they could strike the ground, and he laughed again when she turned between bites to stare suspiciously at the brush.

Luanna positioned the last three potatoes beside the fire and raked coals over

and around them. Felix stared at his ancestor's gravestone and held the paper still until his arms ached and thought of an old man twisting his head to make

the best of eyes that had no best to give, of himself twisting just as much to make sense of squiggles he knew were words but could not connect to sound or sense.

Finally, Great-Grandpa said, "This is what it says:

* * *

_William Webb Cross was sixteen years of age in the summer of 1831, and in his

pocket he had twenty-five cents, two bits, or the fourth part of a dollar, and

this was sufficient capital for he knew how to make money and how to save it...

known as Old Comfort Cross, for some reason no longer remembered... bluff and genial and pop[ular]... a practical man and made money in many ways... shrewd and thrifty... respected well-to-do citizen of the community._

It is a tradition in the family that Captain Joseph Walker's son, Benjamin Walker's brother, the son named J... accumulated an immense fortune, came to Bridgton some years before his death in 1891, and called on Mr. Cross.... As they sat on the piazza Joseph Walker said:

"William, I want to know how you are fixed for money."

_"I've got enough," said William Cross. He probably did not then know that Joseph Walker would leave a fortune of nearly \$400,000 at his death in a few years. Neither did he know that Joseph Walker would leave at least \$130,000 to

relatives of his brother Benjamin [William Cross's uncle by marriage]... could

easily have become heir to a bequest of at least \$5,000 or \$10,000, if he had indicated a desire for such financial aid. His rugged independence and his satisfaction with his own efforts to make money, led him to make a simple statement--"I've got enough." Joseph Walker left him no money._

* * *

"At the bottom," said Great-Grandpa. "It says William Webb Cross's grandmother

was a grand-daughter of Samuel Webb, and his daughter Mary Clarissa married

John

T. Webb, a great-great-great grandson of Samuel Webb. He wasn't one of your ancestors, but he was some sort of cousin."

"I shouldn't have taken it," said Felix.

"Why not? It's yours as much as your Pa's."

"But...." The frame had held the Memory of the Webbs in a stronger sense than anyone had ever suspected.

"And it was mine before it was his Pa's."

"He means it's okay," said Maddoc with a laugh.

Felix knew when to shut up. He reached for Dotty and scratched her ears. He felt

her neck and noticed that the rawness where her collar had been was already dry

and scabbed.

* * *

If life could have a flavor, thought Felix, it would be like the wine they had

taken from the ruined deli. Its color was that of blood, and on the tongue it had a bite but also substance like liquid wood, scents of fruit and earth, hard

labor, grief, and joy. The tang of alcohol was there too. He liked it much more

than he did what Pa made from apples.

"We'll need to get some more on the way home," he said as he passed the bottle

to his cousin.

"Don't we have enough?" Luanna was sitting cross-legged by the fire, running a

twig through her doll's hair, fingering the naked side of its scalp as if her touch could make more hair grow. From time to time she twisted and reached and

put another stick on the fire.

"For Pa," he said. "And Ma and Uncle Alva." Ox was nodding.

"People never have enough," said Great-Grandpa. "Billy Cross was a rare bird in

his own time, or no one would ever have written down that story about him. Rare

in any time."

"The bandits," said Maddoc. "The Haveners."

At their mention, Felix felt his back itch as if they were being watched again

or still. It would not surprise him, he thought. Neither group seemed likely to

give up easily.

"More and more and more. Never satisfied." Ox passed the bottle to Luanna and picked up once more the string he had been braiding. He tied a loop in one end,

hooked it over the tip of the bow they had taken from the ruins, bent the bow,

and found the length of his work three inches too short. His fingers began to fly once more.

Felix nodded. He looked at his arm. The rash showed even in the firelight. It itched. He scratched and told himself he was no different. That was why he was

here. He wanted more too, though not money. He knew what money was, or what it

once had been. There wasn't much use for it now. But health. Freedom from itches. And he could wish for more and better food as well. The fish had been boney and thin, not enough, not enough at all.

Amelie's music hushed just long enough for her to say, "The Sacred Animal."

And yes, of course. When people could not have enough, could never be satisfied,
they destroyed their world.
Ox was measuring his bowstring once more, nodding, tying another loop, catching
it on the bow's other end, flicking a "tung" from the string. He picked up a stick, positioned it against the string, drew, and released. It vanished into the darkness.

"Didn't want to lose an arrow," he said. Three of the arrows they had found lay
on the ground beside him.

"Is that how it works?" Luanna was holding the bottle upside down. It was empty.

Felix got to his feet and staggered as the wine made itself felt.

"Not another!" said Maddoc.

He shook his head. "We've had enough. But...." He leaned with one hand against

the side of the trundle and rummaged with the other. Books, books, books, all with their ready lights glowing. Where had he set it down? He touched buttons and heard them identify themselves. There it was. The Sacred Animal.

"But not enough of this." He sat down by the fireside once more.

* * *

We do need that "tough love" attitude. Social and medical triage make sense. Physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia, both restricted to require the consent of the patient or, where that is impossible, the consent of the family

or legal guardian, seem quite reasonable.

They are especially reasonable because the problems that led us into this discussion are not about to go away. They remain. They promise to contribute to

an enormous catastrophe, that Great Die-Off. And they demand solutions.

It is unfortunate that those solutions do look so threatening. It is even more

unfortunate that most people seem to believe that the best way to stay off the

slippery slope is to pretend it does not exist. The best way to guard against extremism, they say, is to refuse even to think about the problems that can lead

to it.

But closing our eyes to our problems, refusing even to consider such questions

as whether some people are more worthy of help or life than others, or whether

all human lives are equally sacred, does not help. It is far better to strive to

understand the problems, the possible solutions, and the implications of both problems and solutions as fully as possible--as fully as possible....

But closing our eyes to our problems, refusing even to consider such questions

as whether some people are more worthy of help or life than others, or whether

all human lives are equally sacred, does not help. It is far better to strive to

understand the problems, the possible solutions, and the implications of both problems and solutions as fully as possible--as fully as possible--as fully

as....

--From Alameda Croxford, The Sacred Animal

(University of Chicago Press, 1998).

* * *

"It's stuck," said Maddoc. "It's memory's looping. That's all you'll get out

of
that one."

"They're old," said Great-Grandpa. "As old as us. Older, even. But we were built to last."

Felix stared at The Sacred Animal in his hand. Its little red light was still glowing. Beside the light were two buttons he had not touched; they were marked with arrows pointing left and right. He tried the one that pointed left. "Sure," said Great-Grandpa. "Try the rewind."

Unfortunately, the button did not change a thing. When he once more asked the book to read itself aloud, all he heard was, "...whether all human lives are equally sacred...."

"Toss it in the fire," said Amelie. "Useless thing."

"No." But Felix did not know what else to do. The Sacred Animal had given him thoughts it had never occurred to him to think. But now it was as good as dead.

"Try another," said Ox.

He shook his head, and silence fell until he finally asked, "Was that what happened? Triage and slippery slope? Did they get out of control?"

"No," said Maddoc. "We never did admit we had to make the hard choices. So it was the problems that got out of control. Too many people, so we destroyed the land as we tried to feed them all. We used up oil and gas and coal and heated up the greenhouse effect. We let in the youvee. We used up metals and forests and a thousand other things and threw the remains in dumps like...."

Felix and Ox looked back the way they had come. Luanna tightened her grip on her doll.

"What I saw in Africa and Chile...." There was pain in Great-Grandpa's voice. "I'm glad I died before...." Dotty's growl drowned out Maddoc's voice. She was on her feet once more, facing the brush behind Luanna's back, stiff-legged, fangs bared. Her growl was joined by Thunderstone's, and then both were barking, baying, howling.

Felix lifted a burning stick from the fire and held it above his head. Its light revealed two shadowy figures the size of crouching men. When they realized they could be seen, they melted into the brush behind them. The dogs paused long enough to let Felix hear the crackling sounds of the strangers' departure. A few minutes later they stopped their noise entirely.

"Who...?"

"The bandits," said Ox. "They didn't have those round hats, and one looked lopsided, like he had one arm in a sling."

"I've been wondering." Felix scratched the back of his neck. "I could feel...."

"Why didn't you say something?" Luanna's voice trembled on the verge of hysteria. The men who had just disappeared in shadows had already destroyed her family and her home. They had been about to do as much to her. Now they were following her, and there was nothing she could do. Not even as much as she had done when they had interrupted the Haveners' attempt to seize her for their own

ends.

"Wouldn't do any good," said Ox.

"Just upset the little lady," said Great-Grandpa.

"Vapors and frights!" cried Maddoc. "Sleepless nights, and besides we could tell

they were there."

"You could?" Luanna jumped to her feet, nearly shrieking in outrage.

"Of course! We've got good ears, good mikes, could even hear them saying, 'Hush!

They'll hear!'"

The bow still sat beside Ox. Luanna grabbed it as if she had suddenly remembered

what it was for. She seized the arrows too, nocked one, and fired it toward where the bandits had appeared. It vanished in the darkness even though it wobbled as it left the bow.

"Hey!" cried Ox.

Dotty barked, and Thunderstone joined in.

"You could hurt somebody!" Amelie sounded horrified.

"That's the idea!" She was sobbing now.

"They're gone anyway," said Maddoc. "That's a pretty useless gesture."

"I forgot." She set the bow down once more, but she did not look as if she regretted her useless gesture. "But I had to do it."

Felix nodded to show he thought he understood.

Great-Grandpa said, "We'll let you know next time they get close."

"How can you tell?"

"We've got good hearing, as Maddoc said. They made us that way, so we could hear

each other across the cemetery."

"Why didn't you say anything before?"

"We didn't think it was necessary. They seemed to be more interested in watching

than in attacking."

"Did you know who they were?" asked Felix.

"Weren't their voices familiar?" asked Luanna.

"I'm shrugging," said Maddoc. "We can't hear them anymore anyway. They're gone."

"I don't believe it. They'll be back."

"We'll be listening," said Amelie.

"Sniffing too," said Thunderstone. "To bark and bite and tear."

"Bush-tail and claws," hissed the catstone.

"This time we'll let you know."

Despite the words, the girl did not seem comforted. Felix watched her pace about

their campsite, circling between the trundle and the fire, brushing mosquitoes

from her arms and face and neck, waving away the moths drawn by the fire. She was staring into the dark, always staying within the light. For a little while

she carried the axe. Then she switched to the bow again. Dotty split her attention between Luanna and the brush into which the bandits had disappeared.

Only when her step grew labored with fatigue would she sit down again. Soon she

and the boys were all three curled up within their cloaks.

Later, Felix roused just enough to be aware that she had cupped herself against

his back. He smiled as he realized how comforting her warmth was, and he hoped

it was the same for her.

CHAPTER 25

A low growl woke him.

He peered from the shelter of his cloak. The sky was gray, a touch of yellow appearing in the east to say dawn was near and soon the whole sky would share the hue of dust lofted from distant deserts. Dotty was on her belly, chin between her paws, ears pricked forward, staring toward the same bushes that had

swallowed the bandits the night before.

Luanna still lay warm against his back. She did not stir.

Dotty growled again.

Then she shifted her head, pointing about thirty degrees to the right as if to

say the bandits had split up and were now trying to flank the campsite. Or as if

the Haveners were there as well.

She growled once more.

"We'd better run," said Ox. He lay half under the trundle, the bow and arrows beside him. He was watching Felix, not the shrubby dog, and his eyes were dark and hollowed as if he had so watched all night. Felix thought he wished Luanna had chosen to sleep beside him. "No time for breakfast."

"No food anyway." Felix snorted, and his stomach growled. The fire was dead, mere ashes without a spark of ember or thread of smoke.

"Are they close?" Luanna's breath tickled his ear. She sounded still half asleep. Ox shifted his stare to the bristling dog.

"Not far," said Thunderstone. "Sneaking, stalking."

"They're up," said Amelie. Her music was very soft, but she had added to it an

urgent beat. "They'll be on their way soon."

"Do you know how to use that bow, boy?" asked Great-Grandpa.

Ox shook his head. Since everyone had seen him make a bowstring, string the bow,

and launch a stick into the brush the night before, he had to mean he could do

little more.

"Then why don't you take a few practice shots? We can spare a few minutes."

"I'll lose the arrows."

"You'll lose them anyway if you can't hit what you aim at. Pick a tree."

"That one." He pointed at the broken stub of trunk near the bridge and got to his feet. Then, while the others loaded their few possessions onto the trundle,

he positioned himself so that when he missed the arrows flew down the road they

would soon be traveling.

His last three arrows actually struck the tree trunk. One bounced into the brush

and vanished forever.

While he was retrieving the two that had stuck in the wood, Dotty got to her feet and began once more to growl. Felix's back and neck began to itch far worse

than the rash ever made them do. Luanna scratched as if she felt the same intense sense of being watched.

"I could do better than that," she said when Ox returned. "Let me try." The look

he gave her in reply was skeptical and hurt. He said nothing, and instead of passing her the bow and arrows, he laid them carefully in the trundle.

"Time to go," said Great-Grandpa. "Move 'em out."

Felix checked the trundle's power gauge. It showed hardly any charge at all.

"Hurry, hurry," Heavy hissed.

* * *

They were exhausted long before the sun neared its zenith. They had not seen

any
sign of the bandits or the Haveners, although whenever a hill or thicker
brush
had slowed the trundle, Dotty had stopped and turned and snarled at the world
behind them.
That, thought Felix to himself, must be deliberate. Their pursuers had no
trundle to slow them down, no burdens to carry. They could surely catch up
any
time. If they did not, if they did not pass around them and set up an ambush,
if
they did not attack, that could only be because they planned to wear the
youngsters down. To stay just close enough to keep the dog alarmed and to
keep
their quarry running. The attack would come as soon as they collapsed and
could
resist no longer.
Now the road ahead was flat, curving around the flank of a hill, and a narrow
lane down its center was clear of growth. There were footprints in the thin
skin
of dirt that covered the pavement. To the right a dirt path led toward the
hill
and the distinctive green of apple trees.
The air carried a faint scent of woodsmoke and manure.
Not one of the three had the breath to speak. They could only stand and stare
at
the signs that there were people in the vicinity, settled people who tended
apple trees and probably--like Felix's Pa--got drunk on applejack.
Did the trees seem a little taller here, a little greener? Felix shook his
head
and looked at the sky. Yet the light had not changed, and the youvee could
not.
Perhaps there was less poison in the soil.
He still felt watched, but Dotty was quiet. He laid the itch between his
shoulderblades to his rash and studied the landscape until Luanna pointed
toward
the brush to one side of the road and said, "Wild onions."
"There's better than that," said Great-Grandpa. "Right behind you and two
steps
off the trail."
Felix had no trouble finding what the stone meant. The purplish-green,
thumb-thick spears were something he had never seen before. Beside them,
three
greener stalks fanned into feathery foliage adorned with dozens of small,
elongated, red beetles with black spots. "What...?"
"Sparrow-grass," said Maddoc. "Asparagus. Break them and steam them and serve
them with butter. Or hollandaise. Or vinaigrette."
Before anyone could remind him that his words belonged to another age of the
world and were quite meaningless here and now, Amelie said, "Raw. I used to
love
them that way."
Luanna tried one. Felix watched her face, and when she took a second bite he
followed suit. So did Ox, and soon the spears were gone.
"Pigs," said a young, disgusted voice.
Felix wished he were closer to the trundle and his axe.
Dotty pricked her ears and faced the sound but said nothing.
"Not scared," said Thunderstone. "No danger."
"Come out," said Maddoc gently. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. Allee,
allee, in come free."
Amelie put the sound of small bells in her music.
A thin figure stepped out of the brush a little up the path that led off

toward

the apple trees. Her posture was wary yet drawn, as if by the music. "I was supposed to get those for lunch." Then, as if in afterthought, she said, "I'm Karyn. Who are you?"

She wore faded, much patched jeans, a threadbare sweater, and sandals that seemed to have been cut from an old tire. Her ankles were bright with a familiar

rash. A dark pigtail jutted from beneath a hat as broad-brimmed as Felix's own.

She seemed about a year younger than he.

Now Dotty began to bristle, but not toward the strange girl. She spun to face behind them and growled and snarled even as a voice carried to their ears.

The bandits or the Haveners--or both--were close behind them, pushing them to move on and exhaust themselves.

Felix resisted. He wanted to take a moment to catch his breath, and another to

introduce himself and his companions to the young girl who stood before them. But even as he was opening his mouth, a rock flew from the bushes behind them and whammed Luanna in the head.

A curse said the stone-thrower had not meant to hit her, but the damage was done. Ox leaped and caught Luanna before she could strike the ground.

Karyn cried, "Follow me!" and began to run.

Amelie shouted her march in a voice of bagpipes.

Felix slammed his weight against the trundle's rear even as Luanna landed bonelessly in its bed, the mark of the stone now bloody on her forehead. His cousin was beside him, and the trundle was gathering momentum in its flight toward whatever refuge Karyn could offer them.

* * *

As soon as they rounded the bulge of the hill, they came upon a well-trodden path that led off the road and into a fold of the land where every leaf seemed

almost as green as apple leaves. There, almost entirely hidden from view by a thick growth of unusually tall birches and other trees, was a house that reminded Felix of the ell Uncle Alva had added to what his Pa had built. The walls did not bulge. The windows were all neat rectangles filled with glass. The

roof was shakes, and it was not held in place by chunks of rock. He thought the

slopes to either side must shelter it from storms.

Beside and behind the house rail fences enclosed a garden rowed with bright green seedlings, a pen, and a bit of pasture. A pair of pigs, three goats, and a

single rooster watched the newcomers.

"Dad!" As Karyn cried the word ahead of them, a short man holding a long-handled

sledge charged from the open door of a long, low building whose stones were stained by decades of rust from its metal roof, of smoke from its brick chimney,

of moss and lichen. Beside him raced a gray dog whose pelt was marked with black

flecks and patches.

"She's hurt!"

Amelie still skirled, but her pace was slowing, her volume quieting.

"Who?" The voice and the slam of a door jerked Felix's eyes back toward the house on the other side of the yard. "Caleb?" The woman on the steps was worn thin, her face creased, her expression frantic until she saw Karyn. Beside her

stood a pair of girls. One seemed about twelve years old. The other was about Felix's age.

"Look what Karyn found! Boys!"

"Hush!"

Karyn's Dad reached the trundle, but he did not stop. After a single glance at

the young woman and her bloody face, he positioned himself where the trail entered the farmstead's yard. He held his hammer as if he wished someone would

challenge him. His dog bristled beside him.

The woman reached the trundle almost as quickly and began to wipe at Luanna's brow with a cloth. When she said, "Oh, she's pale," she sounded worried.

The rock and the curse spilled out of Karyn, while Felix said, "They're following us."

"Who?" asked one of the other girls.

"Hush," said their mother. "Later."

When Felix leaned under the canopy, he barely had time to see that Luanna's breathing was fast and shallow before she shooed him off.

He backed a step. Karyn's hand tugged at his cloak. "Mama's good. She'll fix her."

"No," said her mother. "She'll fix herself. If the rock didn't hit too hard. If

it did...."

"Concussion," said Maddoc. "Coma. Persistent vegetative condition."

"I don't know those words." A talking stone did not seem to faze her.

"Who did it?" Karyn's Dad was beside them now, his hammer on his shoulder.

When

Felix seemed surprised, he shrugged. "No one out there now." His dog stood stiffly beside Dotty, nose to tail, sniffing. When he wagged a whiplike tail, the man added, "Doesn't look like she's in heat. That's Tickles."

"'Cause his fur is ticked," said Karyn.

"He gets ticks, too." The youngest girl was beside the trundle, staring eagerly

at Luanna, Felix, Dotty, Ox, the stones.

"Trudy." Then the man pointed at her sister, also approaching at last.

"That's

Bella."

Felix and Ox both looked from one to another, confused by so many faces thrust

upon them so suddenly even as Luanna seemed at risk of disappearing. At last they settled their gazes on the man. He wore a leather kilt, shoulder cape, and

back shield that exposed a massive belly and arms as thick as Felix's thighs. He

wore no hat, and his hairless scalp shone in the light. His elbows and knees were almost as red with rash as Felix's.

"I don't think they're bandits," said Karyn. "They ate the asparagus."

"Then they must be hungry," said her father. His attention shifted from the boys

to Luanna to the trundle and back again. His expression was puzzled, as if he did not know what to make of strangers, or perhaps of Amelie's Wedding March, which showed no sign of stopping, its Highland voice an apt reflection of the air of panic that still surrounded them all.

Bella was peering past her mother's shoulder and busy hands. "Is she your wife?"

Ox stiffened. Felix shook his head, though he thought he recognized the same wish for mates Ma had expressed for him and he had felt in himself.

"Call me Caleb. Caleb Inger." The man indicated his wife. "Madge." When the house's door opened and closed once more, he added, "That's Miriam." The oldest

of the four daughters, she was scaling a pair of broad-brimmed hats toward Trudy

and Bella.

Felix felt puzzled. He looked from one girl to another, comparing them with each

other and their parents. Miriam's hair was light in the shadow of her hat and her face was taut with reserve. The younger girls' faces were more open than their sister's and rounder than their mother's. Yet all had noses and chins and

eyes of a kind. The family resemblance was unmistakable. And there were so many

of them! How did Caleb and Madge do it? What secret of fertility did they have?

"I think she'll be all right," said Madge at last. She stood up, her hands against the small of her back. Luanna was still pale, still breathing shallowly,

but the blood was only a row of droplets on her skin. "There's no depression in

the bone. No softness."

