

The Gentled of Mary

Andrew John Valencia

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The Gentled of Mary

Published by Andrew John Valencia

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Part One: Gathering

It's All New

Ben's view was blocked by something large and wooden. As he watched, it moved aside, and he was looking up at a stained glass window. He didn't want to move much, but his eyes followed the group of people who were dragging aside whatever had been blocking his view. It was a cross. No, he realized, it was a crucifix. It had been on top of him?

He still didn't feel like moving. His eyes returned to the stained glass window—it was beautiful beyond belief—and saw two jagged pieces of wire hanging loosely from the ceiling's beams. He was laying on his back, resting on something unyielding. Someone leaned over him, her eyes haunted and her mouth twisted in horror.

"Ben! Oh, Ben!"

"Hi." His chest felt funny, like it didn't want to move air. But he was pretty sure he got the word out.

The woman shrieked, and shied back. A clean-shaven man with mighty shoulders took her place.

"You shouldn't move. We've called 911."

"I don't feel like moving. What happened?" His chest felt better. He had gotten that whole sentence out without problems.

The man shook his head. "You were up on the ladder dusting our crucifix when somehow both wires snapped and it smashed you right down onto the altar." He glanced sideways to look at the crucifix as it lay over to the side. It was a cross of wood, taller than a man, with a carved wooden figure of Jesus nailed to it. "It must weigh several hundred pounds. I don't know how you're talking to me."

A heavysset man in a black shirt with a white collar hurried up. He was holding a book and a vial. "Ben! The paramedics will be here soon. Can you speak? I can hear your confession."

Ben laughed. "Help me up."

The clean-shaven man and the one with the collar—a clerical collar, he remembered—looked sideways at each other in concern. "Now, Ben. . ." began the one with the collar.

Father Sam. That was his named. "I'm OK, Father. Can you and. . ."—the name came to him—"Ollie help me up?"

He grabbed an arm of each man, and pulled himself up off the altar. As his feet touched the ground, he was suddenly facing a golden container on a stand. A Presence filled his vision, like a weight of golden light. He felt wisdom, and love, and humor, and power.

"The tabernacle," he croaked, "kneel."

He dragged them down, and knelt before the awful, wondrous presence. Ollie and Father Sam awkwardly knelt, too, mostly so they could keep a hold on him and support him.

"Let's go over to the side," he pleaded.

They carefully shuffled off the platform—*sanctuary* his memory said—and sat him down at the first pew. A siren could be heard rapidly approaching.

"Ben," began Father Sam again.

"Sorry, Father. No need for Last Rites today."

Father Sam looked like he was going to argue the point, but a pair of paramedics hurried in, led in by the woman he'd first seen. *Marie*.

The lead paramedic looked at the altar, then over to Ben. "You *moved* him?" he asked in exasperation.

Ollie shrugged. "Long story."

The paramedics went into action. One got all the details of the accident as he assisted the other in a physical examination. They started very tentatively, obviously expecting spine or brain damage. As they continued, their extremely gentle manipulations and tests became more and more rigorous. By the end, he was standing as they moved his arms and legs in a full range of motion.

Finally the lead paramedic nodded to the other, who started packing up. He shook his head. "That cross must've missed him, or else he was in plate mail. I don't see the slightest sign of trauma. Now, we can get him transported to the ER for a full workup. . ."

"No." Ben interrupted. "Thanks, but no. I'm very grateful that you could check me." His tone was final.

The paramedic was filling in a form. "Sign here, then."

It was a form full of words. He didn't read them, but all their intentions floated off the page like a scent of the old bedding in a rat cage. Evasion, and deniability, and greed, and sly intentions behind dishonesty. He signed "Ben", then realized that he didn't have a last name any more. He wrote a squiggle, noticed that they'd forgotten to ask his last name up above, and handed the clipboard back. "Thanks."

The paramedics left.

Father Sam sat on one side of him, Ollie on the other. He could tell they felt awkward; "how are you not dead?" was an uncomfortable way to start a conversation, but anything else would be a little dishonest. They were honest men, so for now there was a little peace while Ben gathered his thoughts. He was shyly keeping his eyes away from the tabernacle up behind the altar, and caught sight of a statue further to his left.

It was Mary, mother of God. Well, a likeness intended to bring Her to mind. There was a candle burning in the stand of candles beside the statue, but he could tell it was lit merely as a rote task, with no prayer. Ollie and Father jumped when he stood, went over, found the matches, and lit the candle right below the one lit candle. He stood before the statue, and realized that she had lived in this world, and most only dimly suspected what she had done, and how she had done it.

He laughed, and returned to sit with Father and Ollie. "Is it OK if I don't stay and help re-hang the crucifix?"

Ollie stared at him in blank astonishment. "Are you crazy, Ben? We had to use a high-lift last time, and I'm not doing anything until I can check the mounts and replace those wires!" He hesitated. "Should I call. . ." he trailed off in puzzlement.

Ben nodded sympathetically. *His wife*. The world where he had a last name and a family was, for him, no more. Just a few echoes were left, quickly fading. He stood up.

"Thanks, Ollie. Thanks, Father. I'll be heading off, then." He stood, bowed to the Presence in the tabernacle, then walked towards the back of the church. Father and Ollie followed, and Ben noticed Father still had the anointing oil and his prayer book in hand. He pushed the exit door open, then turned back. Ollie caught the door, holding it open while he and Father looked at Ben, concern still on their faces.

"Father, Ollie—you've been great. Thank you." He turned and walked off across the parking lot. There were a number of cars—stink of chemicals coming from within coarse, brute metal intermingled with plastic. Each one was a bubble of isolation and alienation. Had he driven? He would never miss it.

He continued across the parking lot, keeping his distance from cars as much as he could manage. There weren't many, and he realized that none of them was in running condition. Cracked, flat tires, and peeling paint.

He looked back once. Ollie and Father were watching him, and then their faces showed distraction. They looked at each other in confusion, then Ollie let the door close, both of them returning inside.

Up ahead, nearly where the driveway entered the public road, he saw a red line. It paralleled the road, then curved off on each side. He could see it all the way across the property; it was a circle which encompassed the entirety of the church and its property.

A *blood line*, he realized. He remembered walking this line, asking for the protection of Jesus to be laid down as a shield for the church. At the time, he had prayed in faith, but lacked the perception to detect the result.

It was a deep, pure red, with a shimmering force drifting up into the sky. It stood impervious, and if Satan mustered a sufficient force to attack it, Archangel Michael would no doubt see fit to smash them back down to Hell once again. Thus the perfect answer to the imperfect prayer. No wonder the minions of Satan worked so hard to extinguish faith and prayer.

Seeing the World

The Walk to Town

Ben looked back at the church. The walls glowed faintly, still blessed and providing some protection for the building. It struck him as a kinder and gentler protection, for a kinder and gentler time.

He turned, once again facing the burning red of the Blood Line. The image of Saint Michael the Archangel suddenly occurred to him, leading all the hosts of God to drive the devil down into Hell. He realized how small all of this was—Saint Michael had prevailed, and then Jesus. The battle was already won, it was just the details of the victory which remained.

He stepped through the red veil unharmed, and headed towards town. What had happened to him? Probably he'd pick up clues from the people in town.

Ben realized that along with the few, broken cars at the church, the parking lot was cracked, with weeds sprouting up. The road he walked along was almost as cracked, and not a single car came by as he proceeded. He finally came to a larger road, and took a left to head towards town.

He walked along the shoulder of the two-lane road, enjoying the quiet although wondering whether he'd see anybody at all before reaching town. His question was shortly answered when, in the distance from the direction of town, a car turned onto his road, then accelerated with a roar of engine power. It was a police car, and it slowed as it came near him.

The driver was dressed in some sort of black uniform. He was broad across the chest, short sleeves with thickly muscled arms. But what Ben most noticed was the face, marked with a brutal hunger for violence and sadism. And the eyes—they were wrong in some undefinable way.

A Lost, the idea popped into his mind.

The officer pulled the car to a stop on the road right beside Ben, the brute peering all along the roadside as if to find something, although his eyes passed right over Ben.

Evil has a hard time seeing Good, he realized. He held still, not wanting to try his luck. There was no doubt how this encounter would go if this creature laid hold of him.

Ah, he realized. *I am Good*. That was something.

The officer gave an animal grunt. The engine roared, and the wheels spun, the smoke of burning rubber filling the air as the car rocketed away. It was over the distant hill in seconds, the sound of the engine faded away.

Ben continued walking towards town.

A "Super" Market

The road he was following intersected with an even bigger road, and on this road were businesses along both sides. Town.

Well, buildings where businesses had been. Most did not contain businesses anymore, but had closed, locked up, and even mounted plywood over the windows and doors. The plywood had been subsequently pried off in most cases, and Ben got peeks of improvised living quarters within. A market at the end of the block was still open, and he walked toward it with a sense of curiosity.

Once again, there was a cracked parking lot containing no operable cars, and again it supported many weeds. A number of steel pipes bent in the shape of an upside-down "U" were embedded in the ground here and there, and he saw just a few bicycles locked to these. He could also see through the entry doors of the market,

and it looked quite crowded inside. Apparently, most people couldn't manage a bicycle much less a car, and just walked.

The doors were open, but a pair of men guarded the entrance. Thankfully, they weren't the black-shirted type he'd seen in the police car, but they were watchful and bureaucratic. As each person walked towards the entrance, they presented a card for inspection. Most were waved in, but some were turned away.

Ben patted his pockets, finding all of them empty. Whatever he had previously possessed to fit into this world was gone. He continued toward the men, wondering if they'd see him.

They could. One stepped in front of him, hand put out to signal him to stop.

"Ration card."

Ben shrugged. "I don't know where it is?"

That got a frown. "Turn around. Walk away. You just used up your one warning."

Ben studied the man. He wasn't evil like that officer, but he was... indifferent to evil. He'd do evil, support it. Maybe at some point he'd preferred good to evil. Now? His ability to care had faded away.

The guard took Ben's glance as some sort of insolence. His body tensed, and he reached for the club which hung on his belt.

"Ben!"

Unnoticed, a woman came out of the market, and saw that Ben was in a confrontation. She hurried past the guards, and took Ben by an arm.

"Come away from here, Ben."

"Lady, leave your crazy man at home from now on."

She didn't answer, but pulled Ben along until they'd moved beyond view of the guards.

"Ben, um..." She'd appeared to know exactly what to do in the heat of the moment, but now she was at a loss. He realized that most of his history had evaporated as a part of whatever that event at the church was. People's intuition and instincts still recognized him, but all the actual details were gone.

He studied her. She was in her 40's, her hair was dull and flat, but she was still attractive. Her face held a few smile lines, but he guessed they'd all be gone within the next ten years. She held a flicker of kindness, but now defended by a habitual reserve.

They're all so terribly worn down.

"Thanks for your help. I was just out to see what I could see; I didn't mean to make any trouble."

She sniffed, then dug in the bag of purchases she had just made. She brought out a small packet, and held it towards him.

"We're not really allowed to share, but if you need this...?"

His nose told him it was meat. But meat from some poor animal which was drugged, and hurt, and miserable. Then the meat had been soaked in some chemicals, and moved around in plastic containers which had leached their own toxins into the product. With all the tang of chemicals he could smell, there was still a faint odor of spoilage coming off the packet.

"Thank you," the name was suddenly in his memory, "Barbara. I'm OK, and I really couldn't eat that." He couldn't keep the fervent honesty out of his statement.

She seemed relieved, and put the packet back in her bag. "If you're sure. Well! I have to run." She strode away, not looking back.

"Hey, Barbara! Where's the nearest farm?"

She stopped, then turned reluctantly and pointed past him in the other direction. “You always liked Plain Old Farm.” She turned away again, and continued at a brisker pace.

He turned his back to her, and started in the indicated direction.

Wither the Farm?

He was now walking alongside the “highway”, the big road which ran through town. There were few cars, all apparently battery powered. They made a fretful whine as they went by, the drivers almost invisible behind tinted glass, looking straight ahead.

All the cars in sight suddenly shied away from the road, and a police car roared by. Even without lights, everyone was well trained to defer to the minions in the big, gas-powered cars. The rank odor of partially combusted gasoline made him hold his breath until a light breeze cleared it away. He continued walking.

He almost missed the turnoff to Plain Old Farm, its sign laying off to the side of the road, trampled and broken. Finding the post it had been mounted upon, he verified which way the arrow had pointed, then leaned the sign against the post so others could perhaps follow it. A car passed as he adjusted the sign, a pale white blob of a face quickly turning away as he looked up. He could hear the electric motor laboring as the driver tried to race away.

Ben started walking down the side road indicated by the sign. It was mostly grass, with a residual layer of asphalt now crumbled. He watched on both sides, afraid to miss the next sign for the farm if it was laying in the weeds beside the road. But he saw neither turnoffs nor signs until he came up to a traffic barrier installed to block the road.

NO ADMITTANCE

Ben studied it, then looked beyond to see that the road, even more decrepit, did continue. The barrier was only to stop traffic, and it was easy to walk around it and continue onward. Having ignored the sign, he planned on ducking off the road to hide if he heard anything or anybody coming. But he heard nothing except the hum of insects and the occasional chirp of a bird.

The road eventually lost all sign of asphalt, and became little more than a memory. Rain had washed away part, leaving large dips which would stop most vehicles. Trees had started to move in, and some of the saplings sprouted in the road were becoming big enough to block vehicles. Ben stopped worrying about anything automotive coming along, but he still stopped and listened closely at intervals. It would be foolish to assume this forest was empty.

He skirted a patch of nettles, and pushed through yet another stand of saplings to find that this remnant of a road finally ended at a tall steel security gate. Many plants had grown up to it and through it, and yet it stood tall and unbroken, topped by coils of barbed wire. Ben grabbed the gate and gave it an experimental shake; it had no give at all. There was a sign attached, but it had weathered away to illegibility. Having no desire to try climbing the gate and somehow getting past the wire at top, he turned and followed along the fence, peering through its bars to try and spot what was protected by this gate and its attached fence.

The overgrowth out here continued on the inside, permitting very little visibility into the protected area. The fence was tremendously tall, at least 12 feet high, and was topped by barbed wire just as the gate had been. But presently he came across what he'd been hoping for: a tree a good ways back from the fence had grown tall enough, and then fallen during some storm in the past. It had smashed down onto the fence, which was so strong it had almost fully held against the tree. But Ben saw the give of the fence had opened a gap in the bars, and he slipped through.

The Compound

The overgrowth thinned rapidly on the inside of the fence, and presently he stepped out onto the edge of a large, open field. There were squat, concrete buildings spaced out across the field from him, each with a dark steel door on its front. A pipe stuck out of the ground right in the center of the field, and Ben walked over to see it had a protective plate screwed onto its top.

“A well,” Ben guessed out loud.

He continued on to the concrete buildings, and inspected each in turn. He could see where some sort of painted label had weathered away, but the buildings and their doors were intact. Whatever they protected would be protected a little bit longer. Each door was a single rectangle of blackened steel, with a metal strap run across the door and held by a lock the size of both his hands clasped together. The locks were of gleaming chrome, untouched by the years and neglect.

He walked the full extent of this fenced area, and decided that this was some sort of emergency site where people had planned to fall back if a disaster struck. Getting inside those buildings would confirm it, and if they held the sorts of supplies you’d need in a disaster, this site could become very useful to him. But he first needed to find that farm and its farmer, and there was no sign of such a person here. Somewhere between that sign and here was a side path he’d apparently missed.

The Way

Once back outside the big security fence, Ben headed back towards the highway. He searched every possible break in the brush, but was almost back to the main road when he heard a loud CRACK. He ducked to the side and waited as another CRACK, and another, reached his ears. He was ready to plunge into the brush, because those were certainly gunshots. But he held off; if the shooter didn’t know he was around, the sound of crashing through the brush would bring them running and—probably—shooting.

The shooting stopped, and he heard the murmur of an angry voice. He edged along the brush on the side of the path, torn between finding out some more information on this threat, and simply ducking and hoping it would go away. He finally reached a place where a fallen tree, overgrown with bramble and ferns, let him peek cautiously through to see where his path reached the main road.

It was a police cruiser, parked at the side of the road right where this path started. An officer had his gun out, apparently enraged at the sign for Plain Old Farm. The officer glared around, then pointed his gun at the splintered remnants of the sign, firing again. Propping up the sign had apparently enraged this creature’s sensibilities, and Ben watched as the sign was shot again and again, eventually reduced to paint-covered splinters.

“I’ll kill that farmer,” the officer shouted as he climbed back into his car (there were some extra, unprintable, words intermingled). The engine roared as the car backed up, then drove forward into the vegetation on one side of the path. Ben was puzzled, then realized as the car made progress that there had been a path under that overgrowth. Apparently that farm sign had pointed to *that* path, not the road he had explored.

The car, with its powerful engine, pressed forward into the vegetation. The ground was dry, and Ben saw that there was a heavy protective grill on its front which served very well as a ram to push forward through any resistance without damaging the vehicle. Ben came just close enough to watch the car’s progress, not wanting any risk of being spotted.

After 50 feet or so, the vegetation thinned out, making the old farm path easier to follow. The car picked up speed, now just brushing aside the odd sapling or fallen branch. The car had advanced several hundred feet when suddenly the ground collapsed beneath the car, the front of the car ending nose-down in a pit at least as deep as the car was tall.

The car had apparently tried to cross a small bridge over a now-dry watercourse, but its weight had broken the bridge, leaving the car trapped. The engine revved and the wheels spun, but the car was thoroughly stuck. Ben, well back on the path, carefully stepped off the path and into the brush. Either this officer would be heading back on foot, or he might have called for help on his radio.

30 minutes later it turned out to be the latter. Ben heard an engine approaching, and presently a second police car appeared, driving up the same path to join the trapped officer. They both left their cars and consulted, and then they got a towing cable from the second car’s trunk, and busied themselves hitching to pull the trapped car. Ben thought they were going to have to call for even more help, but presently the second car pulled out the first one. There was some packing up of cables, and then the two cars drove away. Ben waited for more than an hour in case the program against the farm road continued, but apparently the

mishap had extinguished any official interest. He started down the path, skirting the crushed bridge and scrambling up the other side to continue deeper into the woods.

Unwelcome Visitors

It was getting darker, and Ben had one small problem, and one larger one. The smaller was that he hadn't eaten since whatever meal he'd had before his church mishap. He was hungry, but he had experience with fasting. No problem.

The larger problem was that he was pretty sure there were two adult males stalking him. They were trying to be stealthy, but periodic rustlings and twigs snapped underfoot kept him aware of their presence. They were following him on a parallel path, never more than 100 yards away. He stopped and waited, but presently they stopped and waited, too. They obviously were hoping to catch him once he fell asleep.

He was tired after a full, strange day. But not so tired that he'd fall asleep with two-legged predators nearby. He didn't know why, but he suddenly looked straight up. There was a break in the tree branches here, and he saw stars slowly becoming visible as the sun finished setting. One star caught his eye, and he watched as it grew. He stepped back as a small figure made of starlight landed right before him. *Cherubim*, he thought.

The figure was small, but human in shape. Or was it? Sometimes it seemed more reptilian. It seemed like his eyes weren't the right sort to *really* see such a being.

But indeed, it was made of starlight as best he could tell. The figure held a finger to its lips, then pointed to a place behind a nearby tree. Ben went where directed as the figure puddled on the ground, and suddenly was a crackling bonfire.

Ben waited. The stalkers were suspicious, but he heard them trying to sneak closer and closer. He realized that an image of him was bedded beside the "fire", just as a figure broke from the brush and rushed over, stabbing the image of himself.

"There you go! There you go! Whatcha got? Whatchagot?"

A second figure joined the first, directing all manner of violence at the mirage, which suddenly disappeared. The two figures looked around in puzzlement as the cherub formed, replacing the campfire. The attackers—scruffily dressed, with gaunt features—turned towards the cherub, obviously planning a new attack.

The cherub pointed with a finger at one man's face, then the other. They both staggered, shaking their heads. The cherub finally spoke.

"I declare your sight forfeit. Make amends for all the evil you have done, and your sight shall return."

One of the men was quicker on the uptake. "How can we do *anything* when we're blind?"

"God will guide you."

"Pah! I don't believe in fairy tales."

"Then why are you blind?"

The cherubim disappeared, leaving darkness behind. The men cursed, and crashed about, eventually moving off towards the highway. Ben finally settled with his back against a tree, and after a prayer of thanks, fell asleep.

Finding the Kids

Ben woke up, glad that no further trouble had found him in the night. He even thought he'd heard a siren in the distance, so perhaps the blinded robbers had been spotted out at the road. Given the quality of everything else he'd seen, a quick treatment of euthanasia was probably all they had received.

Casting aside dark thoughts, Ben got up and headed back to where the police car had bulled into the vegetation. He had a feeling that it was the right path, but intentionally designed to stymie thugs driving large vehicles. He decided to go all the way back to the road to start the search anew.

Just short of the road, he heard a gas engine rumbling. So far, his experience was the vehicles were either little EV's, or growling gas monstrosities driven by people in authority. This one sounded different, and he peeked out from the final stand of foliage to see a yellow school bus rumbling by. Without even understanding why, he stepped out onto the road once it was past, and headed in its direction.

It went much faster than he could walk, even given its laboring old engine, but it was stopping periodically to pick up children who were standing at the side of the road. He'd catch up during these stops, and pause far enough back to make sure neither the driver nor the children riders would catch sight of him.

There was something odd about the children waiting for the bus. They all stood in a row, motionless, their faces blank. He first assumed they were subject to some fearsome discipline, but when the bus pulled up and opened its doors, they all turned in unison and marched up into the bus with mechanical precision.

Fascinated and disturbed, he continued following, hoping to see a break from this rigid routine. Or to see a sign of where this eerily controlled behavior came from. But the pattern repeated again and again, with no variance and no further clue. Children weren't children any more.

The bus proceeded into the town Ben had walked through the previous day, but turned and took a path through a part he hadn't seen. There were some intact houses, but it was still mostly blighted, with no pedestrians, few EV's, and no sign of enforcers and their loud gas cars. The bus had apparently picked up all its passengers, as it now accelerated away, leaving Ben behind. He turned back, still puzzling over what he'd just seen.

The Farmer at Plain Old Farm

The Farmer

Ben returned to the path the police car had broken, and in the morning light, it was much easier to search the area. The surface was mostly dirt, with residual chunks of asphalt. It was all churned up by the two vehicles and especially the extraction of the stuck car last night. Ben followed the crushed path and stepped past the collapsed bridge to climb down into the dry watercourse and back up on the other side.

Without the power of an engine, the dense growth beyond the bridge was impassable. He ranged to each side of the overgrown lane to see if there was a way around, and was surprised to find a well-maintained footpath 20 feet away which ran parallel to the overgrown road. On a whim, he followed it out to the road, and found that it ended in a sharp turn within a stand of blackberry, nicely hiding it from anybody on the road.

Turning back around, he continued on the footpath. It was clear and mostly straight, letting him walk a half mile or so before he came to a gate in a tall fence. The wire of the fence made a fine mesh, and the fence was quite high—its primary purpose was presumably to keep deer out, since the wire was too thin stop even human strength. It looked well-maintained, and this was a good sign; it meant the farm was probably still growing food.

Ben studied the latch mechanism on the gate, but stopped when a pair of dogs trotted up, hair on their backs bristling. Ben quickly decided opening the latch could wait as the pair of dogs stared at him, growling. There were sunflowers growing in rows just beyond the dogs, and their height hid the man approaching until he suddenly appeared almost beside the dogs. He studied Ben, then shushed the dogs.

"You're not from around here."

Ben nodded. "New arrival."

"From where? I didn't know anybody went *anywhere* anymore."

Ben pondered, then shrugged. "I was at my church, cleaning the life-size crucifix behind the altar..." he briefly told his tale.

The man shook his head. "None of *them* could think up such a story, much less tell it with a straight face. Welcome." He looked at the dogs. "He's OK." Flicking the gate latch and pulling the gate open, he motioned Ben through.

Hiding a Garden

They passed through a few rows of sunflowers, and now were among an expanse of garden beds, most growing vegetables. There were hoops of PVC pipe which would have supported plastic sheets to create a warmer and protected growing environment, but instead the plastic over the hoops was dirty and shredded.

“It looks like a mostly abandoned farm to their drones,” the farmer explained, seeing Ben’s interest.

“They don’t want you growing food?”

“Growing *unsafe* food! It has to be grown with chemicals by a huge corporation to be safely edible.”

Ben shuddered at the memory. “I *saw* what their food was like when I went by the supermarket.”

“I can probably just out-live them, me eating my food and they, theirs.”

In a little further were small houses with ramps set upon wheels. Ben was familiar with chicken tractors, but these were open to the garden.

“I can add wire mesh runs when new predators move in, until I can kill’em or the dogs chase’em off. Or when the ladies start eating up too much of my garden!”

Ben saw that a number of hens had made themselves scarce behind various bunches of plants, but now having decided he was harmless, came back out to resume their pecking and scratching. The chicken tractor houses, like all the rest of the garden, had a tattered pieces of plastic tied to wires attached on top. From above it no doubt just looked like discarded old garbage.

“Help me harvest, and in exchange I’ll feed you?”

“Deal.”

Even further into the garden was a very small house. Perhaps it had originally been just a garden shed, but Ben got a peek of a front sitting room with a small kitchen against the back wall. The farmer—his name, it turned out, was “Fred”—went inside and brought out a stack of bowls as well as some mesh bags.

They picked beans, peas, and corn. Then up came some carrots and radishes, and then Fred had Ben cut a few small delicata squash. Each bag was filled with a mix of these, and Ben saw that Fred was supplying produce to other people in the area. They finished with leaves of greens, gathered in one big bowl and washed and spun dry before tucking two handfuls of salad mix into the corner of each bag.

Fred had watched Ben closely at first, and then less and less as it became clear Ben was no stranger to gardening. As they finished, Fred nodded approvingly at him.

“I bet you’re just as good at weeding. I have a clear patch right next door which you could homestead. We could eat like kings, and help a bunch more people in the area. If you’re good at archery, better yet—or I could teach you.”

“That’d be nice, but I think I’m on the hook to do something else.”

Fred shrugged. “With that story you told me, I’m not surprised. But keep it in mind once your quest is done.”

A Good Meal

With everything cleaned up and stowed away—he had a cool, dark root cellar to store the harvested produce—they went into Fred’s house for some lunch. The smell of grilled potato cubes mixed with tomato slices made Ben’s mouth water. Presently sliced bread browning on a wire rack on top of the cookstove joined, and as they assembled sandwiches, Ben realized he felt a sense of normalcy for the first time since the accident at the church.

Fred brought out a pitcher of water, and twisted some lemon into it. As they finished their sandwiches, Fred leaned back to study Ben.

“I don’t even know what you’re going to do—but I want it to succeed. How can I help you?”

“I’m pretty sure I need to save children—as many as I can figure out. I saw some of them out on the road, and I suddenly felt like I need to help them. They look sick, and they move like they’re under remote control. Is there any sort of resistance I could contact which could help? People with the skills to tell me what’s happened to them, and how I can get them free?”

Fred hesitated, then,

“Convince me. Without thinking: Matthew, Mark, Luke.”

“John.”

“In nomine Patris et Filii et...?”

“Spiritus Sancti, amen”

“Saint Michael the Archangel...”

“Defend us in battle. You’re Catholic?”

“I haven’t gone to Sunday mass in a while, so maybe I’m disqualified. I can’t imagine the other side would bother training a spy this deeply.”

“So?”

“So there’s a doctor—MD—who’s fallen so far out of favor that she’s under house arrest out by herself in the forest. But she’s so good they bring her into town to treat all the important people.”

“Being an MD is *not* a recommendation. What did she do to earn their apparent displeasure?”

“Refuse to administer unnecessary treatments. Recommended against brain implants. Read all the literature and questioned inconsistencies in the claims. Identified medicines which did more harm than good. Red flagged most of the modern food kids are given. Things like that.”

“She could barely call herself an MD, in the modern sense.”

“You have to remember that the elites want to be healthy. They just want the medical community to be OK with different treatments for the dirt people.”

“Do you trust her?”

Fred told the story of the doctor, her past, what she’d done during the terrible years when everything changed. Fred even told of some of the terrible risks he’d taken in helping her both in the years leading up to the disaster, and since. She sounded remarkable, and for the first time in this terrible world he began to have an idea of what he should do.

“So you trust her. Have you stayed in touch with her?”

“She keeps me healthy, and I keep her fed.”

“Perhaps you can help *me*. How did this all—” Ben waved his arm to encompass all the world around them—happen?”

Fred opened a tin box, and brought out a paper and some dried leafy matter. He rolled a cigarette, then offered it to Ben with a questioning crook of his eyebrow. Ben waved a “no, thanks” and Fred lit the cigarette, breathing in some smoke while thinking about Ben’s question.