"Just let her sleep," said Maddoc. "Keep her warm and safe."

"I know that much."

"He's a doctor," said Great-Grandpa. "Or he was."

"Humph." She did not seem to appreciate advice even from such a source.

"How many were there?" asked Caleb.

"Four, after the last attack," said Ox.

"How many did you kill?"

Ox held up three fingers. "One bandit, two Haveners."

Luanna's eyelids flickered. "K' muh Mama, Pa-pa."

"We saved her once, we did," said Maddoc.

Caleb nodded approvingly and reached to touch Luanna's cheek just where her old

bruise still stained her skin with yellow. At that moment, Felix saw, Caleb's wife, Madge, closed her eyes.

"What are Haveners?" asked Trudy.

"You haven't seem them here? You must be too far from the shore." Felix told them the little bit he knew about the islanders. "They take kids, especially girls they can breed."

"We don't need to worry," said Caleb, though he glanced toward the trail and his

fingers tightened on the haft of his hammer. "We outnumber them here."

Madge nodded, but her hand found and tightened on her nearest daughter's shoulder.

"They can get reinforcements. And they will, once they see the girls."

Caleb turned toward the trundle. "You boys like gravestones instead?" He laughed

and ran a forefinger over the markings on the stones. "An-d-er-s We-ebb. V-an...."

"You can read," said Maddoc. He sounded surprised.

"A little. We don't have anything like you around here, though I've heard...."

"I've seen them," said his wife. "They talk too much."

Maddoc made a laughing noise. "You would too, if...."

Dotty spun toward the trail they had followed and barked. Tickles joined her with a deep-throated "Haarrooo!"

"Get the kids out of sight," said Great-Grandpa. A second later, as if he had decided the chorus needed another voice, Thunderstone began to bay as well.

Amelie redoubled the wildness of her Wedding March and increased the volume.

"Is that a song?" On the steps, Miriam was leaning forward. Felix noticed that

she too, like all the rest, wore the rash. He measured it with his eyes, looked

at the other Ingers and measured theirs. Were their rashes really less severe

than his own? Than those of the Webbs? Did that go with their greater fertility?

"Mendel's song," said Maddoc. "The music of heredity."

"Never mind that," said Madge. The dogs were already quieting, their howls dying to yips and growls. Whatever had set them off had retreated. "Just come inside."

* * *

Lunch was boiled potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, a few small asparagus stalks from another patch, all served with butter made from goat milk. The Ingers seemed to think it very plain. Felix and Ox, who had had even plainer fare for days, thought it a feast. Luanna said nothing, though she was very much the center of attention. The boys had carried her indoors and stretched her out upon a bed of blankets on the other side of the room. There she lay still, nearly lifeless except for an occasional twitch or moan. Madge got up from the table twice to check on her. The daughters stared first at her, then at Ox or Felix, who watched mainly their injured friend. At one point, Felix noticed that Caleb watched her too, though his expression seemed less worried than.... Felix could not name the emotion he sensed.

The Ingers were easier to read. They were a family like his own family, struggling to hold on in a world that was no longer as hospitable to human life

as once it had been. The difference lay only in their obvious fertility. Somehow

their struggle was more successful than the Webbs'.

Yet there were tensions. The younger girls talked freely, but Miriam was quiet

and her face remained stiff. Madge watched her with an expression almost as concerned as the one she wore for Luanna. When she looked at her husband, she seemed watchful, wary.

After lunch, Caleb showed the travelers his barn. One end of the low building held the animals' stalls and emitted the distinctive aromas of pig and goat.

The other was a workshop, with a long bench covered with tools and bits of unidentifiable apparatus; a misshapen leather hat lay beside a vise. Attached to

the chimney was a raised firepit whose brick rim supported an anvil. Beside it

hung a heavy leather apron. The ashes in the pit were cold.

The center of the barn was dominated by a low platform covered inches deep with

hay. "No loft," said Caleb. "That's to keep it off the ground and out of the damp. You can sleep there tonight. Your girl'll be okay in the house."

Felix hoped the man was right.

"Later, if you stay, we'll build you a place of your own."

CHAPTER 26

When the third spoke snapped and the wheel at last went uselessly out of true,

he was delighted. He grinned as he threw the bike into the ravine beside the road and then massaged his crotch.

The tireless rims had slammed every crack and pothole straight up the frame

and
through the seat. He hurt.
So did his ears. Those rims had been so noisy that he had had to stay far
behind
those he followed. The bike had also needed oil for squeaky pedals and hubs.
So why had he even bothered? He'd be closer to them now if he had simply
walked.
It was quieter and less painful and even easier, a least as long as every
bike
left in the world was a corroded wreck. He had hoped, though. He knew what
bikes
had been once, he had even had one a long, long, time ago, a small one with
tires made of arcs of wood bolted to the rims, and he had let hope overpower
his
sense. And he did love gadgets, the old machines, their smell of ancient,
golden
wealth and health and happiness.
But now, he told himself, if he could just catch up....
Might he get too close? The surviving bandits could be around any corner,
behind
any bush. If he moved cautiously enough to avoid any chance of stumbling over
them, he might as well stay where he was. But....
He cut a sapling and trimmed it until it was as long as he was tall. Gripping
it
by one end, he slashed it in an experimental arc, scowling as his cloak swung
wide behind him. If he needed to fight, this would do. In the meantime, it
would
serve as a walking stick.
He left the broken bicycle behind. Ancient pavement, as webbed with cracks as
his long-dead granny's skin, slapped against his feet. His stick, bark rough
beneath his palm and fingers, thudded counterpoint. Comforting sounds, easing
his soul in a way that machines such as bicycles never could, especially when
they screeched and balked and broke. Quiet sounds that somehow let all his
senses open wide. He was aware of seagulls and crows in the air, leather
brushing against his thighs, his hatband tight against his brow, stretching
muscles, the scents of soil and growing things, the not-too-distant sea, his
own
sweat, hot sun, cool breeze. He was also aware of the ruins beside the road,
the
rusted-out, youvee-eaten remains of vehicles, a slumping roof that shone with
what might be solar cells.
He did not think of why he was on this road, of who he was following, of what
he
hoped to do when the time was ripe. All that would come. For now, it was
enough
to be here and moving and remembering a time when he had been not much
different
from those he followed.
Eventually he would retrace his path, going home again. On his way he would
stop
and check that roof. Perhaps there would be something to salvage, though he
had
never yet found home-use solar cells with any life left at all. They had just
not been made to last like those in the cemeteries.
* * *
"Asshole," said Kiwi. He sat on the ground, his legs straight out before him,
his back against a low wall that was all that remained of what once had been
a
house. His face was a mask of pain, his arm swollen and black. Red streaks
showed on one side of his neck. "You had to throw that goddam rock."

Hussey squatted miserably a few feet away. "I was trying for the guy." He held another rock in one hand, studying it as if it could tell him why its fellow had gone astray.

"So you spoiled my chance for one last fuck. They'd be out of there by now. We

could hit them, grab her...." He grimaced with pain, clamping his lips tight. Hussey did not answer. Instead, his mind pounded futilely at a single question:

Why had he missed? He usually had better aim than that. Perhaps it had something

to do with that hazy sense of familiarity he had felt for the last day or two.

"Have we been through here before?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Kiwi flailed with his good hand at the flies on his swollen arm. They lifted, buzzed, returned, and he struck harder. A crack opened in his skin, releasing foul fluids and a gangrenous stink. "Uhhh!"

When Kiwi spoke again, his voice was weaker. "Maybe," he said. "What difference

does it make?"

Hussey shrugged.

"You saw that other girl? The kid?"

He nodded and rolled the stone in his hand.

"Go get her for me."

Hussey didn't move. The very thought of doing what his long-time comrade asked

made his stomach churn.

"I haven't got long, you know. You'd better hurry."

Hussey felt his head move in almost invisible refusal.

"Damn you. Fuck you. If I could stand up I'd make you bend over. Fuck you."

Finally Hussey said, "There's too many of them there. They know we're here. It'd

never work."

"Fuck you." But Kiwi's voice was weak, as if the man had resigned himself to an

unswiven death.

* * *

Consideration Wiggin could hardly believe what he was seeing.

The problem was not that the farmstead was neater than most he had encountered

on the mainland. Houses, barns, sheds, and fences often bore the mark of despair, but not always. Rarer was the richness of the green in and around this

fold of land. Only the island was greener.

Rarest of all was the family itself. Four living kids! All of them girls!

It had taken a while to find a suitable hiding place from which he could watch

people move from house to shed and back again. There were few signs of ruins here, only long lines of jumbled rocks that marked the boundaries of ancient fields long since grown up to forest. The ground between the trees was nearly bare of dead branches and fallen trunks, even near the frequent stumps.

Probably, he thought, they cut most of the wood they needed for their fires but

gathered whatever fell as well. Perhaps they even knew they were reducing the danger of forest fire.

Yet some wood remained on the ground. Old, half-rotted logs, mossy and soft, dating to years before the family had settled here. Now he lay prone behind a log on the hillside behind the shed, only his head showing above it, and studied

four girls, four sizes, four ages. Though they wore broad-brimmed hats, he could see so much more of hip and thigh and--on the oldest three--even breast than the robes of Haven ever revealed. Delivered of the Lord had more children than that, many more, but never so many per wife. And Delivered of the Lord would be delighted when he brought back word of this place. He would be given a squad and assigned the task of bringing these girls to the island. They would be safer there, sheltered out of reach of killers, rapists, and rock-throwing bandits. He hoped the girl he had been following was all right. He had not seen the incident, but he had overheard enough to know what had happened. Or perhaps he hoped that she was injured just enough to keep her here until he could return with that squad. Then he could rescue her too, take her too to safe Haven, and when he brought in all five, perhaps Delivered of the Lord would let God's Promise return to him. Robes and all, he reminded himself. Clothes did not matter. Neither did bodies. Souls were the point of existence, the central theme of life. And God's Promise, he had always known, had a lovely soul. His breath shuddered in his chest at the prospect ahead of him. Then he settled down to study the farmstead, noting the locations of doors and windows, wondering whether there were hiding places, ceiling spaces, perhaps holes excavated beneath the floor. His finger twitched against the ground as if he were drawing a map, but the only marks he made were in his mind. It was gray dusk when the man, the head of this farmstead, emerged from his barn, turned as if scanning his yard, and walked toward the path that led to the road. When his dog tried to accompany him, he turned again and gestured a peremptory, "Stay!" The dog obediently lay down in his tracks and laid his head on his paws. Perhaps he was scouting to see if whoever had thrown the rock was still around. Perhaps he was planning a night attack on the enemy camp. Then why, as long as Consideration Wiggin could still see him, did he seem to watch more carefully behind him?

CHAPTER 27

Luanna did not awaken the next morning. Felix and Ox watched her for a long hour, but she refused to respond to their hopes. Yet--Did she twitch more frequently? Did her lips writhe? Did her eyelids flutter? Certainly her forehead was swollen and red beneath the skin; she would carry another colorful bruise. "Yes," said Madge Inger. "She's a little better. She's going to make it. I'm sure she will." Bella and Karyn stood behind the boys, occasionally leaning against their backs as if there were no room for them to stand apart. Their mother's face was intent with concern for the injured Luanna, but Felix saw the flicker of smile that said she had noticed what the girls were doing.

She said nothing aloud. Nor did Caleb, though he watched as if he did not wish to miss whatever might happen next. Were they hoping that Luanna would never waken? That she would die? That Felix and Ox would soon be available for the mateless girls? Felix did not know, but he could avoid neither the questions nor the pressures against his back. Nor could he avoid the heaviness in his chest and the tightness around his eyes that said he was about to lose something very precious. When he glanced sidelong at his cousin, he saw an expression that said he was not alone in his thoughts and feelings. That was when he said, "We should get the trundle out of the barn." "Good idea," said Caleb. "Get your minds off this poor girl." He tried to slap Ox on the shoulder, but the boy slipped out of reach and headed for the door. Felix was right behind him. A high haze filtered the sun's youvee harshness, yet the ball of light was bright enough to cast shadows. The boys positioned the trundle where the sun would strike the canopy for most of the day. Then they set the stones beside it.

Amelie's Wedding March swelled from a whisper to a glorious shout when the sunlight struck her stone. "How is she?" "Not gone," said Thunderstone. "Waiting still." "He means," said Great-Grandpa. "They're still out there. Lurking in the bushes. We can hear them move from time to time." "She's still asleep," said Ox. He sounded mournful. "She'll wake up soon." Felix wished his words could only make it so. "About time you got us out of that cave," said Maddoc. "Not that we couldn't have stood the dark a little longer, but...." "Why do they need the sun?" Dotty had flopped in the shade beneath the trundle. Trudy, the youngest, was stroking her side and looking curious. Ox pointed at the solar cells on Heavy's top. "They run on it. These soak up the sunlight and store it in batteries. The trundle's the same way." "It has a motor then?" Caleb looked surprised. Ox nodded, but before he could show off the trundle's solar-cell canopy, the batteries, and the electric motor, their host spotted the talking books. Picking

one at random, he pushed its button, and a familiar voice spread through the yard:

* * *

But closing our eyes to our problems, refusing even to consider such questions as whether some people are more worthy of help or life than others, or whether all human lives are equally sacred, does not help. It is far better to strive to understand the problems, the possible solutions, and the implications of both problems and solutions as fully as possible--as fully as possible....
_--From Alameda Croxford, The Sacred Animal
(University of Chicago Press, 1998)._
* * *

"That one's broken," said Great-Grandpa. "That's all it'll say now." But Caleb was nodding. "It still makes sense." "People should have thought so a long time ago."

"They had other things on their minds." The man's face lit up as he leaned further into the trundle and touched the dark green wine bottles almost reverently. "Where'd you find these?"

"In the ruins," said Maddoc. "Back a ways."

"Is that where you found this?" Trudy was on her feet, staring into the trundle

and reaching for Luanna's doll.

"She found it in a dump we passed," he said.

"I bet she wants it. I'll loan her mine too." The doll disappeared. Then so did

Trudy.

When Felix returned to the house a little later to check on Luanna, he took two

of the bottles with him.

"What're those?" asked Miriam. She was sitting cross-legged near Luanna's feet.

Her mother was at her head, a wet cloth in her hand. Three dolls leaned against

her side. One of them had been lovingly constructed of carved wood and scraps of

faded cloth.

He told her. "'For tonight,' Caleb said. 'We have to celebrate.'"

"He would." She made a face.

"If we stay, he said, there's a lot we can do with the extra hands. Clear some

land, build us houses, turn this place into...."

"That's his dream. Make us a tribe, a village, a little nation. With himself as

the patriarch."

Felix set the bottles on the table and then leaned over Luanna just as her tonguetip appeared between her lips and Madge dabbed at her mouth. "She's dry,

so dry," she murmured.

Was one eye open just a crack?

"She'll wake up soon. I think. She'll be okay."

He hoped she would, whether she wound up as his own mate or Ox's or no one's at

all. Whether they continued on their journey or stayed to help Caleb found a nation all his own.

He and Ox were helping Caleb cut up dry logs and split the pieces into firewood,

as immersed in the smells of sawdust and sweat as ever they had been at home, when Bella appeared on the porch. "She's awake!"

Felix barely registered Caleb's grunt of satisfaction and anticipation before he

let go of his end of the saw and began to run toward the house. Ox, who had dropped a log he had been carrying to the sawhorse, met him there.

Inside, Madge still sat beside Luanna's makeshift bed. She was using her wet cloth now to wipe the patient's forehead, carefully avoiding the swelling where

the stone had struck her. The girls knelt nearby, glancing up when Felix and Ox

came into the room.

Luanna blinked. Her fingers danced over the trio of dolls at her side, and a smile flickered over her lips. "They won't let me up. And I have to...."

"You sound almost normal," said Felix.

"I feel normal. Almost."

"Later," said Madge. "A little water first, a little soup. You weren't out that

long. Your strength will come back quickly."

"We won't leave without you," said Ox. He sounded determined.
"It won't be long," said Madge. "Tomorrow or the next day."
The door slammed as Caleb arrived. "She doesn't have to go."
There was a stillness in the room, as if everyone were holding their breath.
"She can stay as long as she likes," he added. "We won't need that bedding till
next winter."
"She's still weak." Madge's mouth pursed as if she had tasted something sour.
"But she'll be on her feet by tomorrow. She can stay with her friends then."
Luanna looked at Felix, eyes wide. Her fingers found the doll with only half a
head of hair and clutched at it. Neither had any doubt about the topic of
conversation.
"Only if she wants, dear."
"Can I get up now? I really have to...."
"Of course." Madge shooed the men out of the room with an obvious air of
relief.

* * *

Luanna did not go back to bed that afternoon. Once on her feet, she stayed
there
as if determined that no one could possibly call her too weak to travel when
the
boys left once more. At suppertime, it was clear that she was struggling. She
did not move rapidly, her face was pale, and her hand kept going to her
forehead
as if she hoped to rub away a massive headache. Still, she did come to the
table
under her own power. The ensuing meal felt like a festive celebration, and
the
two bottles of wine did not hurt a bit. Nor did the omelet with its burden of
sausage and a few wild onions fried in goat milk butter.
Felix felt obliged to say, "You do so much better here. My folks...." He
shook
his head as Luanna added weakly, "Mine too." Few farmsteads were so fertile
that
their people could eat eggs and meat and butter on a regular basis.
Caleb grinned. "My Daddy picked a good spot, he did."
"Tall trees," said Miriam. "That's what he said he looked for. And greener
leaves."
"I'd like to find some sheep and cows and horses," said Caleb. "They're all
this
place needs to be a real farm. But Daddy always said folks ate them all when
the
world went crazy."
Luanna touched the edge of the table. Like much of the furniture in the Inger
house, it was not bare wood. Instead it wore a thin skin of reddish brown.
"Paint?" she asked.
"Milk and blood," said Madge. "An old, old recipe."
"We've gone back to a lot of the old ways," said the youngest of the girls,
Trudy.
Felix thought of the conversation on the Webb roof just a few days before.
"Nails," he said. "We sift them from the ashes because we can't make them."
"I can," said Caleb. His gesture made his right biceps bulge, and Felix
thought,
of course, we even spoke of blacksmiths. "But you're right," added their
host.
One bottle of wine was still half full. He held it toward Felix and Ox, and
when
they shook their heads, he filled his own chipped mug. When he set the bottle

down, his wife claimed the small amount remaining. "There are millions of them out there, if you can get to them before the rust."

Bella offered Ox a dried apple. "Where are you going?"

"You never said," added her mother.

Felix let his gaze sweep across the entire family. "Most folks aren't as healthy as you." He touched his arm. "We've all got the rash, but I'm the only kid in my family. Ma had a few others, but...." He shrugged and looked down at the table.

"Me too," said Luanna.

"One of the stones is a doctor."

"Maddoc," said Ox.

"He told us there's a city over this way. A library, a place with answers. If we can find it...."

Caleb nodded. "The city's there. About two days off, if you can cross the river."

"There's no bridge?"

"I never saw one." Caleb nodded again, though his eyes were on Luanna. "You might as well stay right here."

* * *

"She's with Mama," said Karyn. She was kneeling beside him, tugging the frayed corner of the blanket from his hand. "They're waiting for Dad to go to sleep. She poured him out a mug of 'jack the way she does."

Felix could not see her face, for so little of the moonlight outside penetrated the darkness of the barn that he could barely tell she was there. Still, he thought he knew what she meant.

"Is he always like this?" Luanna had wanted to stay in the barn with the boys.

Madge had said she was not well enough to leave the house, though if she insisted.... But then the wine was gone. Caleb had grown insistent. Bella had drawn her mother aside in another room. And Madge had finally sided with her husband.

Felix could see just enough to know Karyn looked aside. "There aren't any boys around here. There used to be, I guess. But...." Her hand was on his thigh. He felt more than saw her shrug. "If you come back this way...."

On the other side of the hay platform he could hear Bella whispering to Ox. There was a grunt, a giggle, more whispers.

"Mama decided you should be alone out here. So...." Now Karyn had pulled enough blanket from his grip to move onto it. A knee pressed his side. A hand moved on his thigh and made it plain what she wanted, or what her Mama had told her to want. If humans were to persist on the Earth, this family must survive for another generation, and then another and another. And that meant there must be children.

But....

Felix shifted his position so that her hand was closer to his knee. The sounds from the other side of the platform told him that Ox was not balking at what was asked of him. He, on the other hand, could feel himself responding, but he did

not want....

"Am I too young?"

"It's not that." Her body was feminine enough, if less developed than those of

her older sisters and Luanna. But....

"It's her then."

"We haven't done anything." He shook his head in the dark. "I never have."

"But you want to."

"He'd better," said Maddoc softly. They had rolled the trundle under cover for

the night. The ready lights of the books on its bed were sparks in the blackness.

"Shut up," said Amelie. Her music was violins, sweet and gentle, with a backbeat

that sounded like a pounding heart. "Leave him alone."

"If the boy limps out...."

"Shut up."

The music continued but the chatter stopped. Felix said nothing at all while Karyn took her hand away from him and moved, rustling the layer of hay beneath

them.

Something--cloth?--made a gentle breeze in the lightless air.

She seized his hand and pressed it to her. "Can you pretend?"

* * *

"It's almost dawn."

He opened his eyes, realizing as he did so that his face was set in a self-satisfied grin. The barn was as dark as it had been when.... The warmth against his side beneath the blanket, the breath against his neck, the quiet snore....

Then who had spoken?

A shadow moved and poked the blanket, but not where it covered him. "I said...."