The smell was not as chemically unpleasant as Ben remembered. Perhaps he grew it right here, and got nicer results? But it was still nothing Ben wanted to inhale. Fred exhaled, apparently having decided how to answer.

“I’m puzzled about it, always have been. It seemed like if people were told something on radio, TV, and read it on the internet or in print—they’d believe it. And all of a sudden, all of it were saying the same thing, in the same way. And what they were saying got meaner, and meaner. Finally, it got to the point where people acted as if accepting their lies—everything was becoming lies—made you *one of them*. Me and most of the people I called friends knew how to grow food, and with our military background we knew how to

fight. But fight who? How? If we shot everybody who did what they were told, we'd be trying to shoot just about everybody! Events swamped us before we found an answer. We lost the war, and all that's left is to persevere."

"Funny, this reminds me of Jesus' conviction. He was a crowd favorite, compelling, he arrived in Jerusalem in a triumphant parade. And then suddenly the mob was against him and the Roman official had to agree to put him to death. You saw media being used, but it seems like it was just a new way to reach something which has been around for thousands of years, nestled in how people's minds work."

Fred shrugged. "I'm guessing you'll be doing dangerous things. Guns are almost impossible to find any more, but I can give you one from an old stash of mine?"

"I know guns, but violence is no longer an option for me." Ben said it without thinking, realizing it was true. "Whatever I'm going to do, the right way to do it doesn't involve shooting people."

"Here I am with my farm, and there you are without any kind of plan at all. Are you sure you don't just want to settle in next door?"

"Something came up to get me to you. I just have to believe that if I keep moving forward, I'll find more pieces to this puzzle."

Onward

While Ben helped clean up from the meal, Fred gave him detailed instructions on how to reach "The Witch"—as the doctor was known—and how to avoid detection. In the name of the "green revolution", all the homesteads and farms in the region had been depopulated, then left to go wild. Fred and others had purposely planted blackberry and other noxious weeds in order to make most of the region impenetrable—then added carefully hidden footpaths to give them a private way to travel throughout the region.

Fred went outside for a moment, and came back with a canvas knapsack which he filled with various kinds of food. The pack had an outer pouch, and Fred put into it a knife, some paracord, and whatever else caught his eye as he dug through his shelves. He finally handed it to Ben, and motioned him to follow.

As they left the farm, Fred became quiet, and they now proceeded through a number of those secret footpaths Ben had been told about. Fred finally came to a thick hedge of holly, and motioned to a dank pool of scummy water which Ben could see through a low opening in the hedge. Ben bet the mud there would grab the shoe right off your foot.

Fred leaned close to Ben, and said quietly, "I'll push across a plank. There's a road right there, so stay down on your stomach until you're sure there's no traffic. Straight across—"

He pointed at a discarded pile of metal scrap along the road on the other side.

"—you can lift that flat yellow plate, and there's just enough space to crawl until you get to our path on that side. Follow it straight east, and you'll soon see the guideposts to take you to our doc."

"Thanks, Fred. For the food, and the guidance. I'll repay you when I can."

Fred shook his head angrily. "Nah, I'm comfortable enough, but I'm getting old and when I die, the farm goes to weeds and they've gotten their way anyway. Whatever it is you'll do, at least it's *something*."

Fred turned to the side of the hedge to drag out a long plank, which he pushed through the hedge opening until it made a bridge across the muddy standing water. Ben gave him one final nod, then scuttled across the board, which was immediately withdrawn. Ben looked back, but couldn't even make out the low opening he'd just used.

He turned to face the road, and got ready to cross. Even the birds seemed to sense his tension and went silent. Hearing nothing, Ben sprinted across the road, lifted the indicated plate, and scrambled through, letting the plate fall back into place behind him. A narrow channel led him a considerable distance with nothing but dirt walls and a wooden cover over his small tunnel. It opened finally out into forest, with a forest path leading in a curve off to the left. He stood up, dusted himself off, and started to follow it.

Doctor

Finding the “Witch Doctor”

Fred had given Ben directions which were so detailed that Ben was sure he'd lose track of his location within the first mile. This is precisely what happened, and he settled into the “dead reckoning” mode of navigation, at each fork in the trail choosing whichever path seemed to head towards where he thought he might find the doctor. After a few dead ends, including a trail which ended at the lip of a cliff, Ben came across path with what looked like a shrunken old raccoon skull nailed to a tree beside it. Beneath it on a weathered board were the words “Witch Doctor”.

He had no use for a witch doctor, but his quest was for a doctor. . . and how many doctors of any description would be in one neighborhood? Whoever it was could direct him onward if needed. He followed the path.

Doctor Ellen

The path towards this “witch doctor” had occult fetishes periodically applied to trees along the way. As he continued, he began to wonder. There was a raccoon tail nailed to a tree, and then a board with a rude symbol for chaos drawn upon it. When he came upon a pentagram made of white stones embedded right into the path's surface, he realized that this was a *show* of paganism, probably to maintain a buffoonish appearance to placate the authorities.

When he reached her cabin, he was certain. It had been built to look precisely like Baba Yaga's hut from the old fairytale books he'd read as a child. No chicken legs on which the hut would walk, but a crooked chimney, with rude walls and a thatch roof.

“Hail, Granny!” he called, remembering his fairy tales.

A woman came out. She was dressed in an outlandish peasant outfit, with a necklace of teeth hanging down the front of her dress. She had tried to maintain the appearance of a crazy old woman, with her hair mussed and a touch of ash on her face. But he could see she was in her 30's, and her eyes were clear and alert.

“Who's calling Ellen, then?” she demanded in a low voice.

“Are you ready to stop hunkering down, and start doing real healing again?”

“I have my herbs, and my spells. Why are you bothering me?”

“Because I know about you. You're Doctor Ellen Sretre. Medical doctor, PhD's in computer science and electrical engineering too. It's a remarkable set of skills, almost like you had some plan in mind. I assume the Fall happened too quickly for you to work anything out?”

She studied him closely. “You're not one of them.”

“You're good at understatements. Farmer Fred told me about you.”

She exhaled. “I'd be betting it all on a stranger who looks OK. Say something to convince me.”

Remembering Fred's confidence in Catholic details, he recited:

Saint Michael, Archangel. Defend us in battle.
Be our protection against the wickedness and snares
of the Devil; may God rebuke him we humbly pray.
...

He recited the rest of the prayer as she listened.

“You called it the ‘The Fall’. That's certainly how it felt to me. The first I knew of how badly I'd timed things was when my bedroom door got kicked in. They kept my office, and locked me up out here. They would've killed me, but I'm a better doctor than most; they keep MD's around to serve them. I get dragged to my old office about once a week, to give medical care to the elite and their families.”

“How much equipment do you have? I think that you need to pull a disappearing act here. Do we need to raid your office? Is that even possible?”

“Let’s talk to my husband.”

The Archer

She went back inside her hut, motioning for him to follow. It looked like a witch’s hut inside, but she ignored all the trappings to bring out a bound bundle of twigs which had been dipped in something red. She slid out four of them, opened the door of her woodstove, which in this warm weather had no fire going. She lit the twigs, set them inside, and closed the door of the stove.

“Let’s go outside and wait. Sometimes I have to send up more than once.”

Back outside, Ben saw that a small column of red smoke had drifted out of the chimney. The doctor watched it appraisingly.

“It can’t be so much that it’s obvious, and it has to disperse quickly so it’s never seen outside of the forest. He’s pretty good at spotting it.”

Presently, a squirrel chattered, and she bent over to pick up a pair of stones, which she clicked twice, a pause, and once more.

A man emerged from behind a stand of blackberry. Ben pegged him as Robin Hood, right down to the bow he held ready, an arrow nocked. The man was staring at Ben, head down, taking in everything except Ben by way of peripheral vision.

“It’s OK, Rob.”

Ben laughed. “Really? Robin Hood?”

The man came closer, lowering his bow as he released the string tension. “I was Robert long before this whole mess. But yeah, there might be some subconscious thing going there. On the other hand, don’t underestimate archery.”

Ben could see the bow was handmade, and the string looked crude as well. But the arrow appeared straight, with a wicked point at one end and three closely matched feather fletchings at the other end. A quiver over his shoulder held many more arrows. He thought about it for a moment. “Gun control.”

“Right. Every conqueror disarms the population. After World War II we didn’t even let the Japanese train with swords. All the big modern mass murders were preceded by disarming the population. The Brits wouldn’t let the Scots own. . . bows.”

Ben immediately saw the point.

“But unlike guns, bows and arrows require what? Just a knife? Both the arrows and the bow are wood, and I’m sure you’ve found which woods work best. I guess you need to hunt a deer or something to get that string material. Birds and their feathers probably aren’t hard to find.”

Rob nodded. “The string is actually twisted plant fiber, but you have the right idea. Anywhere you have plants, you can have archery. What are you going to do? Outlaw trees? Yes, you can’t go up against an armed patrol, but there’s basically no sound when you let an arrow go. No flash, no bang, no smoke. Stay hidden, and loose an arrow when they aren’t looking. One of theirs ends up with an arrow in his throat, and they usually have no idea where it came from. These days, they never come into the woods at night, because all too often a group of us will wait until they’ve bedded down, then drop a couple waves of arrows down into their camp. They can’t see or hear anything, and suddenly they have arrows sticking out of’em!” He laughed at the memory.

Ellen interrupted, “I think it’s time to go underground. Fred sent this here Ben,” she waved at Ben, “and it sounds like it’s time to start using what I’ve been preparing.”

“Really? What’s Mister Ben have in mind?” They both looked at Ben questioningly.

The Plan

“I’ve found a homestead site in these woods. Storage buildings, open land, and a water source. The approaches are all overgrown, so there’s lots of warning if anybody visits. And it looks like a restricted site; certainly all the usual local officials steer clear.”

Rob wrinkled his nose. “That sounds like that old military location. Those places are *always* polluted.”

“Usually. I’m pretty sure they kept this one for their own use. Who wants to poison themselves and their own families? You’re welcome to test the soil for yourself.”

Ellen broke in, “Ok, so we have a new place to play house. Why should I leave here?”

“It can house—and feed—two or three dozen people.”

“Friends?”

“Children.”

The Move

Thus started a rush of moving Ellen and Rob out to the new location Ben had found. Besides Ellen’s home, Rob was using a large, concrete outbuilding lost in a thicket of blackberry. Over time, he and Ellen had assembled quite an inventory of medical equipment and supplies, as well as a number of computers and other supplies for making and customizing electronic devices. It was far too much to move in its entirety, but Ellen had a clear idea of which pieces would be needed first. Ellen’s current hut was left untouched; she lived there, and nobody official who visited would receive any impression that a new plan was afoot.

At the end of the third week, they were ready. Ellen thought she would simply walk over to the new site, but Rob had her go through an impressive routine of being carried, interspersed with walking in bagged feet. He took bits of her clothing and hiked off in other directions, dragging them. It took time and effort, but soon they were all comfortably moved in at the new camp.

The new camp was a cleared area within the fenced compound, situated with vast patches of bramble blocking its view from anywhere outside the fence, and from most positions within the fence as well. They repaired the fence where it had been broken, and then Rob walked the entire perimeter, finally spotting a fence section which had been cleverly designed to be removed in an emergency while appearing to be just another stretch of security wire. It took most of the afternoon to get it to open, Rob finally resorting to a cutting torch. Just outside this part of the fence, bramble grew, entwined in the trees to create an impenetrable hedge. Over the following week they carefully shifted branches and cut a hidden path so they could come and go while leaving the obvious entrance unused. The concrete structures within the fence were still securely locked, and their experience with the fence told them it would take at least as much effort to open them up. But Rob had brought along a number of camp tents, including a couple of the very large sort which turned into almost a building.

With cots, tables, stools, plus all the other camping supplies Rob had apparently been gathering since even before the Fall, they were quite comfortable. Rob and Ellen took one of the smaller tents, and Ben one of the smallest ones. One large tent was planned for a communal space—especially in bad weather. The other was set up with a couple rows of cots.

“For the children,” Ellen declared. Ben nodded.

Rob took as one of his duties the daily scouting into the outer woods and the world beyond. A few days after getting the camp in order he went out, and came back a day later, grinning. “They’re swarming all over Ellen’s hut. Four search parties are out in the woods, and I didn’t stick ’em with arrows even though it was tempting. They’ll bring the dogs tomorrow.”

Indeed, the next day they heard baying hounds in the distance. But nothing drew near, and Rob came back the day after that to say that the search appeared over.

“They’ll have left some monitoring and alarms set up at her hut, for sure. I’m a little sorry that eventually somebody’s going to go squat there, and all those thugs are going to rush over and try and make’em tell where we are.”

How to Save a Child

Ben began spending time with Dr. Ellen. He now knew that his task was to save children, and soon realized how providential it had been to have her available.

“Ben, you’re thinking about these rescues as mostly physical. That’s actually the easy part, after we’ve freed them from all their mental monitoring and control.”

“I noticed how they just stood stiffly, and moved like robots. What *is* that?”

Ellen shook her head sadly, “Brain implants. They all carry a small device which has a data link to the implant, and it then connects to the cell network. Central systems monitor them, and send back controls. What they do, see, and hear. Supposedly they’ll soon try to control thought itself. The good news is that if can spoof their monitoring, there’s almost no physical security left.”

Ben and Ellen started to work on the device she had in mind. Although he had some background in software, Ellen was far out of his league. So he took care of the menial details, and Ellen crafted the machine. It was obvious she’d been thinking about something like this for a long while, because the design came together with little thought or hesitation on her part. It was a custom radio and antenna, a bunch of computing power, and a skull cap with some bulky capacitors mounted.

Ben knew that capacitors could hold a charge, rather like a battery. The bigger the capacity, the bigger the charge it could hold. The ones she was using were large—very large. He did the math in his head and came up with an alarmingly large amount of power to be held in the ones on this cap.

“Um, Doc, we need to *save* them, not fry their brains?”

She shook her head irritably. “It’s not going to discharge all at once. But we need to disable the stuff embedded in their head. It has to be all in one continuous chain of targeted burnout of the components. All in a fixed order, and with almost no delay. Otherwise it ‘phones home’, and then we have goons to deal with. No time to recharge, so the pack has to hold enough power for the whole operation.”

She paused, then asked, “If this were a military operation, what would you do first?”

“Reconnaissance.”

“Off you go. The rest of the design is all on me.”