"Mama?"

He jumped. He could not help himself, just as he could not help but feel his grin turn into a smirk and vanish from his face, replaced by a wave of heat that

had to mean he had turned bright red. "Huh?"

"You've got to go."

Karyn extracted herself from the blanket and stood up. "He was nice, Mama."

"I'm glad." The girl began to make the sounds of dressing. Similar sounds were

already coming from the other side of the platform. Animals were also stirring.

"He's still asleep," Madge added. "But I can't get him drunk every night. If you

stay...."

Felix understood. Was the dark a little less? He groped for his own clothes.

"She recovered quickly, though she should take it easy for a day or two. I brought some food."

Yes, it was lighter. He could see the bag on which she laid her hand. Had she seen his face?

"Hurry, now."

"Are you sure?" he asked as he pulled his pants on beneath the blanket.

"We're

being followed."

"Maybe they'll visit too, then." Bella produced a throaty giggle not far away.

"And maybe they'll stay. My girls do need husbands."

"Oh, to be young again and in the flesh!"

"Shut up." Felix said it this time.

"My wife was right. I should have let her put me in her vi...."

The music squawked. "I'm blushing," said Amelie.

"The axe is right beside you," said Ox. He was still buttoning his shirt, and he

seemed unable to meet Felix's eyes as if he--as if both of them--had done something shameful that night.

Maddoc didn't say another word until after the boys had pushed the trundle into

the yard, where Luanna stood facing the road. Her arms were folded across her chest, and her back was stiff. She did not turn.

Felix froze, staring at her. What he could see of her cheek was pale. He felt baffled but afraid he knew all too well why she refused to look at him. He did

not notice Miriam beside her, a sack at her feet, until she spoke. "I'm going with you."

"Hey," said Maddoc. "The boy's getting a harem."

"That's not fair," said Felix. Miriam was the only one of the Inger girls who had paid no attention at all to him and Ox. She had not even said very much the

day before. Certainly she had not come to the barn.

"Sure it is," said Great-Grandpa. "Luanna's good and mad at you right now, but

she'll come around. Stop by here on the way home, and you could have two apiece.

Nice fertile stock, too."

Felix glanced toward Karyn. She was blushing in the way that Amelie could only

name. So was Bella, though she was grinning too.

"You're wasting time." Madge grabbed Miriam's sack and tossed it onto the trundle's bed. "Get moving now. He could wake up anytime."

* * *

Felix and Ox leaned into their harness, and the trundle rolled more easily than

ever despite blackberries and everlasting and other stems that thrust between the ancient roadway's cracks. Luanna and Miriam marched behind, Miriam leaning

into the cart's rear whenever it slowed. Dotty trotted to one side and the other, ranged ahead to see how the boys were doing, dropped back to trot beside

the girls, stopped to sniff and listen and utter occasional warning barks that

warned all hazards to steer clear.

The next time Miriam spoke, it was to ask, "Why don't you use the motor?"

"We save it when we can." Felix grunted with effort and concentration as he and

Ox struggled to avoid collapsed pavement and an eroded ditch with a muddy bottom. "For steep hills and when we have to run. It takes too long for the batteries to recharge."

Luanna herself broke the ensuing silence, but her words were not for Felix or Ox. "Why did you leave?"

"You couldn't tell?"

"Hey, guys!" yelled Maddoc. "They're watching your buns!"

A shallow ditch beside the road held stagnant water and mud. Luanna scooped up a

handful of mud and plastered it over Maddoc's solar cells.

"Good idea," said Great-Grandpa.

"My batteries are good for days," said Maddoc.

"There's mud enough for months," said Luanna. "For years."

When the stone said nothing at all, she put the conversation back on its

previous track. "Your Dad?"

Miriam shook her head. "He stopped bothering me a couple years ago. Most of the time."

"Then why? These guys?"

She shrugged. "I couldn't leave by myself."

"It's not safe staying home." Luanna's voice was subdued, as if she were remembering how unsafe--in a very different way--her own home had proved.

"Besides, they're yours, aren't they? And I need to find someone."

"Both of them? Not even one of them. Not anymore!"

"You're being silly," said Great-Grandpa. "Silly and jealous, which always was

pretty silly all by itself."

Amelie's music stopped dead as if she wished to hear his words more clearly. When he stopped, she said, "You have to breed, you know. And strangers are better than kin. You shouldn't miss a chance."

"You can't take just anyone," Luanna said.

"It's not like you had claimed either one of them." When the silence stretched,

Great-Grandpa added, "Had you?"

In a small voice, Luanna said, "I was thinking of it."

The music began again, gently. Amelie asked, "Isn't there anyone else around here? No other families?"

"There used to be," said Miriam. "Years ago. Mama always said it was too bad the

bandits showed up, since they had a boy."

Felix glanced at Ox beside him. Which of them had Luanna been thinking of claiming? He thought he could guess--she had slept warm against his back, after all--but then he chided himself for feeling too smug and wondered if his

face--both their faces, surely--would feel as warm if they were not leaning into

the harness as hard as they could and pretending as mightily that they did not hear.

CHAPTER 28

There was no sign of bandits or Haveners as they left the Inger farmstead, but

no one believed they had abandoned the field.

"We could hear them last night," said Great-Grandpa. "One was chewing something

hard. Another one was swearing."

"Swearing something awful," said Amelie.

"So where are they?" asked Miriam.

"I'm shrugging," said Maddoc.

"He means... he doesn't... know." They had been on the road for less than an hour, and Luanna was still walking. But now she leaned on the trundle's rear. She had to struggle to get her words out.

"You're exhausted," said Miriam.

"Time to ride," said Maddoc. "Listen to the doctor. Hop on and take it easy. Let

the rest of us do the work."

She did not argue as the boys dropped their harness and lifted her onto the trundle. Miriam produced her doll from some fold beneath her cloak and passed it

to her. She curled herself around Heavy just as she had once before, cuddled the

doll against her cheek, and whispered, "I hope... I hope they're not waiting for..."

"There's three of us," said Felix. "We can run faster. The batteries are

charged. And besides--" He gestured as if to draw her attention to the way ahead

of them. "The road's getting better."

She did not answer. Her eyes were already closed. But he was right. For the first time since they had begun this journey, the pavement was clear of everything but moss and lichen almost from edge to edge and as far ahead as they

could see. There were few cracks and potholes. There was not even much of a slope to fight against, though where the road curved out of sight around a distant hill they could see it begin to rise.

"Easy goin'," said Ox. "For a while."

"There's that river," said Miriam. "And no bridge."

"We'll find a way," said Felix. He glanced at the trundle as he picked up the harness once more. There, beside Luanna, were the tools they had salvaged from

her family's place and the rope he had brought from home. So were Ox's bow and

arrows.

"We shouldn't have left," said Ox. "Not yet. She isn't ready."

"Madge said we had to," said Felix.

Miriam made a snorting noise. "She was ready enough for Dad."

The boys fell silent. Felix knew what she meant, knew as well that neither of them wished to see Luanna hurt again. He thought she might go as stiff and speechless as Miriam had been before she had left her childhood home behind her.

He did not want that, for when she spoke--when Miriam spoke as well--they were

people whose company he could enjoy.

When people did not speak, they were mere objects, useful perhaps, but of no value beyond their use. They might as well be the sort of old-fashioned gravestones that had no soul or voice and could be reused as doorsteps and paving-blocks to walk upon.

He and Ox leaned into their harness, and the trundle rolled fast enough to belie

its name. Luanna slept. Miriam pushed, and the boys actually trotted as they pulled.

They kept up their pace as long as they could. But in time they had to slow. The

road collapsed along one edge where erosion had removed the soil beneath. It slumped where a culvert had long since rusted away. Brush once more encroached

upon the pavement, and progress once more became a struggle.

They stopped to catch their breath. To their right rose a hillside covered with

scrub that might hide a thousand bandits, but no one ambushed them. To their left the ground sank away among trees, and a lake could be seen not far off. Along its shore stood rows of thick pillars; most were broken stubs, but a few

still retained their full height.

"That used to be a reservoir," said Great-Grandpa. "Water for the city. It can't

be far now. Those pylons were for the cables that supported the roof. Like a huge tent to keep the crap out."

Miriam stared at the stone. "You remember that. You really do."

"I really do."

"But you're dead." It said so right on the stone.

"Uh, uh," said Maddoc. "That's just the meat. It wore out, you know, got beat,

went and quit, turned to worm shit."

"You mean, they could take you out of your body?"

"No," said Great-Grandpa. "We died with our bodies. Of course we did. But they copied us first. Our minds and memories."
"We didn't want to die, you know," said Maddoc. "But that just couldn't be helped."
"Someone once told me that was what books were," said Great-Grandpa. "Copies of their authors' minds."
"I feel a lot more real than a book. More alive."
"You sound real enough," said Miriam. "If I close my eyes, I can almost see you."
"So what do I look like?"
"A blockhead," said Great-Grandpa.
Luanna's giggle said she was awake once more.
"Stay right there," said Miriam. "Don't get down."
"That's right," said Maddoc. "Hold her eyes open."
Felix looked over his shoulder. Miriam was using her fingers to spread Luanna's eyelids. "They look okay to me."
"Just fine. No pinpoint pupils. No concussion. But she'll be tired for a while."

Now Miriam glanced sidelong toward Felix. "Look at him. He's worried about you."

Luanna did not look, but she did giggle once more and Felix felt heartened. The two girls were getting along very well. And perhaps what had happened the night before would not ruin his chances. He looked at Ox. His mouth was set in a grim line that said he resented the fact that the girls were talking about Felix, that he wished Bella had come instead of Miriam, perhaps that they had stayed at the Inger farmstead despite whatever lay in store for Luanna. Surely, Felix told himself, they could have protected her, kept her with them in the barn at night. But then, just as surely, Bella and Karyn would not have visited them again. "You'll live forever, won't you?" Now she was talking to the stones again. "If no one smashes us," said Maddoc. "If lightning doesn't strike."
"You think that's so nice?" asked Great-Grandpa. "Lots of us are just stuck."
"Waiting for a train that never comes."
"You should have seen the churchyard we passed the other day."
Amelie stilled her Wedding March long enough to sigh dramatically. "Me too," she admitted. "And we never get to do anything or go anywhere."
"Until now," said Maddoc. "So say thank you to the nice boys."
For a moment, her music recapitulated the throb she had given it in the barn the night before. Luanna flushed; she must have heard something of the noise the boys had made. Felix and Ox both put their heads down as if by jerking the trundle into motion once again they could somehow escape the reminder. Dotty loped beside them, tongue lolling, while Thunderstone barked, "Chase! Run! Chase!"
Several miles of curving, dipping road rolled away behind them. There was no sign of bandits or Haveners or anyone else. There were no lines of smoke against the sky, no scent of manure or cooking food, no sound of distant voices, no echoes of axe or hammer. They began to feel safer. Their pace slowed to a

walk

as exhaustion grew, and when they came to the bridge, they stopped. Its surface stood a hand's breadth above the pavement where the road had settled. The stream below was small and clear. Beyond it, the land rose in a hill as long and steep as any they had strained to climb before, and blackberries, everlasting, and other brush crowded as thickly as ever in upon the pavement.

Luanna insisted on getting out of the trundle. The boys, still panting, gathered ferns from the bank of the stream and tried to make her comfortable. Miriam dug

into the sack of supplies her mother had given them and produced a stick of Inger sausage. Then she fetched cold water from the stream and returned to her

conversation with the stones.

"Did they have to cut open your heads to put you in there?"

Maddoc laughed. "If you still had computers, you'd understand."

"We're information, really," said Great-Grandpa. "Collections of habits and words and memories. They had a way to read them and store them."

"Like this." Ox had the box he had taken from the library. He turned it on, and

pictures marched across the screen. He smiled when Miriam's eyes went wide.

"Like batteries." Felix knelt beside the trundle to point at its mechanisms.

He

wasn't about to be left out of the explanation. "They store power, and then they

send it to the motor on wires."

"They poured us in on wires too." After a brief pause, Amelie added, "Look just

under my edge."

Miriam lifted the stone and felt its underside. "This?" Tipping the stone up, she exposed a round indentation.

"Push it." When the bottom of the hole split into leaves and swung aside,

Amelie

said, "My dataplug."

Dotty spun to face the way they had come. Her fur bristled.

"They're coming," said Great-Grandpa.

Thunderstone's growl was all gnashing fangs and strings of bloody drool.

"Run!"

Amelie's Mendelssohn was a skirl of bagpipes and a rattle of drums.

Felix felt a second's urge to howl with laughter as he plunged first toward the

harness and then toward Luanna to boost her back onto the trundle. It was quite

insane, but they had been pursued long enough. All day he had thought--had hoped--they had left the bandits and the Haveners behind at last, and now here

they were again, while the path seemed designed by hill and brush to impede their flight.

If only they had not relaxed and slowed and stopped!

Fortunately, the trundle's batteries were fully charged.

* * *

"Where are they?" panted Miriam. She and the boys were red-faced and sweaty. Despite the youvee hazards, they had tossed their leather cloaks on the trundle,

keeping only their hats.

"I haven't seen a sign," said Ox as breathlessly as she. Even Dotty was exhausted; she had flopped beneath a rhododendron that was all new green leaves

and no sign of this year's flowers.

"We can hear them," said Great-Grandpa.
"They're coming," said Maddoc. "Down the hill, round the bend, out of sight, swearing, 'Where the hell'd they run to? Can't be too far ahead, can they? Where else could they be? Look at the tracks.'" Even with the aid of the trundle's motor, it had taken them hours to reach this level stretch of the road, a shoulder of the hillside, fighting brush all the way, doing a lot of swearing all their own. Ahead of them the hill rose just a little more, or so it seemed. So it had better be, for the trundle's batteries were now nearly dead. They needed a downhill stretch if they were to stay ahead of their foes.
"Then don't stop here." Miriam leaned against the back of the trundle as if she could push it the rest of the way up the hill all by herself.
"I wish I could help," said Luanna.
Amelie laughed. "You'll get your turn as soon as one of them drops."
Felix simply leaned into the harness. The trundle began to roll. His breath came harder, faster, hotter. The hillside passed behind him. The road flattened once more, and bright western sun was in his eyes. Clouds were piling high against the southern border of the sky, dark against yellow and orange and red. A few more steps, a few more, and the road dropped away ahead. Below them now was a broad valley. Toward its other side, just a few miles away, the landscape became a grid of streets and rubble mounds and intact--or nearly so--buildings. One of the largest buildings was topped by a rounded skeletal framework that must once have been a dome. The stunted trees that covered so much of the land elsewhere became sparser than ever.
Felix was still panting, but he managed to ask, "Is that the city?"
"Don't stop," said Great-Grandpa. "They're getting closer."
"That's it," said Maddoc. "We're almost there. The hospital's on its other side.
Up that hill."
Felix groaned.
"I see the river," said Ox. It lay at the bottom of the valley, a line of reflected sun, blocking their way to the city and the library beyond. They could see no bridge.
"There they are!"
They spun to see a single figure breasting the hill behind them. Dotty and Thunderstone both howled with fear and rage.
"Dad!"
"You shouldn't be here, Miriam. It's too dangerous."
"I'm not coming home." Her voice shook, but her expression was grimly determined. "You can't make me."
"Of course I can."
The dogs howled again, more fiercely and desperately than ever, as two more figures came into view. Felix recognized them immediately as the bandits they had met before, and his heart crashed to the pit of his stomach. They were so close, on the very brink of the fulfillment of their quest, and their foes had found them again. He wished they were not too exhausted to flee. Yet the bandits seemed as tired as they. One of them leaned against a stick while one hand fumbled beneath his cloak; his free hand and arm, supported by

slits cut in the cloak, were so blackly swollen that it did not seem possible they could ever heal.

"Stop!" Luanna was sitting up on the trundle. The bow was in her hands, an arrow

against the string. For a moment, she was an ancient goddess of hunt or war, and

Felix wished he knew the name to call her. Ox seemed to agree, for he made no move to claim the bow he had strung and practiced with, the bow she had used only once before.

The bandits obeyed her command as soon as they came abreast of Caleb, who gestured at the younger, uninjured fellow. "Remember the Husseys? He'll be your

husband. I promised him."

"Why?" Her voice shook worse than ever. "So he'll leave my sisters to you?"

Luanna drew the arrow back even further. "And me?"

Caleb held one hand toward the injured bandit. "We'll take care of you once Kiwi's done."

"What about us?" Felix was reaching slowly toward the axe on the trundle bed. Unfortunately, the axe was in plain sight.

Kiwi finally pulled his good hand from beneath his cloak. It held a shiny piece

of metal that no one could fail to recognize as a gun. "Back up."

When Felix had obeyed and the harness that linked him to the trundle was nearly

taut, he added, "We have enough men now."

"Yah!" Luanna shouted as she released her arrow.

She missed, but the startled bandit lurched.

His gun went off. There was a sound of impact and breakage.

"Go!" Simultaneously, Felix and Ox lunged against their harness. The trundle rolled over the lip of the hill and began to gather momentum. Miriam ran behind.

Luanna nocked and fired another arrow.

There was a cry of pain.

Dotty barked, tucked her tail between her legs, and raced past Miriam.

No one tried to restrain the trundle's headlong rush down the hillside. The boys

struggled only to keep it on the pavement.

Luanna clung to the trundle's sides while snatching at bow and arrows, bags of

food, talking books, and anything else that threatened to bounce over the edge.

There could be no stopping, no going back for anything that was lost, not even

for the Memory of the Webbs.

When ten minutes later they reached level ground once more and looked back, no

one was visible on the hilltop.

"What did he hit?" asked Ox.

"I'm all right." That was Great-Grandpa.

"Me, too," said Maddoc. He sounded relieved.

Amelie did not have to say a word, for her music continued.

"No chase," said Thunderstone. "No purr."

"Oh, no," Luanna sobbed. "Heavy."

All that remained of the catstone was an inert stone shell. A single round hole

penetrated one side of the stone. There was no exit hole, nor any sign of life.

CHAPTER 29

Consideration Wiggin had felt torn when Felix, Ox, and Luanna had left the farmstead with one of its daughters. He had known he should return to Haven,

report, and bring a band of his fellows to collect those that remained. Yet he had said he would bring Luanna herself back with him. Now he also wished to know where those he had been following were going. Was there another farmstead still further inland? More young women for Haven? He had not made up his mind until the man from the farmstead had emerged from the house, screamed at his wife and remaining daughters so loudly that Consideration had no trouble hearing the names--Madge, Trudy, Bella, Karyn--and sworn he would bring Miriam home. Consideration had watched him leave then, join the bandits as if he had known them for years, and strike out with them in pursuit of the others. He had really had no choice but to follow in turn. He had even been able to get close enough to hear one of the bandits call him Caleb. Now he stood among the trees and watched the two bandits trudge up the hill toward Caleb. He could tell from the man's gesticulations that he was talking to someone. He could not see Felix, Ox, Luanna, and Miriam, Caleb's runaway daughter, but he could hear the howling of their dog and see the canopy of their cart, and the man's commanding, threatening gestures left no doubt that he was a father and Miriam was his daughter. Or.... He shook his head. The man's manner reminded him of Delivered of the Lord remonstrating with a wayward member of the Haven flock. He had seen other men speak that way to dogs and tangled rigging. But Delivered of the Lord would never give way to others the way this man did to the bandits when they caught up to him. Consideration Wiggan wished he were closer. There was anger there, and the injured bandit sounded vicious. If he turned that viciousness against the girls.... He grinned as he saw a hint of opportunity. He had only his knife for a weapon, but the boys and the bandits would weaken each other in the battle that must come soon. He would step in at the last moment, an Angel of the Lord. He would slay the last of them, and then he would offer both girls safe Haven. They would go with him gratefully. Yet--he had a core of honesty that left him less than comfortable with Delivered of the Lord's autocratic, self-serving rule. That same core made him squirm at his own thoughts and admit that he would step in even if he knew the girls would refuse to go with him. How could he leave when danger hovered?

* * *

The other follower of the little band was further down the hill, leaning on his staff in the shadow of an arching apple tree. He could see even less, but that was enough to tell him Felix and Ox and the girls were in trouble. He bit his lip. He wished he dared to step forward, to intervene. But his stick was his only weapon. They were better equipped than he to ward off attack. When an arrow rattled among the branches overhead, he almost laughed out

loud.

What had he just told himself?

The flat report of the pistol sobered him instantly. He had not known the bandits had such a thing, but there it was, reflecting golden sunlight from the

hand of the thug with the gangrenous arm.

A moment's thought insisted that he hadn't had it before that last battle, or

he would have used it then. It must have been a Havener's, and he must have picked it up when that Havener died.

It was no relief when the farmstead man sat down abruptly, an arrow jutting from

his thigh.

All that proved was that the bullet had not touched whoever held the bow. Ox might be dead. Or Felix.

Or either of the girls.

But now the other bandit, the one with two good arms, was shaking his fist. He

did not look satisfied. Indeed, his posture shouted frustration and said quite

clearly that the others had escaped once more.

He waited beneath the apple tree until the bandits had gone on, passing out of

sight beyond the crest of the hill, and the wounded man had extracted the arrow

from his leg, struggled to his feet, found a stick of his own, and hobbled back

down the hill, grunting and swearing with every other step. He thought it would

take the man at least three days to make it home. If infection set in, it would

take much longer.

He also waited until the Havener had left his own concealment and moved on.

Only

when everyone else was out of sight did he follow.

* * *

"Mother-fuckin' sons of bitches. Why the fuck did we have to catch up at the top

of a hill?"

"Because they stopped to admire the view," Hussey answered. "And we're too sl...."

"Who the fuck asked you?"

You did, Hussey thought, but this time he kept his answer to himself. Kiwi was

still walking, still in hot pursuit of the last piece of ass he could ever hope

to grab. And it would be his last. His arm was blacker than ever, it oozed constantly, it stank, and the red streaks had climbed his neck to his ears and

cheeks. Surely they also stretched across his chest as well. Hussey did not understand why the other bandit was still on his feet.

Why did he keep going himself? Caleb had recognized him, hadn't he? He had walked right up to them there in the woods and said, "You're Batchelor

Hussey,

aren't you? You look just like your Dad."

"Just Hussey," he had answered. Had he once had that other name as well? It seemed familiar, but.... "You knew my Dad?"

"Kill him," Kiwi had said.

"I'm Caleb Inger." He had ignored Kiwi in every way but one: his forehead had suddenly been covered with sweat. "We thought you were dead. We found the

house

all burned and your folks' bodies laying there. We didn't find you."

"Ron liked the shape of his ass." Kiwi had glared at Hussey. "I said kill him."

"You want the girl, don't you?"

"One last fuck," Kiwi had said.

"And the boys?"

"They're fuckin' meat."

Caleb had nodded. "I'll help. But I want the girl when you're done. My wife's gettin' old."

The two bandits had stared at him for a long moment before nodding. Why not? And then, when he had showed up that morning, he had said his daughter was with

them. Kiwi had licked his lips at that and whispered, "Double pussy."

"She's not for you."

"Why not, old man?" Suddenly Kiwi had had his gun in his hand, and it had been

pointing at Caleb. "She too good for the likes of us? Or is she private stock?"

Kiwi had laughed.

"You're getting the other one."

"Then she's for me," Hussey had said. He had surprised himself. He was guilty of

as many rapes as Kiwi, but he had never simply told a father or a husband what

he was about to do. He had killed them first. Yet murder did not feel right here, while claiming Miriam did.

After a long moment, Caleb had cast his eyes down and nodded and softly said, "That was the idea, once."

Now they watched the trundle and their quarry receding rapidly down the hill. Kiwi swore again.

"We'll get them," said Caleb. He was clutching his thigh and grimacing with pain. His face was white.

"Not you," said Hussey. His wound would slow him down far too much.

"You made them run," said Kiwi. He pointed his gun at Caleb. "The deal is fuckin' off."

"Stop it," said Hussey. "If he wasn't here, that arrow might have got you." Kiwi looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he lowered the gun. "They're all

dead

now. As soon as we catch up. First the guys. Then the stones. Then the girls."

"Not Miriam," said Caleb between teeth clenched against his pain. "Bring her home."

The gun came up again. "She left home, old man. She's not yours anymore. So even

her."

For a moment, the man seemed about to defy the bandit, but then he glanced toward Hussey.

Hussey shrugged. When Kiwi made up his mind, there wasn't much that he could do.

Though perhaps....

Caleb slumped, surrendering to pain and threat and futility.

Kiwi turned away, lurching, grimacing with his own pain and futility. "Let's go."

Hussey hesitated while he studied the top of Caleb's bowed head. He knew now why

this landscape had seemed familiar. He had known it when he was a child. He remembered now. He also remembered the day when his life had changed, though a

wall of something like mist kept him from seeing the faces or the deaths of

his
parents. Had he had a brother or a sister? That too was gone. But Ron and
Kiwi
were not. Their faces hovered over him, stinking of smoke and blood and
grinning.
He had gone with them, and he had learned to do awful things.
Now he found himself wishing he could save Miriam, not from Kiwi and himself
but
from her father.

"I said, let's go!"

CHAPTER 30

The catstone rattled when Felix picked it up and set it down beside the road.
No

one spoke, though Luanna cried softly over Heavy's loss and Amelie's Wedding
March turned rumbly soft, as if it were being sung by a chorus of purring
cats.

They listened in silence until Great-Grandpa finally reminded them: "If we
stay

here, they'll catch up again."

Miriam waved one arm toward the valley ahead of them. "How are we going to
cross

the river?"

"Worry about it when we get there." Felix and Ox leaned into their harness
once

more. Miriam and Luanna walked beside the trundle, adding a push when the
brush

became unusually thick. Dotty ranged ahead, her tail jaunty.

"What was he doing there?" asked Felix. "He looked like he knew them."

"Too many people at the farm," said Great-Grandpa. "So they made nice."

"When?" The bandits had not showed themselves before they left that morning,
and

they had caught up so quickly that they could not possibly have taken the
time

to negotiate an alliance. "He had to go to them."

"Would he do that?" Felix found it hard to believe.

Ox snorted. "He was there."

"He wants us back," said Luanna with a glance at Miriam.

She nodded. "And he does know them. One of them. I think."

"What do you mean?"

"There really did used to be another family a couple of miles away. The
Husseys."

"You recognized him?" asked Maddoc.

She shook her head. "We were just kids the last time I saw him. Though there
was

already talk that we would marry. There weren't any other choices, after
all."

"I can guess what happened." Luanna's voice choked on her own memory.

"It was pouring rain that day, so we didn't see the smoke. But we smelled it,
and Dad went to check it out. He told us later. Their place had been too damp
to

burn well, and the bodies of his parents and his sister were still
recognizable."

"No sign of him."

"No."

"They took him for a bugger boy," said Ox in a tone that said he did not find
the idea strange at all.

The trees beside the road gave way to broad expanses of cracked and weedy
pavement surrounding ruined buildings. Most of the ruins were mere piles of
rubble festooned with green. Some had walls still standing, doorways, windows.

A

very few had partial roofs that filled their interiors with shadows and--what else? Another cache of wine? Or a second set of bandits, lurking in ambush? Luanna nocked another arrow just in case and held the bow across her lap. Her hands were sure and confident; after all, hadn't she made one of those bandits

scream?

"Parking lots," said Great-Grandpa. "Car dealers. Furniture and computer stores.

Clothing and shoes. Restaurants and supermarkets."

As they came nearer to the city, they began to see walls pockmarked with craters

the size of a hand, each one with a dark central hole. Side streets became frequent, though their pavement, apparently thinner than that of the main road,

was heaved and broken by the tree-roots that humped beneath it. The brush that

rooted in the cracks and potholes was impassably thick. Cellar holes and chimneys and twists of pipe and stubs of brick wall replaced the parking lots.

Decrepit cars were everywhere, and for the first time Felix realized that each

car's north side, where less youvee touched paint or plastic, always retained more color. The parallel to gravestones and trees with their moss made him laugh

abruptly. Black flies swarmed, and as dusk grew nearer they were joined by mosquitoes.

"People lived here once," said Luanna as a pair of crows cawed from a limb. "Lots of them."

"They died," said Amelie through her music. "Just like us."

"That hospital didn't help much," said Felix. "The library."

"Famine," said Maddoc. "A hospital's useless when people are starving. And a library is only good for helping you prevent disaster in the first place. Add to

that plague and poisons in the air and water and soil. Maybe war as well, when

people started taking what they needed wherever they could find it. Just to feed

their families."

"They were all bandits, then," said Ox.

"If they survived, they had to be."

"Our own ancestors," said Felix.

"So what else is new?" asked Great-Grandpa. "Don't forget old Sam Webb."

"What do you mean?" Miriam looked puzzled. "Who's...?"

Luanna fished the broken frame from its sack. Felix recited the Memory of the Webbs as he and Ox continued to haul the trundle toward the city.

"But they changed," said Miriam when he was done. "Even then. He wasn't what

his father was, and even the pirate changed for a little while."

Her tone was pensive, and Felix guessed that she was thinking of their pursuers.

But he had no chance to pursue that thought, for their road bent into a circle

from which branched several other roads. To their right the ground dropped away

to the river, broad and silver-tarnish yellow-black with.... He looked upward.

No, the water was not reflecting just plain yellow sky. The clouds they had noted when they first saw the city had climbed further from the horizon, spread

wider, and now they boiled with the promise of a storm as bad as the one they

had waited out in the library. Low in the west, occasional breaks in the clouds let through the reddening light of approaching sunset. One of the roads from the circle extended into space above the water, sagged, and stopped; the rest of the bridge had fallen long ago. Another led them down the hill past swirls of pigeons startled from their rookeries to the actual river bank, where tangled roses and honeysuckle and berry canes spilled toward the water. Here the road itself was almost clear of vegetation. The chief obstacles were spills of rubble from the ruins to either side. There was no sign of human life, and Dotty seemed quite unperturbed by scents of other creatures. Like her companions, she ignored the insects in the air. They could see the river to their left. Its roiling, heaving waters were clearly nothing they could ford. There were no boats. There were no bridges except for the stub that jutted from the hillside above their heads. "We're stuck," said Ox. "They'll catch us now." Luanna lifted the bow as if she were looking for their foe. "We can't go any further." "How many arrows are left?" asked Felix. She touched them where they lay beside Thunderstone. There were not many. "Go upstream," said Amelie. "There'll be another bridge." "Maybe even a boat," said Maddoc. "Not likely," said Great-Grandpa. "But do you see that? Toward the water, behind that rubble pile...." "Those red lines?" Squatting over them here and there were massive tanks and boxes and long platforms, all on wheels, all thick with rust and streaked with pigeon droppings. "Railroad tracks," said Maddoc. "Yes, go upstream. Follow them." It was easy to obey. The tracks paralleled the road they were already on, and though they lost sight of the rusty lines from time to time behind or under some pile of rubble or billow of vegetation, they always found them again. On their side of the river, the size of the rubble piles did not change. This had been a district of large buildings. "Warehouses," Great-Grandpa said. "Factories." On the other side, the piles grew smaller and more trees appeared on the bank. They could see another road, ruined houses, and still no sign of human beings. Shadows grew as the clouds grew thicker and the sun sank behind them. Wind blew, trees lashed, and then the tracks bent toward the shore. "I told you so," said Amelie. A steel trestle, as rusted red and pigeon shitted as the railroad cars, stretched across the water, supported midway by a pair of weathered stone pillars. The rails they had been following stopped a hundred feet short of the structure. They had been removed from the bridge as well. Most of the wooden cross-ties remained, twisted and cracked and gray from decades of youvee and weather. Where they were missing someone had filled in with chunks of log. Yet that someone had done the work long, long ago. The new wood seemed almost as

weathered as the old.

When Felix tested the trestle with his weight, it creaked and trembled. The cross-ties, new and old, crunched under his feet and shed flakes into the water

rushing below. Dotty, who had ventured onto the crumbling structure with him, whined.

A gust of wind whipped out of the sky, and the trestle trembled again. He and the dog both backed off. "I don't like it."

"No choice," said Great-Grandpa. "No time to build a raft. Look behind you." Half a mile away on the road they had followed he could see two figures.

"This trundle's too damned slow," said Maddoc.

"I'm shaking my head," said Great-Grandpa. "Skeptically. We may be slow, but look at the way that guy moves."

One of the figures in the distance leaned on a stick and lurched forward with a

feverish, desperate intensity that explained how he managed to stay so close behind them.

"Not my Dad," said Miriam. "Not the right shape. What did they do to him?"

"Maybe he went home," said Luanna.

"Why would he do that?" She both looked and sounded worried.

"Hurry up!" cried Maddoc. "Stop the chat, don't look back, hit the track."

They wasted no more time.

Despite the trestle's frightening weakness, they had to trust it, and they had

no time to carry the trundle's cargo across piece by piece. They rolled the trundle onto the first of the cross-ties and winced when it shifted under their

weight. The bolts that had once anchored it to the steel frame beneath had long

since corroded away.

They winced again when the trundle's wheels jolted into the first of the between-tie gaps. But though the steel shook and the wood crumbled even worse than it had beneath Felix's weight alone, it held.

They were nearly halfway across when a tie broke completely under the weight of

the trundle's rear wheels. The end of the cart fell abruptly. Stones slid and shouted.

"The poles!" Felix shouted. Ox and Miriam hastily untied the only tools they had

that could help them now. Using them as levers, they then boosted the trundle onto the next tie, which groaned and crumbled but held even as they all held their breaths. Amelie's Wedding March bellowed loud and triumphant.

Felix looked behind. Night was almost on them now, and the clouds made the dusk

quite murky. But he could see the bandits. They were almost to the other side of

the bridge.

A dozen ties later, they broke through again. This time the levers they needed

were ready in their hands and they were hardly delayed at all.

The bandit's gun cracked just as they reached the other side. A slug spanged off

the metal of the trestle. Flakes of rust scattered on the wind and stung their

necks.

"Let's go!" yelled Maddoc.

"Not yet," said Ox, and he led the way back onto the bridge to remove as many of

the ties as they could, piling them into a barrier wall and opening a long gap

in the trestle's deck, leaving only the narrow support beams as a solid pathway.

They lost only a few of the ties into the river.

They ran from the bridge at last and began to haul and push the trundle back downstream, toward the center of the city.

"That won't stop them," said Maddoc. "You just wasted time, lost your lead."

"It wouldn't stop anyone with two arms," said Great-Grandpa. "But one of them's

pretty gimpy. He'll want more light."

Felix was not sure the stone was right, but he realized they had no choice. Even

if they could destroy the trestle--and despite its shakiness he did not think they could--they shouldn't. They didn't dare. It would strand the bandits on the

other side of the river, but it would also strand them. When they were ready to

go home again, they would have to trek far upstream to find another bridge. None of them could be sure that such a thing existed, or that more bandits did

not lie in wait just over the horizon. He might never see his Ma and Pa again.

Now it was growing rapidly darker. They could barely see the bridge behind them.

They could not see the bandits at all, though all four could imagine them approaching the trestle, venturing onto it, finding the gap in the surface, swearing, backing off to wait for morning.

It was too much to hope that one or both would fall through the gap into the rushing water below.

Just enough moonlight came through the clouds overhead to show how rapidly the

stormwind blew. Gusts touched them on the ground, rattled branches, tugged at the trundle canopy. A banging drew their eyes to a roofless ruin beside the road; once-white pockmarked walls still bore the stains of fire.

"A door," said Great-Grandpa. "Still on its hinges after all these years."

There were few such active remnants of the past. Most of the ruins they passed

were silent, everything that was loose long since blown into some corner where

the wind no longer touched it. The marks of fire were common. More common still

were the crumbings of sheer age and rot.

"Where's that hospital?" Felix asked.

"Miles away," said Maddoc. "South and west and up that hill you saw. We won't get there tonight."

The scent of roses came to them. A vine-covered wall of decorative masonry loomed beside them. A drive arced behind it, overgrown with everlasting and brambles and small trees. Above that hung the facade of what once had been a multi-story building. Through its glassless upper windows they could see the racing clouds; there was no roof. Its lower windows, just as glassless, were black.

"That'll do," said Great-Grandpa. "Enough out of the way so they won't stumble

over us in the dark. And it's solid enough if the storm breaks."

They did not explore. They had no lights, they were tired, and besides, the interior stank of small animals and decay. They camped just within the building's broad entrance.

* * *

When Felix opened his eyes, it was even darker than it had been when he closed

them. The wind roared through branches and gaps in ruined walls and whistled

over still-standing chimneys. Branches rattled against the side of the building.

He had no idea how much of the night had passed.

Lightning flashed, and on its heels pealed the thunder.

He did not hear rain or the crash of falling masonry.

Nor was there the snap and crackle of fire.

What was there? Amelie's ever-present Mendelssohn was the merest thread of sound, almost inaudible. In the dark recesses of the building, small creatures

scratched and rustled. Over-riding both was a low rumble, a growl of danger and

defiance and....

Another bolt of lightning, more distant, just a spark but enough to show him Dotty standing stiff-legged, bristle-shouldered, staring toward the road.

"What is it?"

He could not tell who was whispering. His "Quiet!" gesture was just barely visible in the dark. He pointed outside. Someone was there. The bandits, the Haveners, Miriam's Dad, he had no way to tell. It was enough that Dotty warned

them.

Bodies shifted near him. Everyone was awake and listening and watching and fearing discovery.

But Dotty's growl never changed its volume or its pitch.

On the road, someone swore.

"They're ahead of us now," Great-Grandpa said no more loudly than the wind.

"Ambush," said Maddoc just as softly. "That's what they'll try."

The growling faded, message enough that the danger had moved on.

"They don't know they're ahead of us," said Miriam.

"They will," said Ox. "In the morning, as soon as they don't see our tracks in

front of them."

"Not if it rains," said Maddoc.

"Then they'll backtrack." Luanna's voice shook.

"We'll have to watch. Both ways."

"You told us where you're going," said Miriam. "If Dad told them...."

Maddoc made a soft, derisive noise. "They still don't know where the hospital is."

"That depends where they've been before."

After a brief silence, Maddoc said, "Sorry. You're right, of course."

"Hush!" said Great-Grandpa, and they could hear it too. Dotty was growling once

more. Felix reached for her, petted her, and felt her body change its posture,

aiming now back the way they had come, toward the trestle.

"It's someone else," he breathed. Not the bandits backtracking already.

"The Haveners."

"Or...."

* * *

The entranceway in which they sheltered faced east, but no sun struck their eyes

to wake them in the morning. The cloud cover was complete, the sky dark gray streaked with wind furrows though for the moment the air at ground level was still. It had not yet rained.

They positioned the trundle to soak up whatever light it could. Then they ventured out of the building's drive and past its shielding wall to examine the

road. Felix thought the weeds and moss and brush seemed more trampled than they

alone could account for, and the signs did go on past their hiding place.

"A stick," said Ox. He was bent over a patch of silt some past storm had

deposited on the pavement and no moss or grass had yet covered over. When the others joined him, they saw what he meant, a round imprint with one drawn-out edge, as if the walker had let his stick drag for a moment each time he picked

it up. There were also footprints, though counting the number of foes who had passed them in the night was almost impossible.

"At least two," said Ox. "See? One print overlaps another."

"I thought they weren't supposed to be able to get across in the dark," said Miriam.

"The ties were loose." Felix shrugged. "They must have picked them up behind them and set them down ahead. At least it slowed them down."

"Here's another on top of that?" asked Luanna. The ground was too dry to be sure.

"Then three," said Ox. "At least. Maybe more."

"Let's stay here a while," said Miriam tentatively, almost as if she were asking. "We can rest, while they get further ahead."

"Or set up their ambush." Luanna scratched nervously at the rash on her wrist.

She was not happy at the thought. She knew what her fate would be if the bandits got her.

Felix snorted. He thought Miriam's point was better than she had herself. "If we

wait long enough, they'll think we went some other way."

"We haven't seen one yet."

"Or that we're still ahead of them, so they'll hurry on."

"Hah. We leave tracks too, and there won't be any ahead of them."

"We should get higher," said Miriam. "We might see them, or another road."

The building that had sheltered them through the night offered as much elevation

as anything in the neighborhood. Daylight, dimmed though it was by clouds, penetrated from the glassless windows into rooms and corridors. Rusty metal stairways trembled under their weight. Doors sagged on corroded hinges and disintegrated into thin layers of veneer and wads of fibrous pulp. Paper hung in

faded scrolls from the water-stained walls. Plaster grew multicolored furs of mold. Carpeting was matted with moisture and wind-blown dirt and dung.

Cockroaches scuttled away from their steps. Tracks of small animals--but not of

people--were visible. There were all the stinks of mildew, rats, a skunk, and decay.

There were signs of vandalism as well as time: One room's walls and ceiling and

floor were streaked and splattered with a hundred colors of paint. The cans scattered across the floor suggested some frenzied madman whirling about the room, can after can in his grip, paint spraying wildly. In one hallway, the walls had been destroyed, beaten in by clubs or axes; the floor was thick with

broken plaster and wood, and light came through the holes from the rooms behind

the walls.

Those rooms still held furniture: Wood had gone the way of the doors, but there

remained metal and plastic, chairs and tables and desks. Metal cabinets held sliding drawers full of layered pulp, turned unrecognizable by damp.

Glass-fronted boxes like larger versions of the moving-picture box Ox had found

at the library sat on many desks, attached by wires to metal cases and flat arrays of pushbuttons. When a small version, screen and keyboard and all in a single unit about twice the size of his Swiss Family Robinson or Sacred

Animal_, caught his eye, Felix picked it up. "I'll ask Great-Grandpa what it is."

The top floor was open to the sky. More dirt blended with the matted carpet. Grass and weeds and even small trees sprouted amid pigeon tracks and droppings.

Here the windows gave them a good view in all directions. They could see the river and the trestle bridge they had crossed the day before, the road they had

been following, the skeletal dome that was still ahead on their path, towering

high above everything else in sight. They could not see any sign of the bandits,

nor any hint of an alternate route to their destination. Every side road seemed

choked by vegetation or rubble.

"They'd be traps," said Luanna, pointing at one of those congested streets.

"If

they found us there, we couldn't run."

"We can move faster on this one." Ox indicated the road outside the building.

"But there's still no way off it. We could be boxed in."

Now it was Miriam's turn to point. "More buildings," she said. Felix saw what she meant: Away from the road they had to follow the buildings were smaller and

more ruined. Near it, the buildings were larger--some of them larger than the ruin that now sheltered them--and in better shape. "Built to last. At least we

can go to ground."

"And we can shoot back."

"The bow?" asked Ox. "Where is it?"

"I left it...." Her hand went to her mouth as she gasped. It was with the trundle, where Dotty and the stones stood guard, ready to cry out a warning if

the bandits appeared. But if that happened, without the bow, they would be trapped.

Yet there seemed no real need for worry. When they emerged from the building once more, Dotty lay beside the trundle, undisturbed. "No sight, no sound," said

Maddoc. "Except the storm. The barometer's way down."