School

The Building

The next morning, Ben walked back to town, starting with their hidden paths, and ending on the path cleared by the thugs in their cars. The blackberry was already growing back, but it was still walkable.

As he continued into the town, he could see rotting houses set back from the road, mostly abandoned with wood nailed over the doors and windows. One which looked like the others—doors and windows sealed—had a wisp of smoke coming out of the chimney. He wondered how many of these shells had people inside, waiting for... what?

He shook off the thought, and started towards the school Ellen had told him about. He remembered his own school experiences from when... the thought failed him. “Wife” and “family” were becoming elusive the longer he walked this land. He hoped there was a point where they came back, too.

His memory of a school was children, a playground, and a couple single-level buildings, with doors dotted along the exterior, one classroom per door. What he approached was six storeys, with blank tan concrete

walls lacking any breaks. He reached the cyclone fence surrounding the property, its mesh weave topped by loops of barbed wire. At random, he decided to follow it to the left to try and reach the main entrance.

Presently he found the entrance, unlike any school building's entrance in his memory. It was now a rectangle frame of stainless steel, two enormous swinging doors ajar just enough to let a human step between them. Large teardrop bollards were dotted in a protective half-circle around the entrance, as if to protect it from a ramming attack by a semi truck. There was nobody guarding that entrance.

But there *were* a pair of guards at the opening in the outer cyclone fence he'd have to pass to even reach the building. The black-uniformed officer in the car had been evil, but this pair had an almost palpable aura of hate and fear and torture. He stepped between them as he strode towards the building entrance, and they didn't even blink. Without even a flicker of humanity left, there was simply no way for them to detect him.

The Principal

Passing through the front doors and entering the building, he found himself in an entry with an attendance office on his right. A woman, blank faced, busied herself with a cell phone held down in her lap. Ben assumed his shadow as he came through the door from the outside would have caught her attention, but she continued with her phone until he came right up to her kiosk window and knocked on the glass.

Her head came up, eyes unfocused, and she waited.

"Hello."

She gave no sign that she had heard.

"Can I speak with the principal?"

He thought she still hadn't heard, but a door a little way down the hall buzzed. He hesitated, but she said nothing. The buzzing continued.

"Thank you."

He stepped to the door, the buzzer stopping as soon as he pulled it open. He looked back, but the woman's head was already down at her phone. He stepped through.

This was a waiting room, but the desk at the front of the room was obviously disused. As he looked about, the door at the far end of the room opened, and a man peered out, saw Ben, and gestured him to follow. The door had a sign with "Principal" over it, so he stepped through.

The man went back around his desk in this room, and sat. Ben sat at the chair in front of the desk as the man cleared his throat.

"How can I help you, Mister..."

"Ben. Just Ben. Children are very important to me, and nobody could tell me about their care and education. This facility is very impressive, but I don't see any actual children here?"

The principal's face relaxed into a pleased smile. "Oh, yes, I can't tell you how important Public Education is to our society. We've had to demolish and rebuild four times as the standards were raised again and again. The current building is secure against all currently identified classes of threats."

"But the children. Where are the children?"

The principal shrugged. "We are ready for any expected level of enrollment."

"And that enrollment is currently *zero*?"

The principal stood. "Really, Mister... Ben. We welcome *responsible* community involvement, but have firm policies against abusiveness."

The door swung open, kicked from the outside. The two security guards from the gate stepped into the room, automatic rifles held low and ready as their heads swept back and forth, searching for the threat. Apparently

somebody had tripped an alarm, probably that receptionist. Ben stepped between the guards once again, as invisible as ever, and walked back out the way he'd come in.

He could still hear the principal chastising them as he stepped through the gate and started down the street.

The School Bus

Ben was so absorbed with the spectacle of the “school” that he didn’t register the approaching groan of an engine until it was almost upon him. A *school bus*! He gasped, realizing that while that building had zero students, there must be an answer for whatever number of children were left in this area. The bus wheezed by, heading for a marked zone right outside the wire fence near the entry to the school.

Ben turned and followed, stopping as far back as he could while still being able to see the children delivered by the bus. The driver pulled the bus up alongside the curb, and the engine idled as the front doors telescoped open. There was a pause, and then Ben could see the driver turning to face the back and start shouting. He shouted some more, then reached behind to touch the steering wheel, and honked the horn.

Finally Ben could see some stirring motion in the back of the bus. A little girl stepped down, and started along the sidewalk in the other direction. Two boys came down, one after the other, and followed her. There was no talking, no hurrying. After a long pause, a girl with a shaved head stepped down, and started walking towards Ben.

As she got closer, he could see that she was perhaps 14 years old. Her head was shaved, and her eyes stared straight ahead as she neared Ben. Her clothes, which he had taken to be colorful, were in fact some cheap type of canvas, with a garish dye achieved by dipping bulk cloth into a vat of chemicals. As she got closer, he could see that the clothes were assembled with staples, not stitches.

Ben took the girl’s composure and straight-ahead eyes as the usual adaptation of a young woman when passing a strange man. But as she reached him, he was suddenly certain that she couldn’t see him at all. He was puzzled; there was no sign of evil here. It was as if she couldn’t see *anything*.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She stopped, turning towards him. Her face twitched, her head shook side to side slightly, and then her eyes finally came alive to focus upon him.

“What.”

“You acted as if you couldn’t even see me?”

“My nav is fine, I wasn’t going to walk into you.”

“But what were you looking at instead?”

“Look, old person. I’m wired for full sensory immersion. I have things to do, and you are NOT on the list. Hurry up and die.”

With that, her eyes went back to being blank, she turned, and walked off.

“Nice to meet you, too,” he muttered.

The Last Rider

He was about to head back out of town, but saw that the principal, flanked by the two guards, had come out of the building and was walking towards the fence. At first Ben assumed they were coming after him, but the guards resumed their post at the gateway in the fence, and the principal continued along to climb up into the bus. Presently he came back out, nudging along a small boy—Ben guessed about seven years old.

The principal continued with the boy, nudging and urging him along. The boy walked with the stiff, poorly coordinated motions of somebody with nerve damage, and Ben was surprised that the principal himself would take time to help such a child. He followed the pair, watching the guards warily. He was as invisible as ever.

At first Ben remained cautious, making sure there was somewhere to duck into hiding if the principal looked around. But the man was entirely focused on moving this small child along. His body language showed eagerness, even anticipation. Ben's unease grew, but he simply did not know enough to justify any sort of action.

The pair worked their way slowly along, block after block. Ben closed up his distance, now getting close enough to hear the principal's voice.

"Ok, Adam, we're almost there. No, no, there you go. Don't slow down." The litany went on and on.

They reached a cube-shaped building, at least three storeys tall. A faint rumbling could be felt in the concrete of the sidewalk in front of it, and the principal pushed at a square pad next to the rectangular opening centered in its front face, causing the steel rectangle to slide aside. The pair went in, the door closing behind them.

Ben quickly surveyed the other three sides of the building, which were all blank. He came back to the front just in time to see the principal emerge from the same door, then walk briskly back towards the school. The small child—Adam, apparently—was still inside.

With the principal gone, Ben walked right up to the front door of this building. Over the door a brass plaque labeled this place "Facility of Peace".

"Oh, no."

Ben pushed the plate, and the door slide aside for him. Inside was a hallway leading to a crude inner door. No sign of Adam. Should he venture further in? The sound of an approaching vehicle decided him, and he quickly darted out and back alongside the facility.

Saving Sue

Urgency

Ben made his way back, neither seeing nor hearing anyone else, and—he hoped—being seen by nobody. Finally reaching their camp, he was glad to see both Rob and Ellen were still there, Rob sitting in a chair reading a book, Ellen inside their "work tent" fiddling with some sort of electronics. Rob caught the expression on Ben's face and called Ellen to come out. Ben sat at a picnic table they'd set up nearby, and Rob and Ellen joined him, watching expectantly.

"There's a school. It's enormous, and guarded, but I don't think there are any children in it. But as I was leaving a school bus arrived, and. . ."

Ben related what he'd seen. Rob's face became sad, and Ellen bowed her head, swearing softly. She took a deep breath, then raised her head to look at Ben.

"I've known that children were leaving our system. But we were told that it was just a part of how they centralized child care and education now. Seeing children go into that building and not come out is bad. Very, very bad."

"But it was so quick and quiet?"

Her face was terrible to see.

"Motor override was always a capability of their implant controller. It was a 'safety feature'. I hated and feared the idea from the first, and it sounds like they've lived up to my worst fears."

"I was hoping you and Rob would tell me it wasn't what I thought it was. We need to move quickly."

Ellen got up and went back into the tent.

"On it."

Watchful Waiting

Ben had probably watched a child guided to their doom in that “Facility of Peace”, in all likelihood an incineration facility. He mourned the lost soul, and his pain made him very glad that he’d gotten Ellen involved. She worked furiously for three days, only stopping when she passed out and Rob forced her to rest. Two days after her rest, she came out of the work tent.

“I think I have it.”

Her original device was still recognizable, but Ben saw that a great deal of their work had been radically changed. Ellen watched him studying it.

“It was much harder than we appreciated. I had to start over from scratch a couple times. But I think this will work.”

Ben stayed up that night, looking into their small, carefully shielded camp fire. They were fully established in the camp, had the technology—still unproven—to liberate a child from their electronic harness. For the first time since his life changed at that church, he felt confidence. He was where he needed to be, about to do something Good. “Good” with a capital “G”. He looked out into the darkness in the direction of the town.

“See you tomorrow.”

Save the Children

So now, he and Ellen made their way back into town, and carefully scouted for a place where they could intercept children before they met their doom in that horrible building. Of course, he’d seen one child—ever—go in there. Was it one a day? Week? Month? They had so little information, yet the stakes were so high.

The need for secrecy made this all intensely tedious. Ben and Ellen had to sneak out to wait near the “Facility of Peace” building. It became clear that it was automated, for over the next several days they saw only the occasional maintenance technician who’d come by for an hour or two.

Ben had no intention of going into the beige, windowless cube. There wasn’t much near the facility, but by carefully moving around some brush and building it up against a shrub, they ended up with a serviceable “hunting blind” across the street from the building. From there, they waited and watched, day after day.

The plan was to intercept the child out front, and keep them well clear of the incinerator. Would the principal always escort them? They would have to find out. He didn’t think attacking the principal was a great plan, but Ellen, when she heard his concern, simply replied, “leave it to me.”

If they could intercept a child and disable their electronics, nobody would ever know how close the child came. The sensors would show the child arrived at the building, the door opened, and then they weren’t seen again. It was a good plan, but—like all plans—it fell apart as soon as it encountered reality.

It happened on the third day, in the late morning. A small figure came around the corner of the facility, apparently following a path hidden from their view by the bulk of the building. Whoever they were, they were alone—no principal, good. The figure was in front of the doors before they had even started to stand, and slipped through the crack as the sliding door opened.

“Come on!” Ben was running before he even thought about it. He reached the door, which hadn’t even yet fully opened, and darted inside with reckless speed. It was a hallway, and now that he was inside, he could see it was decorated with what some industrial psychologist had doubtless deemed “soothing” abstract art. The hallway was short, and he caught up to the person who’d entered. A girl.

She was in front of the inner door, a part of some piece of large industrial machinery which made up the whole center of the building. There was a rushing sound coming from past the door, and waves of heat came off of it. The door was cast iron, and had a button beside it similar to the one out front. It was the girl he’d encountered from the school bus; she stood in front of the inner door, panting.

He walked up and touched her gently on the shoulder. “Hello again.”

She turned, her facing spasming between blankness and anguish.

“I’m Sue. Sue!”

“Calm down, Sue. I’m here.”

“How are you here? Who are you?”

“I’m here because of... call it fate. I’m Ben. Just ‘Ben.’”

“I hate my life. It’s time to go, and my neural unit can shut off my mind and walk my body into this unit. Dying is *right*. But...”

She was hyperventilating, and Ben made calming motions with his hands. “Try and pause a bit when you breath in, and then again when you exhale; it’ll slow your breathing down. And let’s step away from this *thing*, shall we?” He led her a ways back. The air was cooler here, and the oppressive rushing sound wasn’t as loud.

“Sue. If your life isn’t good, you change it. You don’t end it.”

“I told you that you should die. Why are you being nice to me?”

Ben laughed. “I’d tell you a funny story about my death, but the ending isn’t written yet. I’m being nice to you because you are impossibly precious in a way you can only learn with time.”

“I don’t *feel* precious.”

“A failure of your environment. What do your parents think of all this?”

She looked confused. “My birthing contributors? What do they have to do with anything? I know in some backwards countries they sometimes meet their progeny?”

Ben sighed. “Do you want to live?”

Her face became still. “Yes.”

“Let’s go get some help.”

“I’m here.”

Ellen had quietly followed Ben into the hall, and now brushed past him to kneel before Sue, holding up a small plastic block which had wires trailing to a backpack she was wearing.

“Hi, Sue. I’m Doctor Ellen. You called it your ‘neural implant’, right? I need to disable it, but also fool the people who will check its sensors. I’m going to do a small scan with this sensor pod. You won’t feel anything at all.”

She held it for Sue’s brief inspection, then ran it above and alongside Sue’s head, maintaining a small distance from actual contact. In her other hand was a very old-fashioned compute device—they were called PDA’s—and watched its screen as she scanned Sue. She pursed her lips, and finally nodded, taking off her backpack to pull out another small device. It was dark plastic, about the size of a pack of playing cards.

“Her unit has a temperature sensor, so I’ll need to clone her neural unit onto this, and let it take over while her implanted one goes inactive.”

Ben wrinkled his nose. “Temperature sensor?”

“Well yes. This is, essentially, a crematorium. They’re going to make sure she burned up.”

Ben looked at the inner door, thought about the rushing sound and the heat. Then he looked back at Ellen.

“If I think about that too much, I’m going to get very angry.”

“Think later, we have a child to save. When I hand you this device, take it over, open that door, and put it inside. Or throw it into the flames, if that’s how it works. It needs to burn up as if she walked in there.”

Doctor Ellen tapped at her PDA a bit, then gave the screen a sharp, final tap. Sue sighed, then crumpled to the floor. Ellen had obviously anticipated this, as she caught Sue's small body, then handed the small, dark device to Ben.

"It's taken over, so the system thinks it *is* her. Do it!"

He took it, walked quickly to the door and pushed the plate beside it. The darkened, rough cast iron door opened, and Ben could see that there were flame jets in a circle, all pointing inward to the center of the small room. They had cut back to just pilot flames as the door opened, so one would walk in there to the center, and then this door would close, the jets would resume, and—" Ben damped down a feeling of rage. This was beyond his ability to mete out justice, but he could feel Heaven's judgement building up like a thunderstorm.