Felix did not ask what the stone meant. Instead he held out the device he had found on the desk.

"A computer," said Great-Grandpa. "A laptop. Old in my time. I wonder if it works."

"No way," said Maddoc. "I can see where the battery leaked from here."

"What's a computer?"

"Like us," said Great-Grandpa.

"A person?"

"Uh-uh. Not enough memory in that little thing to hold one of our recordings. Not even Thunderstone. But maybe a cockroach."

"Same thing," said Maddoc. "The way a cupboard is a house. It just can't hold as much."

CHAPTER 31

Consideration Wiggin had not been far behind the bandits when they reached the

trestle. In fact, though he had managed to stay out of sight among the ruins of

the ancient factory zone, he had been close enough to hear them swear when they

discovered the gap their intended prey had created in the long line of ties.

The growing dusk let him dare to come even closer. He found a crumbling brick

building with a window that overlooked the tracks just a few feet from the bridge. He hovered by the window frame, carefully not touching the powdery wood and its encrustation of pigeon droppings, and strained his eyes to see through the growing dark. In one hand he held a pair of pigeon eggs he had taken from a

nest on another window sill.

The bandit with the stick and the gangrenous arm sat heavily down. The other took loose ties and set them in the gap until he could reach those the others had stacked to block their way. Consideration grinned, wondering if he had any

sense at all of the irony in what he was doing, repairing, building instead of

destroying so he could pursue more destruction.

Though it was the other one who made all the threats: "Hurry up, Hussey.

Pussy-hoosey. They'll get too far ahead."

"They haven't so far." If anything, his movements slowed. Consideration thought

he was not so enthusiastic a bandit as he had once been. Perhaps there was hope

for his soul after all, even though Delivered of the Lord would never accept an

adult male recruit.

"Hate to admit it, but I'm running out of steam." Consideration could not see his face, but the voice was strained. "I can't wait for fuckin' ever for that pussy. I haven't _got_ for fuckin' ever. One last piece, that's all I ask.

Kill

the guys and put it to her. You can do the other one."

Hussey said nothing in reply, but he did keep moving ties. Consideration could

hear the thud of punky wood on wood and rusty steel. Finally, the Havener heard

a, "There. Let's go."

Footsteps in the dark. The thud of the stick. The crunch of powdery wood beneath

human weight. The creak of the trestle.

They were gone.

Consideration Wiggin waited only long enough to swallow the contents of the eggs

before he followed them. Because he had no wish to pass them by, he would have

to stay close enough to hear their steps.

Of course, they might stop and then he might stumble on them in the dark. He hoped the stink of gangrene would warn him then, though the wind did not always

blow his way.

* * *

The clouds raced overhead. The wind blew harder than ever, tearing small branches from the trees and loose shingles from those houses that still had roofs, propelling a few drops of rain to sting cheeks and other bits of exposed

skin.

"Can we get there before it lets loose?" Felix and Ox had stepped out of their

harness when they came to the pile of brick that had tumbled across the road. Now they strained at the sides of the trundle while the girls lifted the ends.

Wind jerked at the canopy and nearly knocked them all over.

Amelie's Wedding March was violins in an upper register that blended with the

wind.

Luanna steadied Maddoc's stone as he answered, "How the hell should I know? I thought it was going to let loose last night."

"Use the motor," said Great-Grandpa.

Felix glanced at the trundle's controls. "No charge," he said. "We haven't had

enough sun."

Ahead of them, buildings of many sizes and states of disrepair flanked the road.

Pigeons swung across the gaps between. An intersection was marked by the wreckage of two cars that had been left where they sat after a collision. The pavement was infiltrated with more grass and weeds than brush, but it was also

tilting upward. Their progress remained a struggle.

"What's that?" Ox was pointing toward a single-story building whose flat roof sagged in back where a wall had collapsed. The rest was supported by a pair of

cracked concrete pillars. Inside, a long counter faced a row of seats set on metal posts. The seats' upholstery was tattered. The posts were so corroded that

only fragments of the plating that had once made them shine remained.

"What's what?"

"On the roof. Something moved."

Dotty assumed her stiff-legged stance and began to bark.

"A pigeon."

But no pigeons strutted along the edge of the roof.

"The wind."

But Ox did not need to argue that he had seen something more than wreckage stirred by the storm. A head heaved into view over the low curb that marked the

edge of the roof. Lips parted to reveal yellow teeth. A hand, a shining piece of

metal, a sudden crack, an "Ouch!" behind him.

He did not hesitate to see who had been hurt. He dropped the harness and raced

toward the building. As he dashed under the overhang of its roof, he seized one

of the seats and tore it from the floor. Then he slammed it against a pillar.

The seat tore off the post and flew into the street.

"Havener!" cried Luanna. The round, fishskin hat was enough to identify the figure who ran from the shelter of the building next door. She raised her bow,

but Miriam's hand on her elbow kept her from releasing the arrow. The stranger

was not charging at them, but at the building where Ox was slamming the pillar

again and again and again with his metal post and blood was already reddening his fingers and wrists.

Dotty still stood and howled defiance and threat of mayhem from the middle of the road.

Felix swore. "Damned dog!" But he did not try to pull her to a safer position.

Instead he jerked both Luanna and Miriam down behind the trundle as the bandit

on the roof fired another shot. This time the bullet missed entirely, perhaps because every blow Ox delivered made the roof tremble visibly.

The Havener seized another stool and added his own strength to the attack on the

pillar. The trembling of the roof grew worse. The pillar's cracks widened and shed crumbs of concrete. Both Ox and the Havener grunted with effort, and

when

the pillar finally began to buckle they leaped toward the street. They almost didn't make it. Once the pillar began to go, it did not hesitate. Concrete cracked and crumbled. Rusty reinforcing steel snapped. The bottom half

of the pillar toppled one way, the top half the other. The roof sagged and creaked and slammed to the ground. A cloud of gritty dust puffed from beneath it.

The bandits were clinging to the roof, but as soon as their fall was done, the

one with the gun glared at Ox and lifted his weapon. Luanna stepped clear of the

trundle and launched an arrow. The bandit shrieked when it pierced his belly.

The Havener's club smashed his head. The Havener himself grabbed the gun.

The other bandit almost seemed to relax at that. Raising both hands into the air, he began to shake. "My leg's broke." It was indeed bent at an awkward angle. His face was white with pain.

Luanna nocked another arrow.

"No," said Miriam.

"Why not?"

"Maybe he can change?"

Someone snorted.

"Dad was right, you know. He wasn't always a bandit."

"He's not your little neighbor anymore," said Great-Grandpa.

Luanna drew her bow.

"Please," said Hussey. There was sweat on his brow, even though the day beneath

the clouds was cool. "I didn't want...."

"But you did."

His nod was jerky.

Luanna bit her lip and lowered the bow, though her movements were jerky too, as

if she had to struggle with herself.

Felix knelt over Hussey and straightened his leg with a jerk. The bandit screamed. Felix yanked roughly at his clothing, looking for hidden weapons, but

found only rash and sores. "Worse than ours," he said, and now his tone was almost sympathetic.

He stood up and studied the other man. He was not much older than he, thin but

with an overlay of soft flesh that said he had long eaten better than he should.

His hair was stringy. He stank of dirt and sweat just as, Felix was sure, he did

himself. His face was pale beneath its layer of grime, and he seemed less a threat now than an object of pity.

Dotty stalked to his side, growled, and sniffed. Thunderstone echoed the growl.

"Don't let her...!"

"Why not?" Maddoc called from the trundle. "She's our buddy. You're dogmeat. You

damned near killed me."

"Just a chip," said Amelie above her music. "I can see it."

"An inch closer, and I'd be just a pile of chips. Chips and gizmo bits."

Ox pushed the dog away with his club. Felix noticed that its remaining fragments

of plating curled up at their edges, and the metal was red with blood. Ox's hands were dripping. He glanced at the Havener. His were too.

Yet neither man had let go of his club.

Ox realized who he was looking at, turned, and tightened his grip despite the

pain it had to inflict on him. The Havener still held the gun. Now he held it up, looked at it, and said, "This has to go back." Then he tucked it inside his shirt and gripped his own club until his knuckles whitened. Blood welled between his fingers.

"No," said Miriam once more. "There's been enough of that." Maddoc laughed. "Don't you know what he wants? If we don't stop him, he'll kill

us and take you and Luanna back to his island."

"He won't kill you," said Great-Grandpa. "But you'll be slaves."

"Sex slaves," said Maddoc. "Raped and raped and raped. Screwed, blued, and tattooed with a 'Property of Haven' sign."

"It's not rape," said the Havener, though he was already backing up as if he feared the stone would goad the more mobile humans to attack him. "You'd be wives."

"Babymakers," said Maddoc. "To help them spread all over the world all over again."

"Truce?" asked Miriam. "Can we manage that?"

Hussey snorted where he lay.

Felix could not help but share the bandit's skepticism.

"Why not?" Luanna glared over the bow she still held.

"_He's_ a predator," said the Havener.

"Like you?" There were tears in her eyes now. "Is that all there is?"

Ox did not wait for anyone to answer her question before aiming one of his own

at Hussey. "Why didn't you ever settle down like normal folks?"

The bandit looked away from Luanna, at the Havener. "That's what they taught me.

Predators and prey, and we were predators."

"So you killed my Mama and my Papa. You were going to kill me."

He nodded helplessly.

"Why?" she screamed at him. "But why?"

Dotty growled and bared her teeth at the helpless bandit, who did not answer. He

could not.

When the silence had stretched for over a minute, Great-Grandpa asked, "Why did

you follow us? Revenge?"

It was no surprise that Hussey ignored him. The answer was obvious, and if the

urge for revenge had belonged to his companion instead of him, that made little difference.

"He's not human," said Luanna. She was raising the bow once more, pulling the string toward her ear, aiming the arrow. He did not try to escape, though his face turned even paler and he looked to one side, away from everyone, as if he

wished neither to see her release the arrow nor to let the others see his fear.

"Of course he is." Miriam was pointing at a pockmarked, cratered wall nearby.

"See the bullet holes? Remember the walls this morning?"

"It's what people do," said Great-Grandpa in a bitter tone. "I saw it in Chile.

Never thought I'd see it here. But it is what people do."

Hussey was nodding tentatively. "That's what Ron said. 'Peace is for assholes.'"

"I wouldn't go that far. But it's certainly uncommon, and it never seems to last, no matter how loudly people shout that life is sacred."

"It is!" said the Havener.

"Only if it belongs to your own little tribe," said Great-Grandpa. "If it bows

to your god and smokes what you smoke. If it doesn't, it's not even human." When the Havener said nothing in reply, Felix stared at him. In his way, he seemed as uncomfortable as Hussey, the captive, broken-legged bandit.

He had not recognized the pockmark scars on so many of the city's remaining walls as bullet holes. He did not have the experience to do so, even though he

had been shot at. Yet now he knew, and as he scanned the ruins around him, he realized the scars were everywhere. There were thousands of them. Millions of them.

The civilization of his ancestors had not simply faded away. It had torn itself

to pieces. And with it had gone both its history and its destiny.

Poison in the soil. Was that it, as his Uncle Alva would say? Or youvee poison

in the sky? The greenhouse? He shuddered even though he knew his perception of

the catastrophe was too dim, too faint, to come anywhere near the truth. What was happening now, with bandit killer-rapists and Havener girl-nappers, was only

a distant echo. The truth had to have been horrifying.

Poison in the soul.

* * *

"Can I shoot him now?" Luanna's tone was vicious; her hand quivered on the bowstring. Felix had no difficulty understanding her feelings, nor the beads of

sweat that sprang to the bandit's forehead and cheeks.

"But he's helpless!" cried Miriam. "You can't!"

"Is that what makes life sacred?" She drew the bowstring even tauter.

"Helplessness?"

Mendelssohn dwindled into silence. "That used to be enough," said Amelie.

"For

babies and children, for the poor and the ill."

Luanna shook her head furiously. Her grip on the bow did not waver now, and the

arrow pointed straight at Hussey's heart. "_They_ never thought so."

Silence followed her words until she herself broke it: "Or is it that you and he

were supposed to...?"

"Leave him right here," said Maddoc. "Let him rot. He has it coming."

"You've got a rock for a heart," said Amelie, and she restarted her eternal music with four notes that might have been struck by hammers on stones.

"And for a brain," the other retorted. "So what else is news?"

Great-Grandpa laughed. "If we wanted what we had coming, we wouldn't be here

now."

"At least fix his leg." Miriam turned to the trundle and began to untie one of

the poles Felix had brought from home and never discarded.

"Why bother, when I'm going to...?"

But Felix pushed down her bow. "No," he said. The Sacred Animal had argued that no life should be preserved just because it was life. Each case should be

considered on its merits, and this one did not have many merits. Yet The Sacred

Animal had been written when people were as numerous as grass blades, when preserving one meant threatening all the rest. Now people were scarce.

Perhaps

an individual life, whatever its merits, was sacred now in a sense it had never been before.

"Not yet, anyway," he added. "He's no danger to us now. We can give him a chance."

The tableau held for a dozen heartbeats before she nodded at last.

"We'll take him with us," said Miriam then. "If we don't, he'll just be a bandit again."

It was clear that Luanna would rather kill the injured bandit. But she managed

to let go of the bow, and a moment later she was even helping Felix obey Maddoc's instructions to splint Hussey's leg. They used her Papa's saw to cut the pole Miriam had selected. They tied the pieces in place with rope, cutting

it without a thought to its irreplaceability. Then they lifted him onto the trundle along with everything else.

Yet they were not gentle in their handling of the broken limb or their patient.

Hussey bit his lip until it bled. He whimpered once and moaned twice. If he said

nothing, that was perhaps because he agreed that he deserved no more consideration.

The Havener watched, his eyes moving intently from Luanna to Miriam and back again as if he were evaluating, appraising, choosing which one to claim, as if,

indeed, it were up to him to choose.

"_You_ can go home," Ox told him. He still held the club that had bloodied his

hands, though he had set it down long enough to wrap it with a strip of leather

from the dead bandit's cloak.

The other man shook his head. "I'll go with you. After all, he's still a bandit.

Maybe I can help."

Ox gave him a skeptical glare. "You did once, but...."

Felix glanced toward Hussey. His eyes were closed. "So did they, the first time

your gang attacked us."

Great-Grandpa laughed. "'She's ours!' they said. Just competition."

"You're taking _him_."

"We can't very well leave him here," said Miriam.

"Why not? He's a killer."

"And you're not." Luanna's tone was bitter.

This time no one said what the Haveners were instead, though Maddoc muttered,

"He just wants to get the girls closer to Haven," and Amelie swelled her wedding

march with organ music.

"I want to see where you're going."

"So follow us."

"I could." He looked once more at Luanna, and then at Miriam. "I will. But you

could let me help. You can't trust him."

"Or you," said Maddoc.

The standoff was only immobilizing them beneath the thickening storm clouds. If

they let it continue, they would never reach their destination or solve the problems that had driven them this far on their journey. They were, it seemed,

destined to absorb their enemies, bandits and Haveners both.

Felix finally sighed and said, "What's your name?"
The Havener looked thoughtful. He hesitated. Finally, he seemed to take Felix's question as the offer of truce Miriam had suggested some time before. He opened his bloody hand and let his club fall to the ground. His knife remained in its sheath at his side. The gun stayed out of sight. "Consideration Wiggin." "A churchy name," said Great-Grandpa. "The sort of name they used in the 1600s. Even before our Memory."
Dotty recognized the change in the voices that surrounded her and produced a tentative swing of her tail.
Felix tossed Consideration Wiggin a piece of cloth for his hands.

* * *

Even though the road now led uphill, the wind was in their faces, and the load on the trundle was heavier, Consideration Wiggin was not allowed to help. He marched ahead, scouting. Dotty stayed near him, ranging to either side of the road but always watching him as if she trusted him no better than she did Felix.
Once she came close enough for Wiggin to reach out and scratch her between her ears. She did not protest, but after that she stayed further off.
Ox and Felix strained against the trundle's harness. Luanna and Miriam pushed behind. Hussey lay quiet except when a lurch banged his broken leg against a stone. Then he gasped or moaned and gritted his teeth, while Maddoc sang tunelessly, "We're sorry, you duffer, but you gotta suffer. 'Cause we haven't a grain of ass-prine. Neither we got no morphine. No ibby-youprofen, no seedy-mo-minnerfin. If you'd rather be dead, we'll cut off your...."
Amelie interrupted her music long enough to say, "Idiot."
"And you're an obsessive-compulsive. You and your music."
As they approached the center of the city, the marks of long-past violence became more frequent. Bullet holes were everywhere in the ruins to either side of their path. Smoke stains and char were common.
Fifty feet down a side road that was remarkably clear of debris and vegetation, a rusty, wheelless panel truck lay on its side. A single piebald goat stood atop it, all four feet together as if it balanced on some mountain pinnacle. It showed no sign of fear as it watched them.
Further down the road, perhaps two hundred yards away, stood the building whose skeletal dome had caught their eye from the other side of the valley. It was built of white stone, as were the long flight of steps that led to its broad entrance and the row of pillars that adorned its front.
"That was the Capitol building," said Great-Grandpa.
This close, they could see that the dome still retained a twisted scrap or two of the black and green metal that once had sheathed it. Several of its ribs were bent off the gentle curve they should have followed. Many cross-pieces were missing entirely; the rest were visibly mounded with pigeon droppings.
"Where our rulers met," added Maddoc.
"Rulers?" asked Ox.
"The people chose representatives to come here to discuss their problems and decide what to do."
"How many?" asked Felix.

"A couple of hundred in this state. One for every thirty thousand people." No one spoke. In a world where no one had more than a handful of neighbors, such numbers were incomprehensible. Consideration Wiggin was just a few feet away, staring first at the remnants of government, then at Luanna, then at Miriam. "I want to see it." When he began to walk toward the Capitol, the goat bounded from its perch and vanished in the brush beside the road. Without a word, the others followed him, but not before both Felix and Miriam had turned to scan the ruined city that surrounded the Capitol. It stretched so far. It had held so many people. The disaster that had struck it, as well as the rest of the world they knew, was staggering. When they got closer to the Capitol, they could see that the building's stone was as bullet-pocked as any other single ruin in the city. Every one of its myriad windows was a glassless hole. The doors that once had filled the doorway at the top of the steps lay shattered behind the pillars. Inside the place was a shambles. Ceilings had fallen. What had been furniture was now piles of punky splinters. Only patches of plaster remained on the walls, and pigeon nests clung to battered cornices and other niches. The pigeons themselves were bursting into the air. They could not enter the broad rotunda the dome had once covered, for it contained the remnants of the dome itself. Torn panels of green-black copper and broken girders made the room impassable, though they could see the white stone statues that still stood in recesses around the perimeter. "Just the way it was in my day," said Great-Grandpa when they returned to the trundle and the stones and captive they had decided were too heavy to carry. "Except for the damage. I bet the bomb went off in the rotunda, right under the dome. I wonder if it was a terrorist." "Airburst," said Maddoc. "Had to be, or the sheathing would be all outside the building." "Why haven't we seen any people?" asked Consideration Wiggin. "There's plenty of shelter here." "Not enough clear ground?" asked Felix. "Ghosts," said Great-Grandpa. "No," said Miriam. "Anyone who comes here can see what happened once upon a time, and it gives them nightmares." "It should," said Amelie. Ox looked thoughtful. "I remember," he said. "I think. We came through here when I was little. And there wasn't anyone then, either." "They'll come back," said Great-Grandpa. "Folks will forget what happened, and their numbers will grow." "We've already forgotten," said Felix. "Not quite." "And the numbers aren't growing much." "That's what we're here for," said Maddoc. Consideration Wiggin slowly nodded as if what the mad doctor had just said explained a mystery.

* * *

The remnant of the Capitol dome was still visible behind them when they made camp that evening. They could even see the dark cloud that issued from it and dispersed beneath the still-heavy clouds above their heads.

"Bats," said Consideration Wiggin. "I've never seen so many."

"The youvee can't touch them," said Great-Grandpa. "They're nocturnal."

Full dark fell rapidly. The wind eased a little, though it remained strong enough to whip the flames of their fire and send sparks cascading into the air.

For a few moments, the clouds parted just enough to let the three-quarters moon

shine through and provoke a pair of howls from Dotty and Thunderstone.

Even as the clouds closed up and the world went dark again, a third howl came to

them, so faint that it was barely audible over the rush of wind. Dotty's ears pricked, and she stared into the night. "It must be miles away," said Luanna. Their campsite had once been a metal-sided building. Much of it had collapsed flat upon the ground, but one wall had instead folded when it fell, forming a triangular cave large enough to shelter them all if the storm broke. The metal

was not one that rusted.

The men helped Hussey down from the trundle long enough to relieve himself outside the cave. Consideration Wiggin bedded down in a nearby house that still

clung to enough roof to ward off rain. Ox and Miriam found separate spaces in the back of the cave. Felix rolled himself in his cloak near the opening, where

he could watch the dying fire and rushing clouds and listen to the wind.

Shortly after the others began to snore, he felt Luanna once more curled against

his back. Somehow he was not surprised. Nor was he surprised when she whispered,

"She's a nice kid," he rolled to face her, and she clung to him, her breath hot

against his cheek.

Perhaps they would not have cared that they were watched from the shadows outside their metal cave, nor that the watcher chuckled gently at what he saw and heard.

CHAPTER 32

Wind flexed and boomed the metal walls of their cave. Around them swirled the scents of mold and damp and an animal musk that was only partly their own.

Rain

drops pinged and rattled and banged and found holes in the metal they had hoped

would shield them. Spray blew in upon them in the dark.

"We need better shelter." A flash of lightning silhouetted Consideration Wiggin

standing in the triangular entrance to the cave. Felix thought the nest he had

found for himself must have been even wetter and more wind-blown.

"It's going to get worse," said Great-Grandpa from his place on the trundle.

"Lots worse. Better hurry, or you'll never reach the hospital."

"If it even exists anymore." Felix's rash was slightly better than it had been,

but the journey had revealed a world so thoroughly destroyed that it seemed impossible the library Maddoc had promised him could have survived.

"Hell of a note to quit now," said Great-Grandpa.

Felix sighed. "Let's move on, then. At least we can look for a better place to

sleep."

The night was not over. No one had had enough rest. All were still tired. Yet

no

one said another word as they got to their feet and rolled the trundle out of their inadequate shelter and back onto the road.

More lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. Wind jerked at the trundle's canopy. Hussey swore when his broken leg lurched against Thunderstone. Maddoc swore back. "Watch it, bonehead. We break easier than your goddam leg."

Felix and Ox each had their own harness to put the load they hauled on waist and

shoulders. Neither objected when Consideration Wiggin stepped between them, grabbed one harness strap with each hand, and added his strength to theirs. Luanna and Miriam pushed. Amelie's Wedding March was wild with trumpets and bagpipes. Despite wind and exhaustion, the trundle rolled steadily up the hill

that still remained.

Dawn came before they reached the crest, but the daylight it brought was murky,

stained the yellow and green of an old bruise.

"Tornado sky," said Great-Grandpa above the noise of the storm. "I don't like this. We need to find a hole."

"No such thing any more," said Maddoc. "Mama Nature's kicking till we're sore."

"It's God," grunted Consideration Wiggin against the wind and the weight of the

trundle. "Punishing us for the sins of our ancestors. 'Unto the seventh generation,' says the Bible."

"How many are left?" asked Luanna.

"How many what?" asked Ox.

"Generations."

The Havener looked over his shoulder and smiled, pleased that she should show any interest in his beliefs. "We'll know when our numbers finally begin to climb

again. That's what Delivered of the Lord says. When we can multiply and replenish the Earth. Then we can cleanse away the unbelievers, raising up their

children to be saved. And when all the world is saved...."

"Judgment Day, right?" Maddoc sounded skeptical.

The road leveled under them and began to dip. They stopped. "What happened here?"

Not a building was intact within their sight. The few fragments of wall were so

riddled with bullet holes and blackened by smoke that it seemed impossible they

were still standing. The road was littered with rubble, rusted out cars and trucks, and....

The scene was of great violence and many deaths, but time had leached away the

blood and pain. Small trees and shrubs stood among the ruins. Vines--woodbine and bittersweet and wild grape--crawled over the broken walls and piles of rubble. The land smelled like land anywhere, of soil and growth. If there was any taint, it was only the usual sour acridity of a poisoned world.

Movement jerked their eyes toward a machine as rusty and corroded as any ancient

car. Its massive lower portion sat on tracks through which grew a cluster of late daffodils. Its smaller upper portion was slowly swiveling a long snout toward them. Entangling vines tore from the ground and fell away.

Unlubricated

joints creaked and groaned. When Felix could see that the snout had a single nostril, clicking noises emanated from the machine's bowels.

"That's a tank," said Great-Grandpa. "It wants to shoot us."

Suddenly the clicks were so freighted with menace despite the flowers that

Felix

shivered. The only guns he had ever seen were small things, held in a single hand, that made small holes in catstones and people. Suddenly he had a vision of himself replaced by a single man-shaped hole surrounded by a spray of blood and guts.

"It's not the only one," said Miriam. But the other tanks were motionless. The

vines that hung across their corroded metal were undisturbed.

"And APCs. Armored personnel carriers." Boxy trucks with slitlike windows, as red with rust as any car.

"A helicopter." Two thin metal wands thrusting into the air, one drooping like a plant stem, one bent and broken. The rounded hull below them had been made of a metal that had not rusted.

"That was the city armory," said Maddoc. "That pile of bricks with the girders sticking out. I remember driving past it. It had a sign."

"They fought a war here," said Felix.

"Just a skirmish," said Great-Grandpa. "But yeah. Things really did go to hell

around here. Must have been worse in the big cities."

"Worse?" Ox's voice cracked with his disbelief.

Maddoc's voice was subdued when he said, "I hope the hospital's still there."

A gust of wind tipped the trundle up on its lefthand wheels. Hussey screamed when his leg lurched and rolled and grabbed whatever he could to keep from falling. All the stones shrieked with alarm. Thunderstone barked, and Dotty joined in. Luanna and Miriam caught the rising edge and used their weight to bring it down again.

"How much further?" cried Ox as he struggled to unfasten the trundle's canopy,

fold it, and tuck it beneath the weight of stones and Hussey. The wind was roaring, the rain now coming harder, faster, driving past their hats and cloaks

and soaking to their skin. Lightning blinded them. Thunder deafened.

"Couple miles," shouted Maddoc. "That's all. Hurry!"

Amelie screamed triumph and defiance with her Wedding March.

Maddoc tried to outshout her with, "I'm getting wet!"

Great-Grandpa said, "So what else is new? Remember the cemetery!"

They did their best, but that long-quiet battle had blocked the road with wreckage. They had to force their way through the brush beside the pavement, clamber over drifts of crumbled masonry, gasp relief when the way opened up for

ten or twenty feet ahead, and then repeat it all again.

Almost immediately, the storm informed them that so far it had been merely playing. The rain became a sideways-blasting torrent as the wind doubled and tripled its strength. If the canopy had remained in place, they would surely have lost the trundle and its cargo. Hats abandoned every head, and rain-slippery, rain-heavy cloaks strove to turn into wings. Branches and other

debris blew past them, slashing at their faces and arms; fortunately none were

large enough to do harm.

They could not take shelter. There was none to be had. All they could do was struggle onward while Amelie's music screamed in debate with the elements. No one spoke. Felix put all his energy into moving the trundle on, even as he wished they had not left the metal leanto cave that had sheltered them for part

of the night, wished they were still in the building at the bottom of the hill, wished they were still at the Inger farm, no matter what Caleb must have been planning for Luanna, wished they had never left home. He hoped Ma and Pa and Uncle Alva were okay. Their house had survived dozens of storms, maybe even ones as bad as this though surely, he told himself, it sounded worse when you were out in it. Maybe it wasn't so bad then. Yet.... He almost laughed at the thought of Pa and Uncle Alva struggling to put the shed roof back all by themselves. Three hours later, when they were finally past the armory and the devastated battle scene, the storm was still raging as furiously as ever. Yet now the road was open. They made rapid progress.

* * *

"That's it!" cried Maddoc. "Take that turn! I'm pointing right!" The storm had flattened every blade of grass. Even weeds with sturdy stems bowed before the weight of wind and rain. Water rushed across the pavement and foamed in the ditch beside the road. Yet there, to the right, there was no ditch. Instead another stream rushed over flat, weedy ground and into their path. They could not see a thing more than twenty feet from their faces. Rain and spray and blowing debris filled the air. It was impossible to tell whether there was indeed a hospital at the other end of the torrent. Yet they followed Maddoc's instructions, splashing against the flow, up a slope, and around a curve. "Who are you?" They froze. Felix swung his head from side to side, but he could see no one. There was only a wall of metal before them. "Identify yourselves!" The voice was peremptory, harsh, with the sound of metal to it. Dotty whined, and her tail drooped between her legs. Thunderstone said, "Patting head. Dead thing. No harm, no harm." "Ignore him," said Great-Grandpa. "He's just another tank." Now Felix saw the cannon jutting above their heads. It was not moving. "Identify yourselves." "Shut up," said Maddoc. "I'm a doctor. These are my patients and assistants. We're going to the hospital." "The hospital is closed." "I'm opening it up again." "What is the wagon?" "That's my ambulance. Can't you see the guy with the broken leg?" "Identify yourselves." "Get a new tape." "I will shoot you." Small hatches creaked open in the rusty barrier before them. Stubby gun barrels twitched back and forth. Triggers clicked. But except for the plummeting sensation in Felix's stomach, nothing happened. Either the deadly mechanisms had failed or the tank was out of ammunition. Maddoc laughed quite shrilly. "I _thought_ you couldn't get it up." They pushed past the impotent guardian to find an APC, blackened by fire, with a small tree growing through its roof. They broke a trail through sodden, wind-whipped brush and encountered another tank, this one silent as well as

motionless, and two more APCs before they could return to pavement. A bulbously insectile helicopter lay on its side, perhaps capsized by the very storm that buffeted them. Vines entangled its landing skids. For a moment the wind let up. The hospital stood before them, two broad stories of creamy stone and concrete stippled with the marks of gunfire. Some windows still held glass. Most were empty except for occasional shards. Felix blinked rain from his eyes. He panted from his struggle against the storm. Hope surged in his breast as he said, "We made it. It's there." "I was afraid they'd wrecked it," said Maddoc quietly. "Like the armory." Felix felt the hope die back, though not all the way. Yes, he told himself. The world was wreckage all around. Nothing worked any longer except the mechanisms of death. The impotent tanks. The stones, just as impotent unless they could convince some living chump to haul them around. "They were defending it," said Great-Grandpa. "You saw that tank. This is where they must have kept their wounded." Consideration Wiggin pointed at the hospital walls. Like the other humans, he wore no hat. His hair streaked down his forehead. His mouth was open, breathing hard. Only Hussey and the stones were not exhausted by the fight against brush and storm. "Small holes," he said. "Small guns." "I'm nodding," said Great-Grandpa. Felix thought of the tanks and APCs. "Why didn't they take their gear with them?" "Ran out of fuel," said Maddoc. "As well as ammo." "Can we get inside? This storm's not over." Miriam loosened her sodden cloak and revealed that the rain had plastered every scrap of cloth she wore against her skin. Consideration Wiggin stared at her. So did Hussey. When she turned away, Consideration looked at Luanna, but she was keeping her cloak wrapped tight around her no matter how useless it was against the wet. Amelie's music stopped. "Is there any point? So many windows are broken. There was so much fighting. Surely there's nothing inside." Felix felt much the same. How could there possibly be anything at all in there of any use to him or his family? If there were cures for rashes or dead babies, surely Maddoc would know. Or Ma would. Since they didn't, there could not possibly be any hope behind the walls before them. All their effort had been wasted. All their risk. And now the Haveners knew his family and the Ingers existed. But then he looked at Luanna. No, all their effort had not been wasted. If they had stayed home, she would be dead now. He looked at Hussey, who was still watching Miriam despite the pain that lived in his face. The bandits would be alive and looking for more prey. He had no illusions about what Miriam's life would be like trapped at home. Her father might be paying more attention to her younger sisters now, but that would surely change.

And how could they possibly turn around now? Maddoc had promised him a library.

He had to see if it were truly there, if it were any use at all, for if it were and they turned their backs on it at the last moment, their effort really would be wasted.

Even if there were no storm battering at their heads, even if they did not crave shelter, they had to check out this building.

The hospital's entrance was unobstructed. Once it had been blocked by a pair of wide doors set with glass panels. Now the doors lay twisted to either side, and the remnants of the panels crunched beneath their feet. The masonry that had once supported the doors was broken, cracked and gouged by attackers' weapons.

But the wide room just within the entrance was empty except for drifts of leaves, fibrous ceiling panels, broken plaster, and other debris. Irregular patches of colorful mold and circles of ashes, charred wood, and bones marked what had been a carpet. Other bones were scattered on the floor; many were human. There was no sign of furnishings. A scuttling sound marked the flight of some small animal that made this realm its home.

"Used to be a reception area," said Maddoc when his living companions looked bewildered. "Chairs and couches. Tables and magazines. A long counter full of intake screens. The soldiers must have burned it all."

The corridor beyond was illuminated only by whatever light came through open doors and reflected from the twisted frames of what Maddoc said had been wheelchairs, gurneys, and IV stands. They checked the rooms behind the doors and found the damage less pervasive, though there were still no wooden chairs or tables. All that remained were metal beds and cabinets.

On the side of the corridor that faced the outside of the building, most of the windows were broken and the metal was corroded by the rain that had entered. On the other side, most of the windows were intact. They faced a central courtyard on which the battle had not encroached. The courtyard was below ground level; three tiers of rooms overlooked it.

In one of those rooms, the bed still had a mattress and a few rags of bedding draped over all that was left of a patient.

A round hole marked one side of the skull. A hook on the wall held a belt of khaki webbing and a cracked helmet that must once have covered most of the man's head. The side of the helmet was decorated with a stylized rendition of some extinct beast, all snarling fangs and narrow eyes.

"Casualties," said Great-Grandpa. Amelie's Wedding March turned slow and mournful. "His side lost, and then someone found him here."

"Which side?" asked Ox.

"It doesn't matter now."

Rain hammered the window like hail. Wind howled outside the building and gusted through the halls.

Miriam shivered. "It feels like... like there's someone else here. Waiting for us."

When some small animal made scurrying noises within the walls, Dotty pricked her

ears. Luanna and Ox both jumped. They too felt the place was haunted. "Where's that library?" Felix asked at last. "In the basement," said Maddoc. "This place is a mess," said Great-Grandpa. "It'll be a miracle if it's working."

Not all the hospital's wooden furniture had been burned for warmth and cooking. The first stairwell they found was choked with a tangle of tables and chairs. The second once had been as well, but here the storm outside drizzled through a crack in the roof. Wet dripped from the walls. The barrier against intruders had crumbled long ago. There were only a few pieces of wet metal to push aside through mounds of dark brown humus to reach the door. "We'll have to leave the trundle up here," said Ox once the way was clear. The stairs were too steep and the trundle too heavy. "Thunderstone can guard it." "But not me," said Maddoc. "Nor me," said Great-Grandpa and Amelie together. "We'll carry you," said Felix. The five non-Haveners removed their cloaks. Miriam plucked at her sodden clothing until it no longer stuck to her skin. Luanna did the same and then grabbed her ancient doll from the trundle's bed and clutched it as if it were a talisman.

Felix pulled the Memory of the Webbs from its sack. Its broken frame had allowed the rain to get to it, and it was as soaked as their clothes. Yet its ancient ink had not run. He grunted when he saw that the same was not true of the account of William Webb Cross, who had had enough. That piece of paper was no longer readable. The Family of Man was in no better shape, sodden and swollen and crumbling.

"You can find another," said Great-Grandpa. "There were lots of those around." He extracted the account of Samuel Webb from the frame and spread it out to dry. Then he took his more recent ancestor in his arms. Ox lifted Maddoc from the trundle. Consideration Wiggin refused to touch Amelie, so Luanna struggled with her weight while he carried only the cloaks and what was left of the food. Miriam brought Luanna's bow and arrows while she wrapped one arm around Hussey's chest and helped him hobble down the stairs. He winced and groaned every time he jarred his broken leg. Dotty brought up the rear.

The library was not hard to find. The stairwell opened on a corridor that extended right and left. Across it they faced a wall of dusty, flyspecked glass behind which stretched a broad and empty room. On the other side of the room was the window-wall that faced the courtyard. They could see it tremble when downgusts struck it. The door to the library was as intact as the windows, the air dry, the worn blue carpet still soft though dust puffed from it with every step. But just as in the rest of the hospital there were no tables or chairs. The only furnishings were a long wooden counter, several stone pots full of dirt and dessicated stems,

and

row upon row of metal frames supporting tiers of shelves empty but for spider webs and dead flies and dust.

"This is a library?" asked Great-Grandpa. "There's not a book in sight."

"No problem," said Maddoc. He sounded much more optimistic than the scene seemed

to warrant. "I hope."

CHAPTER 33

Once the hospital's courtyard had been carefully groomed and people had strolled

its flagstone walks, relaxing in an ambience of gravel beds, concrete boxes sown

with flowering plants, steel-framed wooden benches, and small trees. Now grass

and weeds grew rank between the flags and in the gravel, the flowerbeds were choked, the trees sprawled wild and let the stormwind's gusts thrash unpruned branches to the ground. Nothing remained of the benches except their rusty frameworks.

No one was watching. Hussey leaned against the glass where they had set him, letting the glass pass the trembling of the storm deep into his flesh. Small, moist drafts squeezed past the window's edges, stirred the dead flies at its base, and kept the carpet dust in the air. He tried not to breathe it.

His broken leg jutted before him. He gritted his teeth and struggled to ignore

the pain that throbbed in it. He stared at Luanna, the girl he and his late comrades had forever lost the chance to rape. He was surprised to find he felt a

trace of relief, as if the bandit life were a burden whose weight he had never

felt till now.

He stared at Felix and Ox and the stones. Why had they all agreed to let him live?

He stared at Miriam. She was the one who had said, "No, don't kill him." But why?

Was it really true that he had known her once upon a time? When he had had parents? Before Ron and Kiwi? Could it possibly be that she had been destined to

be his wife, that her father was even willing to...?

He closed his eyes as if to shut out every dream of might have been. There had

been a time, he thought, when he had been just as sure as the Havener that his

was the only right and proper way to live. But he had been a kid then. Later he

had come to sense some of the pain he inflicted. He had not stopped, though. He

couldn't have. He'd known no other way to live. And besides, Ron and Kiwi would

not have let him.

But now they were dead.

He wondered if there were any way to start his life over.

When he opened his eyes again he focused on the library's long counter and the

splintered scars where someone once had given way to anger, frustration, or panic. He wondered what the others were doing.

Consideration Wiggin had no more idea than Hussey of what was going on, but at

least he had a better view. He was leaning on that counter, peering over it to

watch fingers move across a mysterious grid of oblong patches, listening to

arcane words, wondering if and when he would ever get back to Haven and whether he would have one of these two young women with him. Out of the rain and without their leather cloaks, Miriam's and Luanna's clothes no longer clung so closely to their forms. But they still revealed more to his eye than he had ever seen of God's Promise, ever since they had grown out of childhood and she had put on a woman's concealing robes. He did not look at the shelves that filled so much of the rest of the room. They were empty, but he still felt the uneasiness that had filled him when he first heard they were looking for a library. He had been taught that all books except the Bible were evil. And not even all Bibles could be trusted. Only the one that Delivered of the Lord would wave in the air and slap with his open hand and proclaim in his high-pitched voice was the True Revealed Word of God. That was why he and his fellows had burned that other library where he had first found these youngsters taking shelter from that earlier, milder storm. Its shelves had been full of books. Felix coughed at the dust that was stirred by every move. "No paper books," he had said when they first saw the empty shelves. As if the despair he felt had awakened it, his rash had begun to itch. He had scratched furiously, breaking crusts and bloodying his fingertips. Ox and Luanna had both imitated him, just as they would have repeated a yawn. "No talking books. The place is useless after all."

"No, no," Maddoc had said. "Put us on the counter, over there, on the left. They had obeyed, and now Maddoc sat amid streaked and furrowed dust on top of the counter. The other two gravestones were beside him, and familiar music echoed in the room.

"What difference does this make?"

"Sweep off the dust."

Miriam had been the one to obey, wiping her hands across the flat surface behind the counter, exposing repeated arrays of lettered oblongs and glass panels like those on the picture box Ox had found.

"Keyboards," said Great-Grandpa. "With touchpads. And screens. But do they still work?"

"Lower right-hand corner," said Maddoc. "See the red dot? Touch it."

Felix's finger beat Miriam's to the gray oblong with the red dot in its center. He was biting his lip, asking himself, could it be this simple? Touch a button, just like on his Swiss Family Robinson or Sacred Animal, and it would tell you whatever you wanted to know? He had to believe, for the talking books had shown him it was possible and the gravestones even showed that there could be a doctor, even the thousand doctors Maddoc had promised, hiding behind this button. But....

Something hummed deep in the counter's bowels. On the screen, a small yellow rectangle began to blink and move haltingly from left to right. A row of characters came into existence. A moment later, a second row appeared. A

third

and fourth.

"It wants to know if you prefer voice access," said Maddoc. "Touch the V."

"That one," said Miriam, reaching past him.

The screen went dark. A feeble voice said, "Insufficient power." The humming in

the counter descended in pitch and stopped.

"Shit," said Great-Grandpa. "Come all this way, and...."

"It doesn't work," said Felix. He worked his mouth, disappointment so bitter on

his tongue that he could actually taste it. He wanted to cry. "We should have known."

"We can't give up yet," said Ox.

"Why the hell not? We might as well go home."

"Was it solar-powered?"

"I'm shrugging," said Maddoc. "I never knew."

"Where would the cells be if it was?"

"Probably on the roof."

"Then we should check them," said Ox. "I think that's what Alva would do."

"Right," said Great-Grandpa. "Can't give up now."

"Later," said Luanna. She pointed at the library's windows, where rain poured down the glass and wind still shook them in their frames. When she turned back

toward Felix, Consideration Wiggin had moved closer. She sidled away.

"You shouldn't be afraid of me," said Wiggin.

Felix stepped between them. "She knows what you want to do."

"We're not rapists." Wiggin shook his head. "We cherish our women. We protect them from every threat and tend them well. Their lives are much easier at Haven."

"But you don't give us any choice," said Miriam.

His face said she did not understand. "The choice is God's."

"Enough," said Great-Grandpa. "You'll never convince each other."

"I don't know why we let him come with us," said Felix. "He's a threat."

"We're watching," said Maddoc. "All the time, so he's got no chance for crime."

Wiggin held up both hands. "I wouldn't hurt any of you."

Amelie jangled a skeptical chord. Dotty flattened her ears and growled.