He didn't want to enter the room, so he skidded the device along the floor; it came to a rest roughly in the center. The door started to close, and Ben backed away. As soon as the door was fully closed, he heard the rush of flame resume. He hoped the device had fooled them.

Back from the Ledge

With relief, they left the building and worked their way along side streets, heading towards the edge of town. Whenever they heard a vehicle coming, they'd duck out of view until it had passed. There was nobody else on foot.

They finally reached the boundary of the town, and crossed the last road to reach the first bits of forest. They were a few miles from camp, and Ben hoped to reach it before sundown. But Sue, tall and painfully skinny, had almost no muscle tone, and she was exhausted within the first quarter mile. When she moved, it was with exhausted, sloppy, noisy steps. Feeling like they could be discovered at any moment, Ben would have them stop while he ranged out ahead to try and spot anybody. Between hiding and stopping for Sue to rest, it was almost dawn before they finally reached their camp.

Ben saw Sue was at the end of her strength, and let Ellen settle her down on a cot with a blanket tucked around her tiny body. She finished by holding her mouth near Sue's ear.

"We're safe enough for now. Rest, dear child."

Sue nodded, too tired to even say a word. She curled up and was asleep immediately.

Ellen shooed Ben out, and set up blankets so she could sit beside Sue all night. Ben fell asleep, expecting to have Sue waking with nightmares off and on during the night. He was going to take over from Ellen when she needed a break, but instead he awoke with the sun streaming in. He got up and found Ellen with Sue at the outdoor picnic table, Ellen with her mug of coffee, and Sue with a teacup.

"Ben! Sue and I have been talking about her diet. It sounds like they fed them mostly a bulk paste, and then had their injection system apply enough nutrients to keep her alive. We'll get her stomach back in shape, starting slowly. This morning it's peppermint tea."

Sue was watching them, her eyes seeming especially large with the dark bags under them. She took a sip, still watching, as if she expected him to stop her.

"Ellen, I'm glad you brought us such a large stock of coffee—I was resigned to pine needle tea! And Sue, now that you've had a little rest, it's good to see you starting your first day of freedom."

"Ben, let's keep the philosophy for later. In a bit I think I'll try her on a little apple sauce and maybe a few raisins."

Ben left them, sure that Doctor Ellen would be building a detailed knowledge of how to help children move into the world of real food. He got his cup of coffee, and went across the camp to sit well out of earshot of Ellen and Sue. Presently, he saw Rob step quietly out of the forest and come over to sit beside Ben.

"It worked?"

Ben studied the Doctor and her patient. "Looks like. We might find that none of these children can digest normal food until we've acclimated them."

Rob snorted. “You have no idea what’s coming.”

“Meaning?”

“You think you’re going to rescue kids onesie-twosie at the incineration place. But *she* knows where there are lots of kids. You and I are going to be doing some jailbreaks in the near future.”

“Lots of kids. Like. . . how many?”

Rob chuckled, put his cup down, got up, patted Ben on the shoulder, then disappeared back out into the forest.

Debrief

Ben let Ellen take the lead with Sue, and although there were a couple upset stomachs, by the third day Sue was joining them at meals, though with no meat and most entrees cut into small bits. Sue insisted that Ellen bed down beside her each night, but was sleeping soundly. On the fourth day, Ben felt the pressure of time and decided to get Ellen’s opinion.

“We ran the rescue for Sue with almost no information. How hard would it be on her for me to ask her some questions and fill out details on how the other side operates?”

She pondered. “She’s not yet on ‘our side’ as such. You’ve seen that she’s anchored on me, which is not really what I’d want as a physician. It’s just the best of the available options. She’s going to consider you some sort of unpleasant price to pay. If you make it too hard on her, you might lose her for good. Worth it?”

“You tell me. She’s one child; there’s apparently a LOT more to save?”

Ellen glowered. “Rob’s been talking to you. Yes, he’s right. We should push the pace, because there’s many more lives at risk.”

Ellen went over, and brought Sue to sit beside Ben.

“Sue, I’m going to be sitting over there. When you’ve talked with Ben enough, you wave to me, and I’ll come get you.” She stared hard at her. “Don’t be shy. When you want to stop, wave right then and there.” Ellen walked away across the camp and sat, then crossed her legs and watched them steadily.

Sue turned to Ben, “She thinks I’m all broken and confused. Yes, I am. But all the life is running out for all the children, and you are the only hope I’ve ever seen. Just let me tell you the things which bother me the most, and later on you can ask all your questions.”

“I’ve been pregnant. I mean, you pretty much *have* to. But only for six months,” her voice caught, “and then, you know, you’re not pregnant or anything.”

Ben felt the blood drain from his face. “How many times?”

“Four.” There were tears in her eyes. “It makes important things they need for the medical people.”

Ben looked at her closely. “There’s more.”

Sue was shivering. “Well, you have to give permission, but—you know—it isn’t OK to be intolerant. When you stop being pregnant, they take you to a special place. You lay inside a diagram on the floor, and all these creepy people in hoods are there.”

Ben’s head was light. “A Satanist presided at your abortion.”

Sue stood up. “Ok, I’m done.” She then fainted, crumpling in place like a bag of laundry. Ben caught her before she could fall, even as Ellen sprinted across, fury on her face.

“Oh, you just HAD to go push her!”

Ben gently handed her to Ellen. “No, she had a story bottled up. It poured out, and then she fainted. I didn’t ask her even one question. It was. . . horrible. I’ll tell you later.”

Ready for More

It was late at night when Doctor Ellen came to get Ben, her face stony.

“She wants to talk with you.”

Ben looked at her, wondering if there was anything reassuring he could say. After a pause, he simply motioned for her to lead him to her.

Sue was sitting up in her bed, wrapped in blankets. He sat down in a chair beside her bed.

“I’m not a bad person.”

“Indeed, you are not.”

“But I did bad things.”

“Bad things were done *to* you.”

“I could have said ‘no.’”

“We’ll talk about coercion some time. But not tonight.”

“Do you still want me around?”

“I can’t tell you how very much the answer is ‘yes’. But—yes, oh yes.”

Sue seemed satisfied. She wriggled a little deeper into the blankets, then looked straight ahead.

“There’s more of us to save.”

“I’ll save as many as I possibly can.”

“I can help you, can’t I? I can tell you lots about how they do things.”

“That would be extremely helpful. It doesn’t have to be tonight, though.”

“If I tell you tonight, you can start saving tomorrow. If I tell you tomorrow, it’ll be the next day?”

“When you put it that way—yes.”

“I remember how they get kids started in school. . . .”

Ben looked around; Ellen had moved away, and he now motioned her over.

“The first part is in a medical clinic. The stuff they plant in your head is a part of getting ready for schooling. . . .”

Sue talked for an hour and more; Ellen had quietly taken out a writing pad and made many pages of notes. By the end of it, Ben realized how lucky they had been to save even one child. And, indeed, Sue was probably an exceptionally intelligent participant in their system, and thus had observed and remembered a great deal of detail. She finally trailed off, once again exhausted.

“I can tell you more when I’m less tired.”

“You are brave and strong, Sue. Thank you, you’ve gifted us a treasure of how to save children from them. I’ll let you settle down with Ellen now.”

“Um, Ben? Could you sit beside me a while longer?”

Ben, who’d been rising from the chair, gave a surprised smile and settled back into the chair.

“Of course, Sue.”

Sue drifted off, and Ben sat beside her, weaving thread after thread of prayer intention as he kept his vigil.

Kit

Contact

Saving Sue had been a cause for celebration, and now she had given them a number of details on how children were managed. It became clear that the strategy of waiting at the incineration site had worked purely by luck. Most often, the child was accompanied on what was known as their “walk of beauty”. For the unaccompanied ones, the time window from seeing a child to when they were lost in the bowels of that awful building was too small.

Sue was still shaky, and Ben almost decided to leave the doctor back to care for her. But Ellen was the only one who could defeat the implanted electronics, so in the end they left Sue in Rob’s care. Rob made it clear he would need to be heading out soon, but he’d hold off until this one day was finished.

Thus, the following day Ben went out with Doctor Ellen, but this time back to a point near the school where they could watch the school bus again. This way they could look for rescue chances among all the children getting off the bus.

Ben had tried to get information from Sue about other children, and she’d done her best. The trauma of nearly dying, and then having her electronics deactivated, and being detached from her old life—she had done very well indeed in what she’d given them. One clue she’d provided was that “poor Kit” didn’t even want to die, but was going to be forced anyway. That memory rattled her, and Ben had changed the subject. But she’d given a brief description, and Ben felt an urgency to try and spot this child—and then save her.

They watched the bus arrive, and Ben wondered if he could pick out the child who wanted to live despite the directives of the electronics wired into her head. Then he laughed, causing Ellen to look at him sharply. The Holy Spirit was with him, and he realized that such a dark situation would leave an unmistakable stamp. He should as soon wonder if God could tell good from bad. He would know her when he saw her.

Children came off the bus, some with a bit of lightheadedness, followed by others who moved jerkily, obviously letting their electronics move their arms and legs as they watched something else entirely inside their skulls. And then Ben saw the one Sue had mentioned; she was much shorter than anyone else, and stepped off the bus with her head bowed down, and Ben could almost hear the electronic dictate: “Die, Die, Die,” and the little girl’s stubborn, desperate: “No, No, No.” Her legs carried her along, trying to take her to the Death Building, then the girl forcing them to steer away. Ben and Ellen hung back until the bus drove away, not wanting any witnesses.

Mother Mary let me reach this child. Ben and Ellen caught up to her—it *must* be Kit, he thought. And Ben reached forward and tapped her on the shoulder. She jerked to a halt, and Ben almost bumped into her.

“Kit?”

She turned. The girl’s eyes were haggard, shadowed with the bags of a much older woman. She was less than five feet tall, skinny, with short dark hair. Her head was still bowed, her eyes looking at them through straight bangs. She was panting, as if from a tremendous exertion. Her face held resignation, which shifted to puzzlement as she studied Ben and Ellen.

“What now?” Her voice was low.

Ellen knelt down so that her face was level with Kit’s.

“Kit, do you want that machine out of your head?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m a doctor. I can help—”

Kit shrank away, “Doctors don’t help. They just *do* things.”

Ellen looked at her steadily. “In the old days, that wasn’t true. They used to heal. I’m an old doctor, not a new one.”

“The voice in my head started telling me to die. It’s never quiet any more. Can you make it quiet? It even tries to use my arms and legs.”

“Yes. But—here’s the hard part—you need to come away with us. Otherwise they’ll notice it’s broken, and then they’ll make it even worse.”

Kit shrugged. “If this is a trick, I just don’t care. I’m *tired*.”

Ben knelt beside Ellen. “We’re going to that building with the smokestack.” Kit stiffened. “No, we’re only going in there to trick the electronics in your head. The people who monitor the electronics in you will see them turn off. They’ll think they turned off because you, um, went in there. So we go near there, but instead our doctor here will quiet your head, and then we sneak away.”

Kit nodded. The three of them proceeded down the street, Ben still sensing the metallic “Die, Die, Die” voice in poor Kit’s head.

Reconnoiter

They reached the building, and Ben could see Kit beginning to panic. He touched her shoulder gently.

“All three of us are going in, together. Doctor Ellen here will turn off your electronics, and I’ll go forward and cycle the furnace doors. You don’t need to get anywhere near them.” Kit nodded, and the three went inside.

Ellen sat Kit down right inside the doors, and Ben went all the way down the corridor, then pressed the button to cycle the incinerator doors open. Beyond saving Kit, he had a further idea, and wanted to examine their machinery. He saw the same circle of burners, idled and ready. He wanted to know if there was any way to destroy this building.

There were no exposed pipes, nor any sign of control electronics. Everything was sealed and well-protected by being built right into the metal walls. And yet, he had seen what was certainly maintenance people coming in here. There must be access panels *somewhere*; all these moving parts would require it.

The door in front of him slid back shut, and he heard a rushing sound of flames resuming. He stepped back, studying the walls, then ceiling. The access had to be right near the mechanism itself, but nothing suggested an access panel or door. And then he looked down at his feet. The smooth floor had a faint repeating pattern of diamond shapes, each four inches tall and two inches across. He noticed that one right near his feet was brighter than the others, as if it was rubbed more often.

He knelt down, and thought he could see a faint line along the outline of the diamond. He brought out his utility knife and folded out the screwdriver. Pushing down on the diamond with its tip, he found no give at all. But when he pushed quite a bit harder, it slid downward as if held by a very stiff spring.

But nothing else happened. It was painfully hard to keep enough pressure on his tool while trying to study the exposed diamond-shaped recess. He finally had to let up the pressure and the diamond popped back up into place. If it was a high tech mechanism, he was just going to have to let the idea go. But if it was the simple, brutal mechanism that he imagined—he took some measurements, then went back to the Doctor and Kit.

Getting Away

The Doctor was ready, and tapped a button on her device when she saw Ben was back and also ready. The whole process had apparently benefited from her experience with Sue, and she shortly handed him the device, which he took back to the incinerator and slid in. He hurried back.

“Time to go!”

They stepped out the door, and Ben listened. It was entirely quiet. Ben motioned them to start, but Kitt hesitated.

“I know a boy you should help.”

Ben stepped back to crouch down and look her in the eye, “Yes, and we will want to hear about it. But first we get you to safety.”

Her hesitation left her, and they moved quickly out away through the buildings and into the forest. Kit was shorter than Sue, but in much better physical condition. *Cumulative poisoning from their diet?* he wondered, even as they moved deeper into the forest.

Kit had apparently never been in a forest before, but she picked up the trick of placing her feet carefully, and soon was at least as quiet as the adults. Ben still ranged out ahead of them, always looking for any sign of trouble, but if their rescue of Sue had been detected in some way, they weren’t looking in the forest yet. They made good time and soon arrived at the camp.

Girls in Camp

Sue was up and moving about the camp when they returned, and her face lit up as she rushed over to them, only to stop in sudden shyness.

“Hi, Kit.”

Kit had no such compunction, and stepped forward to hug Sue.

“Sue. Is all this real?”

“Yes! And the food is *so* different, but I think I’m starting to like it better. . . ”

The girls wandered away, sharing stories and their wonderment at having left their previous lives.

Ben and Ellen walked over to Rob, who was sitting and doing some sort of maintenance with a knife on one of his arrows. He looked up and grunted.