Hussey

managed a sharp laugh.

"You'd kidnap us." Luanna spat on the carpet.

"Enough," said Great-Grandpa. "Save your energy for after the storm."

* * *

When morning came again, the sky's gray was lighter and more even, without the

curdled fury of the storm at its height. The rain had dwindled to little more than drizzle and the wind was a gusty breeze. After a meager breakfast, they left the stones on the library counter and Hussey on the carpet, retrieved their

half-dry cloaks, and began looking for a way to the roof.

Unfortunately, the stairway that had led them to the library ended at the second

floor. They found other unblocked stairways, but not one was any better until they reached a section of the hospital where the floors were uncarpeted and the

walls were naked concrete and the ceiling was obscured by exposed girders, pipes, and cables. Large rooms held workbenches, racks of tools, spools of wire,

and shelves laden with all the bits and pieces a hospital's maintenance department could possibly need. Puddles on the floor marked where the storm had

found ways through the roof and broken windows and vacant doorways. At the end of the corridor, there was a flight of rusty steel stairs. In the space beside the steps several white plastic buckets were half buried in debris that had fallen from the walls and ceiling above. Luanna promptly tugged them free and said, "Just what we need for the privy." The stairs trembled under their weight but did not collapse. When Ox tried the narrow door at the top, its knob at first resisted turning but then gave in with a squeal. The hinges shrieked. The door moved just enough to let an inch of sky show beside the jamb.

"It's stuck."

Felix leaned on it beside his cousin. The hinges shrieked again. The crack of light widened. Miriam said, "There's something in the way."

"A little more," said Luanna. "I can squeeze...." A moment later she was through. A flurry of wings announced that the roof had been occupied. "Just pigeons." Something crashed, and the door moved more easily. As they had hoped, the roof was covered with tilted panels of solar cells, each one three feet wide and ten feet long, supported on frameworks thick with rust. Unfortunately, every panel was plastered with pigeon droppings.

"They're not getting light," said Ox. "Let's hope that's all that's wrong." His hope was vain, for many of the panels were smashed.

"The battle," said Consideration Wiggin.

"Or lightning," said Felix. He pointed at a tree branch that lay across a pair of cracked panels. "Wind."

Luanna kicked at the twisted remains of the panel that had blocked the door. Miriam said, "We'll never...." Ox used the edge of his hand to sweep a gray and white paste of old pigeon droppings from a panel's surface. "It's wet," he said.

"The storm did us a favor."

Luanna and Miriam began cleaning panels to the left of the doorway. Consideration Wiggin stayed near them; whenever anyone glanced his way, he seemed to be watching them. Ox and Felix worked their way to the right. No one spoke until Ox muttered, "Why did we ever leave home?"

Felix looked up from the panel he was working on in the next row over. They were so far from the others that he was sure he was the only one who could hear the words. After a moment, he said, "It was the closest thing I had to hope."

Ox scrubbed harder at his panel, leaning into his work. It cracked. "Shit. Yeah.

I wanted to get away from Alva too. And...."

Felix stopped sweeping pigeon dung to the rooftop. He stood and stared at the boy he had been taught to call "cousin."

"Remember when I asked you to sleep over?" When Felix only looked puzzled, he added, "It was just a couple days before we left."

"Oh, yeah."

"You weren't interested." Ox looked down. "I thought that meant you didn't like me. Anymore."

"That's not...."

"I know that now. I even know Alva's way isn't the only one."

"Even Uncle Alva knows that." Felix thought briefly of his father, drunken

head
laid upon the table, and Uncle Alva following Ma into her bedroom. Unlike Ox,
he
could not leave off the "Uncle." That seemed to be the man's unalterable
name.

"Yeah. But...." Now he was looking eastward, back the way they had come to
find

this hospital that still wore the scars of the battlefield it had once
become.

"I've been thinking about Bella, Miriam's sister. Do you think, on the way
home...?"

Felix grinned and leaned back into his work, though he was careful not to
lean

too hard. The pigeon shit was already stiffening in the sun, and he was
wishing

they had not lost their hats. The youvee would burn skin and plant cancers.

"Why
not?"

* * *

"That wasn't the only problem," said Great-Grandpa.

"'Cause it still don't work," added Maddoc.

Felix could see that. They had gone to the keyboard as soon as they got back
to

the library, still wet from washing in a ditch, but when they touched the red
dot that before had made it tell them it lacked power, they heard only the
merest of whispers within the counter.

Disappointment was sharp in his chest as he told the stones, "It's too late
to

try anything else." Dusk was already growing in the courtyard beyond the
library's windows. The light would be stronger on the roof, but not for long.

"Tomorrow," said Great-Grandpa. "Take me up there too. Maybe I can spot
something."

"You think...?" But Dotty spun toward the library's door and barked before
Felix

could finish the question.

Luanna jumped. "Someone's out there!"

Amelie stopped her music.

Felix went to the door, opened it, and listened. After a moment, he shook his
head.

"I hear footsteps," said Amelie. "They're not close, but...."

"Where?" asked Ox. "Upstairs? Is someone messing with the trundle?"

"I don't know."

"Let's go." Together, Felix and Ox made short work of dismantling one of the
empty bookcases. As soon as they were each armed with a sturdy upright, they
left the room and climbed the stairs.

There was no sign of any stranger in the vicinity of the trundle, though
Thunderstone said excitedly, "I heard! Me, too! I heard! Sneaking feet! I
heard!"

When they returned, Luanna was backed against the library counter.

Consideration

Wiggin was leaning toward her, saying, "You wouldn't have to worry about
bandits. Or hunger. Your kids would be safe."

She shook her head and edged away from him. He followed her. "Surely
Delivered

of the Lord would take you into his own house. Then he might let God's
Promise

come back to me. But maybe not. You might be mine, you know. And really, that
wouldn't be so bad."

"No." She shook her head furiously. Her face was frozen, tense, white.

"Never."

He grinned as if she had just agreed with him, but before he could say anything else, Felix stepped between them. She took three rapid steps away. He said, "You heard her. Back off." Wiggin's shoulders rose as he took a deep breath, inflating himself. Felix did not miss the similarity to a chicken or a goat faced with a rival or a threat, and he wondered very briefly if monkeys, those man-like animals about which he had only heard, had done the same. "Back off," he repeated. "Or leave." Wiggin glanced to one side, where Ox still held his metal pole. This time he obeyed, though his expression said his retreat was only temporary, not a surrender.

* * *

As soon as Great-Grandpa saw the panels on the roof, he said, "There's one problem. Look at those wires." Many of the cables that should have attached to the panels had corroded green and broken. "Now what?" asked Felix. Dotty was sniffing at a support post. "Fix 'em," said Ox. "I know how. I've helped...." "Check the workshops downstairs," said Great-Grandpa. When they obeyed, they found both spare lengths of cable and all the tools they would need, though age had cracked and split those handles that had been made of wood. By late afternoon, they had repaired every broken connection they could find. They had also wiped off numerous fresh deposits of pigeon guano. "I hope that does it," said Miriam. "There's not much else we can do," said Ox. "So push the button." Maddoc sounded grumpy. He had not appreciated being left in the library with no company other than Amelie and Hussey. Luanna obeyed his command. The humming started up within the counter. The tiny yellow rectangle once more traced lines of words across the screen. She touched the V oblong. More lines of words appeared on the screen as the voice they had heard before said, "Power insufficient for full function. Batteries charging. No printer online. No external access. Memory check: 512 gigabytes available. Cannot access 1536 gigabytes. 72 storage sectors available. 184 storage sectors unavailable." Felix almost shouted with relief and renewed hope. "It works!" "I'd hoped for better," said Maddoc as dim lights flickered on the keyboard and several oblongs developed a red glow. "But maybe there's enough." "Do you wish a lookup?" "How long will it take your batteries to charge?" "One sunny day will give two hours library use." "Can you connect to an E-Life Memorial Repository, Model 73A-466?" "Ask the librarian for

a Hudson cable."

"There should be cupboards down there," said Great-Grandpa.

Felix shook his head. "Drawers." The first one he opened was empty. The second

held reels of translucent material nestled in the tattered remains of cardboard

boxes.

"Microfilm," said Amelie above her music.

The third held a tangle of cables. Some had square fittings on their ends. Some

had round ones. He extracted one of each and held them up.

"I'm making a face," said Maddoc. "It takes a round plug to fit up my bum." When

Ox lifted him on one corner and found his socket, he added, "There should be another next to the keyboard there."

As soon as Ox found it, the library said:

"Connection complete.

Do you wish to upload?

Or download?"

Maddoc was silent for a long moment, until lights began to flicker on the keyboard. Images that Felix recognized as parts of his own body, of Ox's and Luanna's and Hussey's, flowed across the screen. White lines encircled patches

of rash. Then the stone said, in tones that sounded like he was running through

a long-familiar procedure, "Unfamiliar syndrome. Rough, dry skin.

Erythematous

dermatitis especially at impact points, e.g., elbows and knees. Rash accompanied

by blisters that become infected and pussy."

"Patient's body morphology?"

"Skinny," was accompanied by a whole-body image of Felix.

"Sensations associated with rash?"

"Felix?"

"It itches. Sometimes it tingles or feels crawly."

"Memory difficulties?"

"Do you forget things?" asked Maddoc.

"I don't remember." Felix laughed as he shook his head. "But Ma and Pa do."

"Mine too," said Luanna. Her voice choked as she called up memories. "And they

got cranky sometimes."

Felix and Ox both nodded. Maddoc said as if explaining, "Irritability too, then."

"Don't forget the babies," Felix said, and Maddoc added, "Widespread infertility."

The library's voice was silent, though the keyboard lights continued to flicker.

The screen held only a single pulsing dot.

"What's wrong?" asked Ox.

"Searching.

Please wait."

"It may not be able to help us at all," said Maddoc. "Remember, it's lost a lot

of storage sectors."

"What are those?" asked Consideration Wiggin.

"Like books in a library. More like whole libraries, really."

"Where are they?" asked Hussey from where he lay by the windows. But before anyone could answer, the library's voice spoke again:

"Further information, please:

Does rash vary with time of year?"

"Is it worse in the spring?" asked Maddoc. When Felix nodded cautiously and Luanna more definitely, the library ordered:

"Describe winter diet."

"Mostly potatoes," said Ox.

"And dried apples," added Felix. He did not mention the way Pa liked his apples.

"Ready.

Primary diagnosis:

Most symptoms accounted for by niacin deficiency.

Contributing factors:

Deficiencies of vitamins A, B1.

Deficiencies of minerals magnesium, zinc.

Recommendation:

Supplement formula V32.

Available at hospital pharmacy."

"The pharmacy is closed," said Maddoc.

"Alternate recommendation:

Increase proportions of meat and fish in diet.

Increase proportions of legumes, grains, and green vegetables in diet.

Expected benefits:

Reduced dermatitis, enhanced fertility."

"I never thought I'd see such things," said Maddoc. "Malnutrition diseases right

out of Poverty Row. Pellagra!"

"I saw them in Chile," said Great-Grandpa. "I should have known."

"Is that why it's been a little better since we left home?" asked Felix. "We had

the goat from Luanna's place, and some fish, and...."

"Or for us," said Miriam, and Felix nodded as he thought of the Inger farmstead.

They had more animals than the Webbs, and they ate more meat.

"Is that all it is?" asked Consideration Wiggin. "Eat a little better, and you'll have more babies?"

"Zinc is essential for..."

Power is now below minimal levels.

Shutting down."

When Felix glanced toward the courtyard, he found it thick with shadows. "We won't get any more until tomorrow."

"But we've got enough already," said Ox. "That's what we came here for. We know

what to do now."

"What are legumes?" asked Luanna.

"Peas and beans," said Great-Grandpa.

"There's got to be more," said Miriam.

"But this is all we need," insisted Ox.

"Don't you want to know what zinc is essential for?"

"I don't even know what zinc is," said Consideration Wiggin. "But now I know

how to get more of it. That's enough."

* * *

Consideration Wiggin did not sleep that night. He lay quiet, wishing at times that he too had a cloak in which to wrap himself, telling himself a little discomfort did not matter, indeed it helped to keep him awake and watching for

his chance. The moon reached its zenith and sank out of sight, while the others

snored. Finally--as he had hoped--one figure rose and left the library,

turning
toward the room they were using for a privy.
As quietly as he could manage, he followed her.
When she emerged from the privy, his gun was in his hand. He showed it to her,
holding the muzzle close beside her nose, just below her wide, wide, terrified eyes.
"We're leaving now," he whispered almost inaudibly. "We'll use a different stairway, stay away from that stone dog. Don't say a word."
He had a cord for her wrists, a rag for a gag. He wished they had hats against the youvee, but those had all been lost in the storm.
He thought she had hair enough. He did not, but he could find a piece of bark.
It would be harder to replace the cloak she had left behind, but he thought she had clothes enough for the few days it would take to return to Delivered of the Lord.
He smiled at the thought of that return. He would bring Haven another woman and word of others and something more valuable than a hundred women. He now knew how to make the women they had produce more babies, more Haveners, more soldiers to save the world for God.
Perhaps God's Promise would be his reward.

CHAPTER 34

"Felix!"

The voice was urgent, but the combination of fatigue from the long journey and relief at having reached their destination and found the answers they sought kept Felix deep in sleep, smiling at dreams of blue skies over hordes of children with unblemished skins.
"Felix! She's gone!"
He rolled over and did not seem to notice that no one lay beside him to block his roll.
"Hit it, Amelie."
Bagpipes and trumpets and drums bellowed out the too-familiar tune, and Felix leaped to his feet. So did Ox and Miriam while Hussey shouted out a panicked "No!" and Dotty yelped in sudden fury.
"She's gone," shouted Maddoc above the din.
Silence fell. "What?"
"She went to the privy," said Great-Grandpa. "The Havener followed her, and they didn't come back."
"When?" cried Felix. His stomach fell as what his ancestor was saying penetrated. Yes, he realized, Luanna was not in the library. Neither was Consideration Wiggin. There was just enough light to see the blocky shapes of the stones on the library counter. Dawn was not far off. "How long ago? Why didn't you...?"
"Half an hour. We thought they'd come back, you know?"
Felix stared at the floor where he had lain. He picked up her cloak where it still lay beside his, as if she might have flattened out and hid beneath it. But all he revealed was the doll she had picked up when they passed the dump. He clutched it in his hand.
She wouldn't have left, would she? Not of her own free will. She couldn't have,

not and left behind the cloak that kept the youvee from her skin. Not and left

behind the doll she treasured.

Ox picked up the bow and arrows she had kept by her ever since the hilltop confrontation with the bandits and Caleb Inger. After all, until then they had

been his.

"Go," said Hussey. He had hitched himself up on his elbows, and he was glaring

at his splinted leg as if to say he too would go, if only he could. "He's not that far ahead, not yet. If you hurry you can catch him."

"Leave us here," cried Amelie. "Don't waste time. Don't let her lose what I...."

But no one heard her last few words. They were already pushing through the library's doorway, running for the stairway, shouting out to Thunderstone,

"He

stole her!" and racing for the hospital's main entrance as the stone dog howled

behind them.

The light was already brighter, just enough seeping through the building's many

openings to let them see their path through the corridors and leap over piles of

ceiling tiles and wrecked gurneys, enough to turn the sky yellow and orange in

the east and see the path they had beaten through grass and weeds when they first approached the hospital. It was not enough to reveal any clue to where Consideration Wiggan and Luanna had passed.

"He's got to be heading for Haven." Ox brandished the bow. "He'll backtrack, but

so can we. We'll catch him!"

"Here!" Miriam was pointing at a patch of mud deposited when storm water had washed across the pavement outside the hospital. It held the print of a single

boot pointing precisely past the ancient tank that had challenged their approach

such a little time before.

* * *

He had found one of those patient rooms whose intact window overlooked the courtyard. Its bed was unoccupied, but when he sat on its edge it creaked. He moved the dusty mattress to the floor and grinned to see the intricate mechanism

he had revealed. He spent a delighted hour poking at it, puzzling out its workings, turning cranks and wheels and knobs until it began to complain of its

long, long decades without oil or care. Eventually, he lay down with his head close to the doorway.

He heard them coming in plenty of time to draw back into the shadows where they

would not see him unless they were searching for him.

The woman's voice was only muffled grunts.

The man's was quietly urgent, little more than a worried whisper. "Stop balking!

I'll shoot you if I have to. Even though you are a woman. Even though I'm supposed to bring you back. That's my orders. I have to follow them. Even Delivered of the Lord has orders to follow. He just gets his from God. I get mine from him. But I won't let you slow me down. I can't let them catch me.

With

you or without you, I have to get back. I heard those secrets too."

He sounded desperate, determined, anxious, perhaps a little mad as his voice faded down the hospital corridor.

The listener wished he knew what secrets the Havener had heard, but he wasted no

time in wondering. As soon as he could no longer hear the voice or the couple's

steps, he left the room where he had slept and followed them.

His hand was tight around the staff he had chosen days before. He thought he might finally get a chance to use it.

Yet when he reached the outdoors, he did not turn toward the tank and the road.

Once the storm had ended and while the others had been working on the roof, he

had been exploring the vicinity. And he had found another route. It was too narrow for the trundle, just a path made by animals, but it passed along what was left of streets and sidewalks in what had been a residential neighborhood,

between the trees of a woodland no one had disturbed in many decades, through a

shadowed, overgrown graveyard whose stones inquired querulously, "Who's that? A

man? Haven't seen one of those in a long, long time. Thought the world had ended, yes, I did. But will you look at him. Moving fast, ain't he? You'd think

he'd be interested in us. 'Tisn't every day you meet a talking gravestone." There was the ruined armory. Here was the path they had beaten when they came by

before, the patches of dirt now quite unmarked by any foot. He grinned at this

sign that he had indeed gotten here first, and again as he hefted his staff in a

suddenly sweaty grip.

Now all he needed was a place to hide.

* * *

As soon as they struck the road and turned back toward home, Dotty howled, "Haroo!" She looked over her shoulder at the humans, and when they made no move

to restrain her, she put her head down and swung her snout across the path. Her

tail swung stiffly erect, a banner for anyone who wished to follow, and she began to run, her voice the bay of nemesis in pursuit.

The light was brighter now. There was no difficulty in seeing the line of bent-aside vegetation that marked their earlier passage or the occasional footprint that said their quarry was before them. They ran, and they hoped they

were moving faster than he with his captive.

They spotted Dotty poised on the rise just before the descent toward the ruined

armory just as her baying rose in pitch and excitement,

"She sees them!" cried Ox.

Still baying, Dotty plunged down the further slope. There was a snarl, a scream,

a canine howl of triumph, and then a single shot, immediately followed by a shout.

Silence.

"He got Dotty!" cried Ox, and there was no other possible interpretation. No one

was surprised when they finally reached the same rise where they had last seen

her and looked down toward the ruins of the armory and the wreckage of a tank

and saw the dog's body sprawled on the pavement.
Nor were they surprised to see Luanna kneeling by the animal's side.
But the man bending over her....
Ox stopped dead in his tracks.
"Uncle Alva!" cried Felix.
The man stood up, Luanna's bonds in his hands, and saluted them with his staff
as they raced down the final slope. "I think I broke his arm." He pointed at the
gun where it lay on the ground a few feet away. "But he got away." Now he was
pointing south of the road, into a wilderness of trees and ruins.
"Why did he have to kill Dotty?" Luanna was lifting the dog's lifeless head
into
her lap. She lifted her own head to stare at Felix. There were tears in her
eyes.
"You stopped him," said Felix as he dropped to his knees beside her. "And got
Luanna back."
"Is that her name?"
"Yeah," said Ox. Both he and Miriam were hanging back. "Why'd you follow us?"
Uncle Alva looked baffled by Ox's tone, so stiff and unwelcoming. "You're not
glad to see me? You found a girl?"
Felix still had the doll in one hand. Now he held it out. But Luanna ignored
it
as she leaned against him and wrapped her arms tight around his torso. He put
his own around her shoulders. Dotty's lifeless head slipped from her lap to the
ground. Ox glanced sidelong at Miriam and stepped away from her. "Sort of."
Uncle Alva laughed. "I was worried about you. So were your folks. But it
wasn't
their trundle you swiped. Where is it?"
Ox picked up the gun and studied it carefully before he tucked it into a
pocket.
"Back at the hospital."

CHAPTER 35

"Alva!" Great-Grandpa sounded shocked when they walked into the library.
Amelie's Wedding March quit entirely. "Are you going to loot this place too?"
"Shut up," said Felix. "He saved Luanna."
"He just didn't want the Haveners getting all the gizmo bits."
Uncle Alva shook his head and stared at Hussey, who still lay by the window.
"What are you keeping him for?"
"He used to be a neighbor," said Miriam.
"And you hope he'll settle down?" When she nodded, so did he. "Well, why not.
I
did."
Felix was surprised. Uncle Alva had been a bandit? Had Ox then been
kept--like
Hussey--after the looting of some farmstead?
The same thought must have struck his cousin, for he was staring at Hussey
with
misery in his eyes.
But before either youth could say a word, Great-Grandpa butted in with, "You
didn't answer my question."
"You're already looting it yourselves, aren't you?"
"What do you mean?"
"You got it working again."
"It wasn't that hard," said Ox. He did not say aloud, "We didn't need you."
"The solar panels were filthy," said Miriam. "We had to fix some wiring, but
that was all."
"We had the stones with us," said Felix. "They told us what to do."
"The wisdom of the ancients." Uncle Alva laughed derisively, and Felix

remembered that he was not one to ask the past for advice or knowledge. He was more likely to seize its physical relicts to serve his own ends, smashing gravestones for their solar cells, stripping tires and batteries from ancient cars. Pa was no better, for he had used the pavement of a road as the foundation of his house, burned houses for nails, salvaged windows wherever he could find them.