“She ate a little, took another nap, and then started wandering around the camp asking me to describe every single thing her eyes lighted upon. She was getting sleepy again when you came thundering through the forest.”

Ellen rolled her eyes, turning to Ben. “Even the moss in the forest doesn’t grow quietly enough for him.”

Ben’s eyes were somber, still following the two girls, “We need to save as many as possible, as quickly as possible. At some point they’re going to know something’s up, and whatever kids they have left will be beyond our reach.”

Learning More About the Enemy

Presently Kit came back over to them, Sue heading back to her cot to rest.

“I know somebody you need to save.”

Ben motioned for her to sit with them.

“How do we find him? Does he take the bus like you?”

“Not our bus, the other one. They have to move him around. But he’s still worth saving!”

“I believe you. What do you mean, the ‘other’ bus?”

They went back and forth, the details slowly clarifying. There was a second bus, on its own schedule. It stopped at the school, but at different times. And somehow there was one child on it who had caught Kit’s attention.

“But what is it about him that caught your attention?”

Kit stamped her foot in impatience. “They’re mean to him, and they’re going to take him to that building someday. He should be with us.”

Ben slowly nodded. “Ok, then.”

Terry

The Morning Bus

Ellen and Ben moved through the forest, the faintest sign of the approaching dawn providing just enough light to follow the path. Ben realized Rob must be sweeping the path and carefully arranging foliage so their frequent usage of it wasn't too clear to any searchers. As he walked, he pondered the upcoming rescue. From talking to Kit, their best guess was this 'other' bus would likely show up early in the morning.

They reached the edge of the town, and shied back as one of the police cars growled by. Ben might be invisible to its driver, but Ellen would certainly not be. He now knew how much coincidence it had been to encounter one on that first day when he'd headed out from the church. Kit told them that things like cars and other machines broke down, and fewer and fewer people knew how to fix them. There was always a shortage of parts.

It was also why that enormous school building wasn't used. Its lights, and wiring, and ventilation and heating and cooling and security had failed at various times, and eventually they gave up trying to keep it in good repair. Now an older school building, many miles away, was used instead. It was built using ancient technology, and apparently wasn't as prone to breakdowns.

They reached the school building with the sun just peeking over the horizon. The gate around the school was closed and locked, with no sign of the daytime guards. Ben had just started wondering how long they would be waiting when he heard a bus approaching.

The unloading process was very different from the one they'd seen during the day. Two workers were apparently assigned to the bus in addition to the driver, and they began unloading the bus. At first, Ben feared it was just bodies, but presently he saw movement and realized why they ran this separate bus, and why it had workers. These were the children who could not move for themselves.

The pair of workers would carry a child out of the bus, one holding the head, the other the feet. They laid them out in a row on the sidewalk, and stopped to rest and wait after about a dozen had been handled in this fashion. As their breathing from the exertion slowed, they kept glancing up the road expectantly. Presently a whirring sound could be heard.

An electric cart with a large, flat bed drove into view. It pulled up, the driver of the cart not even looking towards the other workers, nor towards the row of children on the sidewalk. The two workers, somewhat rested, loaded the children on the back of the cart, which whirred away without comment as soon as they were done. The bus was still there, idling, and Ben wasn't surprised to see the two workers go back inside, and presently a figure emerged, held on each side by the workers.

It was a young man, late teens, skinny with a scraggly beard and short-cropped, unruly hair. Once they got him down the bus steps and onto the sidewalk, they turned him to face down the sidewalk. Then one of the workers gave the young man a light push, which started him walking forward. After five or six steps, he slowed, then stopped. Then the other worker gave him a similar push, which got him walking again. The trio proceeded down the sidewalk in this fashion.

At first Ben was surprised by the careful gentleness of the pushes they were giving the young man. But then he realized that if they pushed too hard and knocked him over, the workers would have to go to the trouble of picking him back up. This had to be 'Terry' who Kit had urged them to rescue. For a moment Ben shrank from the difficulties involved in doing this rescue. Then he shook his head like a dog shaking off water. This was no time to skulk away just because the task was hard.

"That's Terry, no doubt," Ellen broke in on his thoughts.

"Yes. It's going to be a job and a half getting him through the woods."

Ellen shrugged carelessly. "The sooner we start, the sooner the job'll be done."

They started in pursuit of the trio as the bus, now empty, roared off.

Taking Terry

As they followed Terry and his handlers, Ellen reached into her bag and drew out two gun-like objects, offering one to Ben.

“You pop one, I’ll pop the other.”

Ben looked at the proffered weapon, but made no move to accept it.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, ‘I can’t’? This is no time to get all picky about the job. Besides, it’s not a gun—it shoots tranquilizer darts.”

Ben shook his head. “I can’t explain it. I know that in my past, I owned guns and knew how to use them. I’m not forbidding you or anything, but for me? I just know somehow that violence is not something I can choose any more.”

Ellen put them away with a glare, then her face softened a bit.

“You *are* a bit of an enigma, aren’t you?”

They followed with no further words, and presently they saw Terry being urged up the steps of a weathered old house. They worked him inside, then presently they came back out, one shaking his head while the other laughed at something. Ben and Ellen, watching from well back down the road, remained hidden until the pair of helpers had walked away out of sight.

Ellen started forward, a dart gun back in her hand.

“Time to get him.”

They walked cautiously up to the house, then stopped to listen. The house, like the entire neighborhood, was silent. Ben motioned for Ellen to wait, then crept up the stairs, staying off to one side and avoiding even one creak from the rotted wood. He peered in one of the windows, then looked down in disgust. He carefully opened the door, motioning for Ellen to join him as he stepped through the doorway.

Terry was positioned to the side of the entry, and the source of the helper’s amusement was clear. They had positioned him as a coat rack, and taken various items off the hooks on the wall to drape all over him. Terry hadn’t moved, and still didn’t as Ben and Ellen began taking all the sweaters and jackets off of him.

Ellen made as if to say something angry, but Ben shook his head and put a finger to his lips, insisting on silence. Once all the stray articles of clothing were removed, Ben leaned in to whisper carefully in Terry’s ear.

“Terry, if you remember Sue or Kit, then sent us to take you from here. We have better food, and we won’t treat you like this. We won’t force you, so come along only if you want to get free of this place.”

Terry’s face showed no change, but when Ben gently put his hand on Terry’s back, Terry stepped forward with no hesitation. Sue put her dart gun away so she’d have both hands available, and they worked Terry quietly out of the house, down the stairs, and then along the sidewalk. The progress was dangerously slow, and Ben’s skin itched with the thought of anybody in any of these houses who might raise the alarm. But the neighborhood was too dead—or the sensibilities of its inhabitants too deadened—and they made it back to the woods without incident.

Another

The first part of the forest trail was before them, and it had few tripping hazards. They’d be able to make OK time for a bit, although once it became more overgrown, they were going to be clearing each foot of forest as they progressed. They had only gone 100 feet when Ben heard a commotion back behind them.

Of course, at first he assumed it was pursuers, coming to punish him and Ellen and take back Terry. But as they stopped and listened, it became clear somebody was heaping abuse of the most profane and insulting fashion upon somebody. Ben realized that this was the first sign of somebody fighting back he’d heard, and his curiosity quickened.

“Terry, you need to *stay here*. If we aren’t back in an hour, walk back home.” He turned to Ellen. “Come on.”

They headed back towards the town, trying to move from a covering bush, to a tree, to a small hump of earth. Nobody was watching, even with this uproar, and they got to one of the outermost buildings of the town and peeked around its corner.

A young man with bright red, curly hair was locked in some sort of restraining jacket around his torso and arms. His legs were free, and he was doing his best to line up kicks against two of those black-garmented police officers. For their part, they darted from side to side, cursing when a kick landed on their legs.

Because the boy’s arms were restrained, it was an unfair contest. It was obvious that they were driving this young man to the deadly building with its incinerator, and even with his tremendous efforts, it was only going to be a matter of time. The boy apparently spotted Ben and Ellen, for he danced to the side and back, leaving the guard’s backs exposed to Ben and Ellen.

“Wait here,” Ellen dug in her bag, then walked quickly with a light step right up to the guards. One tranquilizer gun was in her right hand, the other in her left. She was apparently right handed, for that’s the one she brought up, firing into the guard’s neck.

The officer made an odd croaking sound, and started to crumple. Whatever these officers were, Ben had to admit that they possessed some real training. The other officer, saw her, assessed the risk, dropped his hand down to bring out his gun and point it at Ellen. She was just bringing up the other tranquilizer gun, which she’d taken from her left hand. He would have killed her, except that he’d forgotten about the young, red-headed prisoner right beside him. As fast as the remaining officer was, the boy was faster, and he planted a beautiful kick straight into the officer’s crotch, ruining his aim.

His gun went off with a *crack*, and a bit of sidewalk concrete puffed up beside Ellen. She lined up her own gun right at his throat and fired back. The officer fell, then curled into a ball making distressed noises. Either the tranquilizer was doing its job, or perhaps the dart itself had hit something important. Ellen, doctor though she was, didn’t even consider kneeling down to render aid.

The boy, eyes wide and breath coming in pants, looked from Ellen and then to Ben as he hurriedly came over.

“Let me go.” the boy growled.

“Of course. *Where* will you go?”

“Anywhere but here.”

“We rescue children. We have a hidden camp nearby. Why not come with us?”

The boy studied them, his eyes looking at them with a cold calculation beyond his years. “I’ll go with you part of the way.”

“Come with us until you see something you don’t like. We won’t imprison or hurt you—now or ever. I’m Ben. This is Ellen. You are?”

“Sean.”

The contraption restraining Sean was baffling to Ben, but Ellen said it was an obvious adaptation of a strait jacket, and shortly had Sean’s arms free. Sean stepped back, obviously in a fight-or-flight mode now that he had his freedom.

Ben smiled at him, then turned to motion Ellen to come with him. As they walked back towards the forest, Ben called over his shoulder, “We are, by far, your best bet, Sean.” Presently he could hear that Sean was indeed following them.

And Another

As they neared the woods once again, Ellen stopped them, then pointed to the cluster of trees where they’d left Terry.

“Sean, do you know a young man named ‘Terry’?”

“Tall, thin, doesn’t move on his own? Yes, we used to have field trips, and he was on a couple of them.”

“Can you go over there, and keep Terry company until we get back?”

Ben interrupted, “Ellen, what’s on your mind?”

“Between Terry and Sean, we’ve blown our cover. No more free passes through town. I need to try and rescue one final group of children before the authorities clamp down.”

Ben hesitated, but saw the logic. “We need to move fast.”

They moved back towards town, Ellen moving faster than he’d yet seen. It was obvious that she knew this was a terrible chance to take, but she was also obviously in the grip of some terrible need. Ben started to hear sirens over towards where they’d rescued Sean, and was just about to force her to give up this fool’s errand when she turned into the vestibule of a large, drab-brown building.

There was an intercom, and Ellen mashed the button, then muttered in impatience until a voice came out of it.

“Yes?”

“It’s Ellen. Let me in. Now.”

The door beside the intercom clicked, and they went through into a hallway. Ellen walked straight down the hallway to the far end, and opened a door. Ben was barely able to keep up with her, peering over her shoulder to see the room at the end of this hall had about a dozen children, tended by an elderly lady in a wheelchair.

“Ellen! They’re looking for you.” She looked fearfully up at a camera mounted up on the ceiling, covering the room. “I disconnected it, but that’s not going to fool them. Why are you here?”

“It’s time for these kids to go. With me. Now.”

“Go where?”

“I’m sorry. They’re going to make you talk.”

The woman in the wheelchair gave a sad smile. “No, they won’t.” She brought out a small pillcase, and opened it to consider a clear capsule within it. “I’ll pray for your success for as long as I can.”

The woman then turned to her students. “This is Doctor Ellen, she’s been good to me and many of you. She needs to take care of you now. Go with her, and do everything she tells you, just as if it was me.”

Ellen nodded her thanks. “Put on all your sweaters, and jackets, and if you have a backpack fill it with food and brushes and toothbrushes and anything else you might want. Bring a favorite toy—but nothing big!”

The students just looked at her with dazed expressions. The teacher clapped her hands once, sharply. “Now!” They leapt into action. In less than two minutes there was a row of alert, bright faces looking at Ellen. Ellen studied them back. They appeared physically fit, ranging in age from 6 to 13. There were 14 of them.

While they’d been gathering their supplies, Ellen had prepared her little electronic devices. Apparently it was far easier to disable the devices when there was no need for misdirection, because she went down the line of children, pushing a button and waiting for the box’s confirming *bing*. Ellen, satisfied, put the box back away and turned back to the children.

“Can you all walk pretty fast?” All the heads nodded. “And run sometimes, when I tell you?” They nodded again. “Let’s go.”

The teacher touched a button on her desk, and a side panel opened to show a hidden door—it had probably been a fire escape.

“They’re out front already.”

Ellen let her hand rest on the woman’s head for one brief moment, then led the line of children out the hidden entrance, Ben swinging it shut behind them.

The corridor was narrow, and apparently ran the full length of what was quite a large building. It ended at a steel door with latches at all four corners. They were stiff, and it took both Ben and Ellen's strength to get them unlocked. Ben pulled the door inward, and peered outside.

The door just looked like some more metallic siding of the building, so hopefully the authorities wouldn't know they could escape this way. Ben motioned them to come out, and he then carefully re-shut the door so there'd be no sign of their exit. Ellen was already leading the way, cutting kitty-corner to the next building so that even if their pursuers decided to close off the perimeter, they'd already be away and out of view.

She led them at a run, and Ben was hard-pressed to catch up. It wasn't long before they were looking across the last street towards the woods. There were sounds of shouts and sirens coming from many directions. Ben pulled up.

And One More Thing...

"Ellen."

"What?"

"I have one more errand. I'll catch up."

"They're out there. *Everywhere.*"

Ben shook his head pityingly. "They've called up their best troops. Which is to say, their worst, most evil people. I... have a way to elude people like that. Just keep going, I'm going to take the heat off—and also do something which will help me sleep at night."

Ellen was distracted, seeing multiple cars pulling on to the road, effectively cutting them off from the forest.

"I hope it works; we're not getting out of here otherwise."

Ben sprinted back towards the incinerator building, their "Facility of Peace". Black cars raced past him, some slowing a bit as if registering uncertainty. He didn't even glance sideways as he passed a pair of guards at the intersection, and then he was there, and pushed the button to enter.

It was quiet in here. *For now*, he smiled grimly. He dug into a pouch at his belt, and brought out a key he had lovingly cut in Rob's little machine shop. It had a big, diamond head, welded to a screwdriver's tip. He walked up to the service panel in the floor, and pushed the diamond down to depress its counterpart shape in the floor. It sank in, and he made sure it was pushed all the way in, and then twisted.

He felt the mechanism in the floor give, and he had twisted the screwdriver 90 degrees when he felt a solid *click*. He pulled, and a whole section of flooring, three feet square, swung up on hinges. There was a ladder down, and lights conveniently came on down in the maintenance space. Very convenient.

He clambered down and studied the layout. There were tools beside the bottom of the ladder, hanging on a pegboard. He grabbed a monkey wrench, and found a place where the gas piping had been stubbed, a pipe end with a screw-on cap pointing straight upward. One last piece to the puzzle. He brought out a little metallic box with a big wad of putty on its back. Basically a timer, nichrome wire, and something Rob had adapted from fire starters which he promised would flame up "beautifully". When electricity flowed through the nichrome, it would glow white hot, which would hopefully turn Rob's infernal paste into a ball of fire.

He set the box on the ground, but didn't start the timer. He adjusted the monkey wrench, then gave the cap a test twist. Stiff, as expected. But it was a big wrench, and when he put all his strength out at the very end of the handle, it gave with a groan. Good.

He bent down to start his fire starting device's timer, then went back to unscrewing the cap on the gas main. He knew when this cap popped off, things were going to happen pretty quickly. He worked the wrench around and around.

Then it popped off, with a sound like an enormous cork coming out of an even larger champagne bottle. The gas in the main *whooshed* out, a geyser of smelly flammable natural gas, painfully cold on his skin as it

sprayed upward and then splashed everywhere, blinding him even as it choked him. He moved to the ladder and went up, keeping the wrench against his body—a spark now would be very, very bad.

He climbed up off the top of the service ladder, and swung the floor panel back into place. He was going to smell like an oil derrick for the rest of his life, but oh well. He hurried to the front door, opened it, and stepped out to find himself face-to-face with a pair of policemen.

And they could see him, worse the luck.

“What’re you doing in there, eh?”

Ben motioned at his disheveled, reeking clothing, managing to come around so *they* were in front of the door, not him.

“There’s something wrong in there! I saw a child, but then there was something spraying.”

The senior officer of the two squinted his eyes in suspicion. He opened his mouth, but to what purpose Ben never found out.

The Facility of Peace exploded, its front door sweeping right through the two officers. Ben would have liked to claim that he saw their feet still standing there, but in reality the shock wave blew him into the air and all the way across the street. He actually hit a piece of wall on the second storey, then fell to land on the sidewalk with a thud. He should certainly have been dead, his organs jellied. But he got up, spat grime and dirt out of his mouth, then got moving to catch up with Ellen and the group. This started with an awkward shuffle, but his body, however it had survived that explosion and fall, improved quickly.

As he hurried along, he stood out like a burning lighthouse. All the police cruisers racing by were too evil to see him. By the time he thought to look back and admire the building’s destruction, he had already turned a couple corners. Still, he was pretty sure they would never be able to use it again.

Through the Woods

Ben reached the place where he’d left Terry, and was not surprised to find nobody around. It took him a few moments to figure out where the path was, finally realizing that branches and strands of blackberry had been arrayed to completely hide the path they’d taken. He looked at the ground, and realized that somebody had carefully erased any sign of recent footprints.

That meant Rob had come out to meet them. Good, because they were coming back with way more saved children than they would ever have guessed. He should have felt reckless, but instead he felt certain that time was running out for an abundantly rotten system.

He followed the path, trying not to undo too much of Rob’s amazing work in hiding it. Periodically he had to stop and puzzle over where the path had gone, Rob’s ingenuity making it seem as if there never had been any path at all. Eventually he’d get back on the path, and hurry along, finally catching sight of Ellen, keeping a rearguard on the group.

“Ben! You look like you got blown up.”

“I *did* get blown up. Well, technically, I blew myself up.”

She considered for a moment. “You bombed that incinerator building.”

“It uses—used—natural gas. Rob’s incendiary putty did a great job.”

“Don’t tell him. He’ll want to use it for everything.”

Ben moved past her, and caught up with the last children in line along the trail. They’d been organized in pairs, and held on to a rope which passed right down the middle. Ben walked with each pair, then passed them when the trail widened enough to permit it. He had to explain what he’d been doing again and again, and the children would first look at him in shock, then laugh when he reached the end of the story.

He finally got to the front of the column, and saw that Rob had been quite clever again. Terry, the slowest, was at the front so the pace could be set by his progress. If they hadn’t done this, he would have ended up

being left far behind, but instead the column moved slowly, but without spreading out. The large red-headed boy—Sean—had an arm linked through one of Terry’s, helping Terry along while keeping him upright. It was a physically taxing chore, but Ben could see Sean had extremely well-developed muscles.

“Sean, you’re the first child we’ve even *seen* who isn’t skinny to the point of unhealthiness?”

Sean turned his head with a jerk to stare at Ben. “Some of them like muscles, OK? I can’t help it, OK?”

Rob, who’d ranged out a little ahead, hurried back. “He doesn’t understand, Sean. Let me talk to him. It *is* OK.” Rob looked at Ben with a how-dumb-can-you-be stare, then motioned with his head for Ben to follow him out in front of the column.

Once they were far enough out in front to be out of earshot of Sean and Terry, Rob resumed clearing the path so Terry could traverse it, explaining to Ben, “I’ve seen it before, and can answer any questions you have. Usually, people like Sean’s ‘career path’ goes onward to becoming those police thugs you see. Psychotic hate controlled by fear. But Sean turned out to be too smart for that; he kept his hate reserved for his government. Unacceptable. Today they were going to ‘retire’ him.”

“I’m sorry. There’s so much going on which is outside my experience. I’ll try to do more good than harm.”

Rob stopped to study Ben appraisingly. “You’re like an angel.”

“How’s that?”

“‘Angel’ comes from a root word meaning ‘messenger’. You don’t really do things, you mostly get people to realize that it’s time to do things. Except for blowing up that building—I heard you describing that to the kids. Made my day—it sent a message in its own way!” He laughed approvingly, then went back to work on the trail.

Back to Camp

It was terribly late when they reached camp, and everybody was desperately tired from the journey. Rob had left Sue and Kit at camp, and the whole journey was worth it to see their faces as Sean with Terry, followed by child after child after child came marching into camp. Kit came over and hugged Ben, as Sue simply sat down, tears streaming down her face.

“You saved *everybody!*” Kit whispered.

Ben patted her back, his face both happy and sad. “Well, we saved as many as we could.”

Rob had been tending the arriving pairs of children, keeping count. He was now satisfied that nobody had been lost, and turned to address the camp in a raised voice.

“The Bad People are going to be very angry with what we’ve done. Which means we did a very good deed today! They will come looking for us, probably starting tomorrow morning. I’m going to go back along the path, and hide all signs of us. Ben, Ellen, Sue, Sean—I know you’re tired, but they’re going to send drones overhead. Maybe even tonight. Move all the camp stuff well back into the brush, then do your best to hide any sign that there’s been anybody here.”

Most of the newly arrived children were too small, and too tired to help. Kit was assigned to keep them together and occupied, while all the rest went to work on the camp. The thought of cold, unfriendly eyes in the air made the back of their necks tingle, and the thought of being returned to the Authorities filled them all with dread. So they worked for many hours, finally stopping when the moon had set and it was too dark to see.

Ben had kept track of where they’d placed the blankets and bedding, and now broke them out in rows, making clusters of beds with one of his “leaders” in the middle. Everybody was so tired that they fell asleep almost immediately, not even the excitement of camping keeping them awake. Ben wondered about a watch, and then about the mosquitoes which already he could hear whining their way towards the group. But a prayer popped unbidden into his mind, and he recited it quietly:

Saint Michael, Archangel, please send an angel to watch over us this night.

Mother Mary, surround these children. Let them sleep safely and start healing.

Amen.

He didn't even realize that he'd fallen asleep.

Hideout

Making Camp

Ben woke from a deep, golden sleep to hear something buzzing along overhead. He held perfectly still, wondering if the drone had spotted them. The sound of it faded away, and Ben looked around to see everybody else laying still with wide, scared eyes.

A stand of foliage moved over at the perimeter of the camp, and then a bit of forest walked towards them. It was Rob, not only dressed in camouflage, but with branches attached to his clothing to further break up his outline and make him blend into the surrounding foliage. He had his bow in hand, but it wasn't drawn.

"They've been coming by all night, but I don't think they've spotted any sign of us at all. From the pattern of flights, I'm guessing they're flying a search pattern across the whole region, hoping to spot us on infrared. I need some scraps of the kid's clothing, and then I'm going to build a trail for their tracking dogs. Get'em to follow me all the way down the river to where it's navigable out to the sea. They hate the ocean, because unless their own boats stay close in to the shore, they just disappear. We may have friends out there, or at least enemies of our enemies. So I'll make the trail suggest we've run away with whoever's out there."

Ellen had walked over as Rob spoke, being careful to stay well in under the forest's canopy. She listened to Rob's plans, then added her own.

"I need to set up a medical tent, then get these poor children started on a health recovery regime. They have rashes, all sorts of latent respiratory issues, and they don't have the enzymes to eat real food. Ben can help me get that sorted while you're out dealing with the searchers."

"Good plan. And Ben, when you're done with that, you can set up the commissary tent, and then it looks like we'll need two tents, one for each gender, plus you and Ellen can work out living space for us grownups. Then you can get a workshop tent going; it needs a vapor barrier on the floor to protect the tools, and..."

Rob had obviously been thinking about this camp for hours, and laid out a camp development campaign which would take weeks to complete. When he finally wound down with a "that'll get us started", Ben shrugged agreeably.

"I'll do my best."

Feeding the Troops

Their commissary tent had benches and long tables with folding legs. Ben was wrestling the first table, moving one end and then the other to walk it into place. Suddenly the table lifted, and Ben saw Sean walk with the whole thing to gently lower it into position.

"Thanks! Um, Sean..."

"Ben. Ellen explained about you. You come from a *nice* place. Parents keep and protect their children, everybody has enough to eat, and the food all tastes good. The police stop bad people, and never hurt good people. Like that?"

"Um, well, not entirely, but yes. A place which has that as its ideals."

"You had no idea what I'd be useful for. You asked an honest question yesterday?"

“Absolutely.”

“It made me mad, but only until I understood. Now *you* understand. Ellen says you can’t fight. Too bad, because this is a very bad place. When I can, I want to kill all the bad people in it.”

Ben leaned very carefully on the table Sean had just moved with so little effort.

“Sean, this world was created by people who thought they could kill, and poison, and censor, and imprison, and coerce their way into perfection. And here we are, just about as far from perfection as you can get. You want to use the same tools, and you think you’ll get different results. You won’t.”

“So we, what, give UP?”

“We don’t give up, and we don’t give in.”

“Then I don’t understand how you’re ever going to win.”

“They don’t, either. That’s why they’re going to lose. And *we’re* going to win.”

Sounds of the Hunt

They finally got the tables and benches set, and got to work on what would be the first real meal for most of their children. Ellen was everywhere, checking on the items of the meal—not too hot, not too cold, almost no salt, a little dried fruit for each child. She was then buzzing about, cajoling some to eat at all, counseling others that they should only eat a little bit to start.

Many of them appeared to have never encountered utensils, or it was so long ago that they had forgotten. Sue was one of those, but she was a quick study, and soon pitched in alongside Ben in helping kids get started with the fine art of eating. From a plate, with a spoon, and a napkin. Sean also required some help, and this put him in a sullen funk. Kit had a few skills, but was satisfied with just working on her own meal.

As the meal finished, Ellen quietly stopped alongside Ben.

“Just so you know, we’re now going to get every gastric complaint in the book. Be sympathetic, help them clean up after any incidents. Assure them it’s normal, and will stop happening. Also, each of them will get a visit with me in my medic tent, which will also help them. Mostly by reassuring them, but I do have some supplements.”

A chorus of howling started up, far away, but not far enough away to be entirely reassuring. A plane buzzed overhead, and then another one further away. Then the thump-thump-thump of helicopters came to their ears.

There’s nothing to draw one’s mind away from existential dread like an upset tummy, and Ellen and Ben were soon very busy indeed giving aid and comfort to all the young digestive systems which were sharing their complaints with their young owners. Glossing over unneeded details, early on Ben made sure a large pot of water was heating, in preparation for a large amount of laundry. This phase of work disconcerted Sue, who faded to a corner of the camp with her face pale and her back turned. But Kit had rallied, and got busy with an assembly line of laundry—rinse, soap, wash, rinse, and then hang to dry.

Sean, shortly after the meal, laid down and hadn’t moved since. Ben finally stopped by to kneel by him.

“Sean, tell me you aren’t dead.”

“I want to be dead.”

“Why? Was the meal *that* bad?”

Sean looked sharply at Ben, as if trying to see if he was being mocked. But Ben had just a friendly quirk to his mouth, sharing a joke with him.

“I’m so big and tough. But I don’t know how to eat, what I eat makes me so sick I lay down here, useless. And all those kids are having their own problems, and it makes me queasy just to hear them. And there little Kit’s doing everything, and making me ashamed.”

“There’s a saying in the military: amateurs study tactics, professionals study logistics. You’ve been thinking about knives and guns and dead bodies. But all this—” Ben waved to encompass the camp—“is how you’re kept warm, and fed, and your wounds bandaged if you get hurt. They’re also the reason for you to fight in the first place. A soldier fights because he gets orders and pay. A *warrior* fights because he stands between the enemy and his community. You’re probably a little bit in shock because you *have* a community for the first time in your life.”

Rob Succeeds

The sounds of dogs, planes, drones, and shouting men never came close, but didn’t go away, either. Ben figured they were eventually going to stumble on this camp, and he was starting to make plans for another march when a plane’s steady engine noise stopped with a loud *pop*, and they all heard the plane drop from the sky and explode. For a moment, the enemy was silent with shock, and then Ben heard every man, plane, and drone turn to rush towards the crash site.

Finally they’re heading away from us, Ben mused as Ellen came up beside him.

“Well, your Rob decided to not do the subtle laying-of-trail trick after all?”

Ellen smiled. “The other side knows we’re much better than them in the woods. They have the manpower, and it’s hard to fool a brute force gridded search pattern. So yes, Rob had to go kinetic.”