Great-Grandpa seemed to be thinking along the same lines. "People didn't pay much attention to that when the Romans fell, either," he said. "But they used pavement blocks, gravestones, and the ruins of temples and aqueducts to build hovels and palaces and churches."

"We weren't doing very well by ourselves." Felix touched the rash on his elbow.

"You've got it too. So do Ma and Pa." On the way back to the hospital, he had related how his own rash, as well as the dearth of babies, had prompted his quest.

"We don't," said Miriam. "That's what Dad used to say. We stand on the shoulders

of those who came before us. We build on what they did."

Uncle Alva laughed again. "That doesn't help much when our predecessors fell flat on their faces. But what do the ancients tell us?"

"We'll let them tell you themselves," said Felix.

Even as he spoke, Luanna was moving behind the library counter and reaching for

the keyboard. A now-familiar hum started up and the library's voice ran through

its status report:

"Power insufficient for full function.

Batteries charging.

No printer online.

No external access.

Memory check: 498 gigabytes available.

Cannot access 1550 gigabytes.

71 storage sectors available.

185 storage sectors unavailable.

Do you wish a lookup?"

"It's failing," said Maddoc. He sounded worried. "That's less memory than before. Less storage too."

"So what did you expect?" asked Great-Grandpa. "We're lucky it still had any memory or data bases left at all."

"What's it going to tell me?"

Maddoc was still linked to the keyboard by the Hudson cable. Before anyone could

say another word, the library's voice said:

"The basic problem is a diet that

lacks many essential vitamins and minerals.

The rash is a distinctive sign of pellagra,

a disease due to a deficiency

of the vitamin niacin.

Fertility problems may be

associated with dietary

shortages of magnesium and zinc."

"What the hell do they have to do with making babies?" asked Uncle Alva.

"Zinc deficiencies are linked to

low sperm counts."

"What's sperm?" asked Hussey. The others nodded. He was not the only one who failed to recognize the library's vocabulary.

"Seed. It's in your gism."

"I told it to say that," Maddoc laughed, and then the library's voice continued:

"Magnesium deficiencies can lead to difficulty in maintaining pregnancies. Added to the effects of epidemic chlamydia and ovarian herpes, they may account for current low fertility."

"Even in my time," said Maddoc. "People weren't having as many babies. Too many of those infections."

"Love bugs," said Ox.

"We couldn't do much about them, but there were still enough kids to go around.

People just had them earlier."

Felix pointed at the keyboard. "How do we know it's right?"

"Plants grown in magnesium-deficient soil have yellow leaves."

Yellowed foliage was far too common in the world outside the library. Silence stretched until Amelie said, "So what can they do?"

"Eat more meat, legumes, grains, and green vegetables."

Uncle Alva snorted. "We have trouble raising what we eat already."

"A copy of the extension service's

Garden Expert data base and

verbal interface will fit in an

E-Life Memorial Repository, Model 73A-466."

"Not me," said Maddoc. "I'm not ready to vacate the premises yet. And there really isn't room to sublet."

"Don't you have any room at all?" asked Uncle Alva.

"Just for a book or two. This is more like crowding two ghosts in one machine."

"Not Amelie," said Luanna.

"Not Great-Grandpa," said Felix, though he felt less sure than he tried to sound. He did not wish to lose his ancestor, but if that was the price of survival for his family....

"That leaves the mutt," said Maddoc.

"Thunderstone," said Felix. His throat felt suddenly swollen, but he could stand

the thought of displacing Maddoc no better than that of displacing

Great-Grandpa

or Amelie.

"No!" cried Luanna.

"WARNING!

482 gigabytes available.

Cannot access 1566 gigabytes.

64 storage sectors available.

192 storage sectors unavailable."

"We have to sacrifice someone," said Maddoc. "Soon. Or we'll lose it all. There's no telling what we've lost already."

Miriam looked at him suspiciously. "You made it say that too."

"Uh-uh. Didn't have to."

There was a sudden throat-clearing noise from near the window. When the humans

turned, Hussey clenched his hands in his lap, stared at them, and said, "I wish

you could use me."

"Ha!" Ox looked skeptical. Luanna took a step back, away from the bandit who had

murdered her family and would have....

"No," he said. "I mean it. I've done some awful things. How else can I make up for them?"

After a moment of silence, Great-Grandpa said, "There's hope for you, boy. But

you just aren't made of the right stuff."

"He's got potential," Maddoc agreed.

"It can give us something for gardening," said Miriam, but though she changed the subject she did aim a small smile Hussey's way as if to say he had now justified being kept alive. "What else does it have in all those storage sectors? What are we losing?"

"This is a hospital, remember," said Maddoc. "There won't be anything on literature or physics or political science."

"What's gardening doing in there?" Great-Grandpa chuckled.

"I'm shrugging," said Maddoc. "Occupational therapy, maybe? Or maybe the kitchen

staff was trying to grow food for the place near the end."

"Or flowers," said Amelie. "For the rooms. My room was full of them, you know. I

could see them once they copied me."

There was a moment of awkward silence. All the stones had such memories. Then Maddoc added, "Or maybe it was for the grounds crew. But let me get a directory."

A list began to slide across the screen, and the library's voice recited:

"Data Bases in Storage:

Audiology (not available)

Biochemistry (not available)

Blood Chemistry (not available)

Cardiology (not available)

Cosmetology

Dentistry (not available)

Dietetics/Nutrition

DSM VIII

Electroencephaloengraphy (not available)

Endocrinology (not available)

Environmental Standards (not available)

Forensic Medicine (not available)

Garden Expert

Gastroenterology (not available)

Genetics (not available)

Genetic therapy (not available)

Gynecology (not available)

Histology (not available)

Index Medicus

Infectious Diseases (not available)

Medical Imaging (not available)

Neurology (not available)

Nursing (not available)

Nutritional Supplements (not available)

Obstetrics

Oncology (not available)

Ophthalmology (not available)

Orthopedics (not available)

Parasitology

Pathology

Pediatrics (not available)

Pharmacy Handbook (not available)

Physical Therapy

Physicians' Desk Reference (not available)

Podiatry

Psychiatry (not available)
Radiology (not available)
Rehabilitation (not available)
Social Work (not available)
Speech Pathology
Surgery (not available)
Toxicology (not available)
Veterinary Science"

"I'd rather have the PDR than the Index Medicus," said Maddoc. "An awful lot is gone."

"We can't afford to lose what's left," said Great-Grandpa.
"Somebody get the mutt, then."

* * *

"High levels of solar ultraviolet have been shown to affect plant growth and vitamin content. Solar ultraviolet may be moderated by a screen of glass as in a..."

Luanna gasped. "Is that what it's going to tell us? That we have to build greenhouses all over again? Destroy what's left of the world?"

"Plantings of tall trees can also help by filtering sunlight. So can woven canopies of certain UV-dense fabrics such as..."

It had not taken long to silence Thunderstone forever. The soul that had animated his stone was replaced by a dry compendium of facts and recommendations.

"We could take away a lot more," said Uncle Alva. "If..."

"No," said Felix. "These stones are people too. We need animal stones."

"Or volunteers," said Hussey. Miriam was sitting cross-legged just a few feet away.

"But not Hussey." Luanna too seemed less hostile. When he had volunteered himself, he had indeed become less a prisoner and more a member of the group. Yet she never smiled when she was looking in his direction. He and his companions had done too much evil to her family, as well as others.

"There's a cemetery not far away." Uncle Alva gestured in the general direction of the armory's ruins.

"Where the doctors buried their mistakes," said Great-Grandpa.

Maddoc made a snorting noise. "No room left on the trundle."

"We don't have to take them home. Just download into them. Then put them someplace safe until we can come back."

"With a larger, faster trundle," said Uncle Alva. "We can take some of those panels off the roof."

The library added a comment of its own:

"WARNING!

466 gigabytes available.

Cannot access 1582 gigabytes.

60 storage sectors available.

196 storage sectors unavailable."

"We'll have to hurry," said Great-Grandpa.

"It shouldn't get any worse once we turn it off," said Maddoc.

"You hope."

* * *

"Did you know you put an arrow in Caleb?"

Miriam gasped, though she had left home in part to get away from her father. Luanna told Uncle Alva, "That was me. They were shooting at us." She glared at

Hussey. "They killed Heavy."

"That was Kiwi," said Hussey. He still rode the trundle. "He had the gun."
"So we ran." Felix had let the harness fall around his ankles while he caught his breath. Now he gestured behind them, down into the valley. The river was as

visible in the distance as it had been then, as was the skeletal dome of the Capitol and the hill that had been their last obstacle before the hospital. There was no sign of the hospital itself.

"Was he okay?" asked Miriam.

"It was in his leg." Uncle Alva used his staff to point down the slope ahead of

them. "He was heading home, though he wasn't hobbling very fast."

"I hope...."

"Yeah," said Felix. "But what about your sisters?"

Miriam looked at Ox. He had begun to grin at the mention of the other girls.

"Bella will come with us."

Ox turned pink. Luanna laughed and said, "Karyn too?"

Amelie gave Mendelssohn a full-throated organ treatment. Now it was Felix's turn

to blush. He tried to change the subject. "Do you think those stones will be all

right?"

"Why shouldn't they be?" asked Uncle Alva. They had replaced the copied minds of

two dogs, a cat, and a monkey with most of the Dietetics/Nutrition and all of the Obstetrics, Parasitology, and Veterinary Science data bases. Another cat held a second copy of the Garden Expert data base. "Their chances are better than ours."

He meant they had no idea of what awaited them on the way home. They knew only

that the fallen bridge would force them to follow some more inland route through

strange territory. Consideration Wiggin was ahead of them, and if he met his fellows in time, there might be an ambush. One group of bandits was gone, but there were others.

Whether they made it or not, the stones should remain, safe on their cemetery pedestals until another expedition could retrieve them.

"I wish we could save more," Maddoc said. His tone was dejected, frustrated. What they had copied was a pitifully small fraction of the immense stock of information the library had once held, even though it was immensely more than they had ever dreamed of finding.

"There must be other libraries," said Miriam.

"The university," said Great-Grandpa. "It would have lots more, too. All the sciences, engineering...."

Uncle Alva's eyes brightened fiercely. "If we could build steam engines and radios.... Where is it?"

"North of home," said Great-Grandpa. "Just about as long a trek as this place."

"We'll have to...."

"We'd better get going," said Ox. He was coiling the harness at the front of the

trundle, preparing for the downhill leg when all they had to do was steer.

"Want to see Bella, do you?"

"Probably thinking of the shed roof," said Felix. "I'll bet it blew off in that

last storm."

"And your Pa can't get it back all by himself," said Uncle Alva. "Yeah, we'd better hurry."

* * *

When they reached the Inger farmstead, Bella was in no frame of mind to give Ox

the welcome he wished. As they rolled into the yard, she stepped out of the house onto the porch. Her face was sober, her eyes swollen. When her mother appeared behind her, she looked even worse, with deep crevices flanking eyes and

mouth and her lips pressed grimly together.

Ox stilled the wave he had begun.

Miriam went white. "Is Dad...?"

"Trudy's gone," Bella said quietly.

"I'd sent her out to the garden to pick radishes," said her mother, Madge.

"We

saw him come out of the woods. He just grabbed her and ran. She was kicking and

struggling, but it didn't help." Her voice was full of pain and grief, but her

eyes remained dry. "She was the youngest, you know. My baby."

"Consideration Wiggin," said Felix. "He's a Havener."

"He swore they take good care of their women," said Maddoc.

"They're just slaves," said Great-Grandpa. "Property."

"You know him."

"He tried to steal me," said Luanna.

"Where's Dad?"

"Inside." Madge pointed with her chin.

They found him sitting at the table, his injured leg propped on a chair, one hand clamped on Karyn's shoulder. A simple crutch, a sapling with a padded fork,

leaned against the wall nearby.

"They didn't catch you." He grimaced and shifted his leg. His knuckles whitened

on Karyn's shoulder. She trembled and clenched her jaws. "What'd you do, kill 'em? Like you tried to do to me?"

"That was me," said Luanna.

He ignored her. "Well?"

"Not Hussey," said Miriam.

"He's outside," added her mother.

Caleb gave a bark of bitter laughter. "Going to keep him, eh? Just like I said."

Miriam shook her head. "I haven't decided yet."

Bella, head down and eyes full of tears, pushed herself against Ox's side.

Karyn whimpered. Felix pointed at her. "Why...?"

"Because she's not leaving too."

Uncle Alva looked sideways at Ox and Bella and nodded as if to say he saw just

how much things had changed since the boy had left home. Then he leaned forward

and used the tip of his staff to prod the bandage on Caleb's leg. "Hurts, does

it?" When Caleb gasped and stiffened and let go of his daughter to lunge for his

crutch, he knocked the crutch out of reach.

"Bastard!"

Karyn darted free across the room. Luanna grabbed her by the hand and pulled her

in between herself and Felix. Felix gave Luanna a surprised stare; her reply was

a determined expression that said an alliance had been forged without a word. He

noded, and they each wrapped an arm around the younger girl. Some of the stiffness immediately went out of her neck and back.

"Do you want to come too?" Uncle Alva asked Madge.

She shook her head. "He needs me."

"Fuckin' right I do. C'mere. I think it's bleeding again."

She looked at the others and shrugged as if to say, "You see?" Then she flapped

them toward the door with one hand, wiggled her fingers in farewell to her daughters, and turned to her husband. "You probably tore something," she said.

The last Felix saw of her before the closing door shut off the view, she was pouring a glass of clear liquid from a dark green bottle that had last held wine.

CHAPTER 36

The new trundle was already taking shape beside the shed. It had six wheels, and

its bed stretched nearly twice as long as that of the old trundle. Its canopy,

fashioned from the broken panel of solar cells brought back from the hospital,

overhung the ends and sides and caught more than twice the sunlight. A pair of

electric motors taken from old trucks rested on a bench, waiting to be installed. The batteries were already in place.

On the poisoned ground beside the garden, where nothing grew, two concentric rings of six tree-trunk posts defined a circular colonnade whose center was open

to the sky. Beneath that open center, exposed to sky and sun, sat

Great-Grandpa

and Maddoc. Between them was the stone that had once held Thunderstone.

Amelie

had gone back to the cemetery.

Felix was on the roof, kneeling on one board salvaged from an old house and positioning another, nailing it to cross-pieces, flapping his hand to shoo away

the rooster that insisted on perching just where he wished to hammer next. A little further around the ring, Ox was doing the same. Pa was fetching boards,

while Uncle Alva, who had designed this structure, was stirring a pile of ashes

with a rusty iron bar. A wire coiled around the bar and extended to the new trundle. Periodically he held the bar over a bucket and flipped a switch mounted

in the wire. Nails rattled into the bucket. Rows of white in the garden said where the ashes wound up; the Garden Expert had said they contained some of the

minerals the soil needed.

Hussey was on the ground, his still-splinted leg thrust out before him, helping

the women weave irregular panels of everlasting stems, apple suckers, and other

brush. Several such panels already hung between tall posts where their porous shadows thinned the sun that struck the garden. In one, a pair of sparrows had

begun to construct a nest.

Bella looked up from her work and caught Ox's eye. He nodded and set down his hammer. "Getting late. We've got to work on our place too." Their house, on the

other side of the goat pen, was not much larger than the shed. Its roof and walls were done, but the window holes were still empty, with glass panels taken

from old cars lying propped against the walls beneath them.

"It's not as if the weather's going to hurt these stones," said Uncle Alva.

He set his electromagnet down and began to pile rotten, nail-studded lumber on top of the ashes. "Go on, then."

"Then why are you building that?" Miriam set down the panel she was working on.

Later she would bed down on Felix's old pallet in the main house. Hussey slept in the ell with Uncle Alva.

"It's a temple," said Maddoc from below. "Great idea. About time folks paid proper respect to their elders."

"It's not for you," said Felix, and Luanna laughed.

"It's for the Garden Expert," said Great-Grandpa.

"And for you," said Luanna. "The wisdom of the elders."

"Who fucked things up once already," muttered Maddoc.

"Yeah," answered Great-Grandpa. "But we're not as useless as people used to think."

"What do you mean?" Karyn stood up from the panel she was weaving.

"When we had ourselves mindloaded, some folks thought we were pretty self-indulgent. Just a bunch of selfish old farts. Actually, they called us that when all we wanted was a bed in a nursing home. 'Useless waste of resources,' they said."

Ma hawked bloody sputum into the garden.

"_The Sacred Animal_," said Felix. He looked at his arm. The rash was still there, but it seemed less red and the scales were thinning. The others' rashes were fading too.

As he fingered the healing skin, Ma called, "Don't scratch." He laughed. The itch was so much less he hardly ever felt the need.

"That was written long before our time," said Maddoc. "When we got old and gray and ugly, we weren't nearly as sacred as our descendants."

"We are our ancestors' children," said Ma in an echo of her familiar litany.

"We suffer for their sins. But we forgive them, don't we?"

"Not much choice," said Pa.

"Things'll be better now," she said. "Good crops. Good health. Babies."

"And the Haveners know we're here."

"Not that we were ever really useless," said Great-Grandpa. "Not even when books and libraries pretended to replace us as storehouses of wisdom. We're--we always were--bridges between the generations, not only storehouses but also vehicles and interpreters of wisdom."

"We always will be," said Maddoc. "Though civilizations may fall, as long as the species endures."

Great-Grandpa laughed. "Meanwhile, the temple will keep the rain and youvee off anyone who comes out to chat."

"What about the neighbors?" asked Ma.

"They can build their own temples," said Felix.

"Once you make copies for them."

"There's stones enough," said Maddoc. A parrot, two cats, a dog, and a once-human volunteer waited on the other side of the garden. The necessary Hudson cables had been stored in the ell.

"No rush. Not many neighbors, and they're close enough to visit."

Gilbert had already come by to hear the story of the quest and ask the Garden Expert what it knew about making wines. When it proved to know nothing at

all,
he had shrugged and said, "There isn't one for cripples either, is there?"
"There used to be," Maddoc had said. "The library had data bases for
orthopedics
and rehabilitation. But those were in the memory it had already lost. All
that
was left was physical therapy." A moment later, he added, "We didn't save a
copy."
Gilbert had shaken his head at that. "Well, it's a start. Maybe next time,
eh?"
"Maybe next time."
"But we've got to square things away here first." Felix looked toward the
trail
to the cemetery. His own new house was just visible beyond an apple tree
already
heavy with green fruit. It was no larger than Ox's and Bella's, even though
it
was home to three people instead of two. He shook his head. It needed a door
as
well as windows, and if he did not get off this "temple" he was helping to
build, the next storm would surely drive them into his parents' place.
He looked over the edge of the roof and shook his head. Luanna and Karyn were
below him now, waiting side by side. He thought he could see the slight swell
of
Luanna's belly even though it was much too soon--both Ma and Maddoc had told
him
so--for her to show any sign of the baby.
He shook his head again. When he had left home, he had had no mate nor any
prospect of one. He had dreamed that perhaps he would find one. But two?
"Are you coming?"
He grinned happily. They had not solved all the world's problems, defeated
some
grand evil force, or restored the lost wonders of civilization at a stroke.
But
now there was hope.
They had coped and learned and survived, much as had the people in his Swiss
Family Robinson, and their world was a little better place than it had been.
Surely it would get better and better still as they gathered what was left of
the old world's knowledge, learned how to use it, and even discovered anew
what
had been lost. There was hope.
"Just a sec," he said.
He craned his neck to look at the sky. It was still yellow, but was there
perhaps just a hint of blue, there, to the north?
But he was only dreaming, wasn't he?
He laughed.

* * *

The sky was just as clear above the island of Haven, and the sea was free of
mists. The golden balls that tipped the arms of the cross gleamed with
divinely
pure fire, and the congregation could watch gulls wheeling hungrily above the
water even near the distant shore.
Delivered of the Lord stood on his dais, holding his Bible aloft. "The Holy
Scripture is all we need," he cried, and the gulls seemed to scream in echo
and
confirmation. "All else is delusion."
Consideration Wiggin wore a frown upon his face. He had brought home news he
thought would be welcome--change their diet, and there would be more babies,
victory over all the unbelievers would be theirs--and the leader he followed
like a father had only shaken his head.

The Lord, he had said, would provide. There were no problems beyond his reach.

Surely, if he wished his chosen people to eat better, he would send more fish into the bay, more eggs to the seagull nests, more pigeons to the snares. Perhaps he would even bring back the deer and the geese.

Consideration Wiggin suppressed his doubts and looked around him. As always, the

bleachers held only men. The women and children, on this fair day, were gathered

on the slope to the left, in the shade of pines and oaks. He could just make out

God's Promise, still among the preacher's wives. He could not see Trudy Inger at

all; he thought she must still be confined.

"All else is the Devil's teaching!" Delivered of the Lord slapped the Book with

an open hand. "This is truth. Ignoring it is what destroyed the world before. Once in Noah's time! Again in our forefathers' time!"

He paused to scan the bleachers and all their empty spaces. "Yet Satan's scriptures still remain."

He paused again until someone screamed out, "Burn them!" and all the men of Haven stood to repeat the cry.

"Yes," he said. "We must destroy that library, and every other library that still exists. We must cleanse the graveyards of their ghosts. And then we must

renew our efforts to reclaim the women and the children of our heathen brethren.

To save the souls of all the world. To prepare the way for Judgment."

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