A second plane’s engine stopped with another *pop*, and they heard it, too, fall from the sky. All sorts of weapons opened fire, apparently in the hope of hitting Rob wherever he was hiding and knocking down airplanes.

Ellen’s mouth twisted in distaste. “They’re more likely to kill each other with all this random gunfire.”

Her comment was born out in a dramatic fashion as a third plane swept past, and released a track of objects before banking away sharply. Explosions rippled in the distance, and men’s screams could be heard clearly. The plane, coming back around for another bombing run, suddenly turned away without releasing anything. Apparently word had reached them that they were targeting their own troops.

Another scream came in the distance, followed by gunfire.

“Ah, that’d be Rob. Archery attacks are so infuriating, because there’s no gunshot, no smoke or flame, and your target tends to writhe around as they fall. It’s very hard to get even a notion of where your attacker is.”

Ben listened as the noise of the conflict became fainter and fainter. “So he *is* leading them away after all.”

“*I* never doubted it. Let’s get back to the children”

They spent the rest of the afternoon giving comfort as stomach cramps slowly faded. In time, each child discovered they weren’t going to die after all, and by dinner some even expressed a mild interest in more food.

Stepping Away

Ben awoke in the middle of the night. The camp was absolutely quiet, but as he listened, he realized that there was no noise from the forest, nor from anything beyond the forest. At first he thought he was seeing by starlight, but then he realized starlight would never be this bright. And he was sleeping inside a tent. He sat up.

An angel was standing at the foot of his bed. He motioned for Ben to dress, which he did quickly, then followed as the angel exited the tent. Ben did so, wondering how the tent’s flap had been unzipped so quietly. It didn’t matter.

The angel, just a faintly glowing silver shape, drifted towards an edge of the camp which ended at an impassable thicket of spiky foliage. Except, as they reached it, Ben could see a path open straight through it.

The angel’s voice was a quiet sigh, “You are needed. Go.”

Ben considered swiftly. He could point out the needs for him here. There would be answers. Either you have faith, or you don't.

"Glory to Jesus Christ." Ben followed the path, not looking back.

"Glory to Him forever!" The angel's voice was so happy, so joyous. He would always be able to remember how those words were said, and feel comfort.

Part Two: Seeking

Started

Returning

Ben had been away for a couple months, and was eager to see what Sue and Ellen and Rob had been up to. He realized that he should be worried that something bad had happened, but he just didn't believe it. Threading his way through the forest, he found the paths even more overgrown and meandering than when he'd left.

He came to a halt, the path he remembered was entirely lost behind a deadfall of trees and branches, ten or more feet tall, with blackberry entwined through the mass of dead wood. He started looking for some hidden path through when he sensed somebody coming through the woods towards him from one side. He turned just as Sue emerged from behind a rhododendron bush which had grown up against the deadfall, so immense it towered over the tall pile.

It was Sue. Her hair—blonde—had grown in. There was a bloom of health to her, but the biggest difference was in her gaze. She looked at him with a clear gaze, with a touch of joy in it. Then she lowered her eyes shyly.

"You're back."

"I'm lost—are you here to help?"

"We decided we needed to make it harder to reach our living space. Sorry."

"I understand. You look... greatly improved, Sue."

"Real food doesn't make me sick any more, neither does work. Doc Ellen still has me on a couple special teas. And I'm learning to sing!"

Her voice was pure and sweet,

"*Salve, Regina, Mater misericordiae
vita, dulcedo, et spes nostra, salve.*"

She smiled. "I'm still memorizing it, but we'll sing it at Evening Prayer."

Ben's throat was tight. He calmed himself, then, "You're learning the *Salve Regina*. Oh, that is good, Sue. I look forward to our prayers together." He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

Sue pretended not to notice his emotion. "C'mon!" And off she went.

He followed, feeling like she was almost a forest sprite. "How *did* you learn the *Salve*? And Evening Prayer? I tried hard to find some religious texts, but it seemed like they'd all been burned."

She shrugged. "About a day after you left, a woman came walking through the forest. She was like you."

"Like me?"

"Kind eyes, quiet voice. I felt like if we needed to do something—in an emergency—she'd tell us what to do. Like that."

Ben absorbed her perception of him thoughtfully. "I look forward to meeting her."

"Oh, no. She left a couple days ago. That's how I knew to start watching for you to return."

"What was her name?"

Sue laughed. "She told us to call her 'Sister'. But she also said she wasn't a nun *yet*. Doctor Ellen said she definitely was a nun. A mystery—but a good one."

Homely

The camp was the same, and yet it was also entirely different. All the children were healthy, some working, others playing. The different tents were where he remembered, but there were paths made up of broken bark, so you wouldn't have to walk in mud when it was rainy. The main table for meals now had some sort of roof

built upon some modest tree trunks. Everywhere he looked, there were touches of domestic comfort and order.

Beyond the tents was an open area, and a number of raised garden beds had been built, with a variety of plants growing in them. He walked over, spotting peas, beans, and some young winter squash. Lettuces, and there were carrots growing intermingled with radishes. Poles were sunk in the ground, and a loose mesh of intermingled branches somewhat shaded the garden. Ben wondered why they'd give up sunlight for the garden, then realized it was to make the whole thing harder to spot from a drone flying by.

Sue had followed him, and Kit was running towards him, excitement evident in her smile. Further back was Sean, walking over in a way that firmly established that he didn't think Ben's return was any big deal. Ben laughed, then looked around.

"Where are Rob and Ellen?"

"They go off to help others. I don't know who, they never want to talk about it. They left yesterday, so they should be back today before dinner."

"And where did Sister sleep?"

Kit had arrived by this point, and answered, "She never slept. All night she'd sit out by the fire pit, even when there wasn't a fire. We'd ask her, and she'd just say that she would catch up on her sleep soon."

Sue, Kit, and Sean were obviously still the leaders. All the children had by now come over, grouped in a circle around Ben. Even Terry was there, guided a little bit by one of the young boys. Ben smiled, happy to be back among them. Then Sean broke the spell.

"Prayer in five! Clean up and meet around the fire."

Sean was mad at him, making a point of it by exercising his authority. Keeping the camp life organized was good; but letting Sean simmer was unacceptable. They'd talk after dinner.

Evening Prayer

Praying was different since his "altar event" way back in that church. A sense of quiet would close around him as soon as he started, and the subjects of his devotions came to mind, vivid and present, as soon as he thought of them. He no longer felt like praying for specific things; he had a sense that he was here to support the prayers of others.

The Holy Spirit was sometimes an almost distracting presence. He still felt an affinity to one of the great statements of the Catholic Church, the Nicene Creed. Towards the end it spoke of the Holy Spirit:

**We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.**

The Orthodox part of the Church believed the Holy Spirit only proceeded from the Father, thus the "Filioque controversy". Now, each time he prayed the Creed and reached this part, he'd receive an impression of something young and spritely, jumping about chanting "Father? Father and Son? Father? Father and Son?" in youthful abandon. The Holy Spirit was as young as a puppy, yet ancient and wise beyond time. It would be hard to explain why he'd laugh at this part of the Creed.

They all gathered around the fire pit. One of the youngest had set the fire going even as everybody else was washing up. Now they made a circle, girls on one half, boys on the other. Just as they were sorting into the circle, Rob and Ellen emerged to quietly join them.

It was the structure of Evening Prayer, known as Vespers. However, it included an examination of conscience, so apparently they weren't yet doing Compline at its own later time. Various children had cards in their hands, and each would step forward to read the appropriate psalm or other reading. When the prayer was finished, each card was carefully returned to that child's bedside.

Ben stopped one of them—Beck, a small girl whose dark, bowl-shaped haircut had grown into shoulder length locks—and asked to see her cards. Beck blushed, but brought out a stack of them. She had painstakingly made her own copies of all the different prayers and readings.

“*She* gave me this one.”

Beck handed Ben a card slowly and carefully. Ben accepted it, and saw why Beck treasured this card. It was the Canticle of Simeon, written in an exquisite calligraphy. The writing was so beautiful that it almost made a second, reverent prayer. A sense of peace and love washed over him, and he realized that Sister had known he would see this card. He carefully handed it back to Beck.

“Thank you. I hope I can meet her someday.”

Beck carefully put away the cards, then they went over to where dinner was being prepared.

Young Appetites

Ben watched as the children busied themselves with the evening meal. Everybody had their task—setting the table, putting out pitchers of water, while others were back putting the finishing touches on plates of food. Whoever this Sister was, she had given them unity and purpose. Soon, most of them sat while a few remaining children brought the final plates of food over.

This Sister had given them more than a sense of place and purpose. He could see in the healthy appetites and the way they held their bodies that their health had improved immensely in his absence. As he joined their conversations, he found the topics to be on what they’d done today, plans for the future. The dark of their past had been driven back substantially. And then he understood Sister.

A healer. Given the results here, probably somebody of tremendous faith and talent. He’d been sent away because although, in all humility, he had many talents. *This* sort of healing drew upon a genius which was beyond him. No wonder she sat at the fire night after night. She had prayed for healing her whole time here. But why couldn’t he be here to see such a thing? Another mystery to add to his list.

Peace With Sean

After dinner, there was another surge of highly coordinated activity—hot water, clearing the table, washing, drying, and very soon everything was put away. Some of the children drifted towards their beds, and Ben could see a few LED lights come on to permit some pre-bedtime reading.

Others joined at the campfire, and sang songs. Some were worship tunes, others just old folk songs. Ben was a little tempted to join in when Sean walked up to stand before him, blocking his view of the fire.

“Sean.”

“Ben. Are you staying the night?”

Ben couldn’t see his face, just the large dark outline of his silhouette. But the voice had a definite touch of insolence, so it was easy to imagine the expression to go with it.

“Sean. Please walk with me.”

Ben turned and walked slowly away from the bustle of the camp. He was relieved when he saw Sean had joined him, walking at his side.

“So there I was that night. . .” and Ben related his encounter with the angel, finishing with, “if an angel sent *you*, Sean, would you go?”

Sean stopped. This story was obviously the last thing he had ever thought to hear. He pondered for a bit.

“So where did you go? What did you do?”

“Sean, it’s a story of these troubled times. Some ugliness, some beauty. But I’m not supposed to bring the burden of that story here, even as we live out our own story. When I can, I would certainly share it with you.”

“So Sister coming wasn’t a coincidence? I liked her. And now she’s gone.”

“The Kingdom of God is at hand. A coincidence and God’s Plan are two sides of the same coin. And how could she stay here? Think of all the hurt in this world; how could you hope to keep her for yourself?” Ben felt a pang. “She’s going to heal and care, as much as she can. Her honor in heaven will be great indeed.”

“You’re totally different than her. But also basically the same. Does that make any sense?”

“A little bit, but I’m only just beginning to understand.”

They turned back to the camp, and Ben could feel the tension of Sean relaxing. At the fire he bade Sean good night, then sat down in preparation for an all-night prayer vigil. He was not a healer, but he could pray for each of them to build up the strength to carry them through with what was coming.

They Come

Alert

The months rolled along, Rob and Ellen coming and going in pursuit of their other activities. Ben teaching, both fundamental education as well as religion. Sue had carefully and politely let him know that Sister had a much better memory than did he. He’d made some definite changes in how they harvested, putting a much greater emphasis on storing food against future shortages.

They were all out among the garden beds, harvesting and then preparing all the raised beds for the coming Winter. Ben had a roll of ground cloth under each arm, and walked to one of their sheds to get a ball of twine. He opened the door of the shed, and found himself facing an angel.

An angel! He dropped the rolls, not sure if this meant he was standing on holy ground. The angel was beautiful, and Ben was forever afterward sure that there was a face, and mouth, and limbs. Luminous, but he could never describe them.

“Peace, brother. There is little time.” He suddenly knew what starlight sounded like, and wondered if he should at least bow. The angel forestalled him.

“Soon, we can stand beside each other and bow to our Lord. For now, agents of evil come. Hide those in your care, and protect them.”

Ben was suddenly alone. He turned and ran towards the center of the garden.

“Everyone! Follow me! NOW!”

Hiding

There was a mad scramble. Some were looking about wildly, not understanding why Ben was shouting about an emergency. Ben and Ellen ran to grab children, and Sue and Sean and some of the other older children grabbed the youngest. Some made as if to tidy up their work before stopping, forestalled by Ben’s urgent commands. It felt to Ben like forever, but within a couple minutes the whole community was assembled, waiting expectantly.

“They’re coming. Follow me.”

Somebody started, “I don’t see anybody. What...” He was shushed, the crowd moving in Ben’s wake.

A corner of the cleared land had been part of an old military installation, and that’s where those bunker buildings were located. The construction was on a massive scale, fit to withstand large bombs. The doors had been secured with a locking system which had taken them months to defeat. It was classic military construction, built solidly back when there had been time, money, and interest for such things. When they had finally forced the door, they found that the entry was a door opening on stairs leading down to a suite of rooms.

There were three of these structures, and each had finally been forced open. They had been slowly but surely hidden by building up berms of dirt on the sides, and then letting vegetation to overgrow it. Two had

been cleaned out, and their openings hidden by building lean-to shacks against the mounds up against the entryway. The back wall of each had a hidden hinged panel, swinging a part of the wall open to access the bunker's door behind it. Within these two bunkers, they'd put in shelves and some supplies, but not a great deal, nor any of their best medicines, foods, and tools.

The third bunker, the largest and the one in the best condition, had been hidden with extra care. No building was near its entrance, and instead a hinged panel was added in front of the door. This panel had wire mesh, and sod with green grass had been mounted onto the face of it. By carefully cutting a rectangular opening around the bunker's doorway, they had mounted this panel with its grassy camouflage in front of the bunker's entry. When swung shut, it looked exactly like an uninterrupted bank of dirt with grass.

The door panel was swung aside, and the bunker door was open. The children streamed through, following the steps downward as quickly as they could. A whup-whup-whup of helicopters was drawing near, and there was also the sound of engines as vehicles forced their way through the underbrush barriers surrounding their homestead.

The last of the children passed through the doorway, leaving only Ben. He looked around, stepped back into the doorway and pulled the panel shut. It had strong latches which he tightened down, and then stepped back again. The bunker door, which opened inward, took all of his strength to swing shut so its face was right up against the outer panel, supporting it.

He locked the inner door, thick metal rods clicking into place as he turned the big locking wheel. The door sealed, and he turned to follow the stairs down to where he heard everybody settling themselves. The bunker had batteries and lights, which somebody had turned on. The entire group quieted as he stepped out into the main room.

"It is very important that you keep quiet. Silent. I need to go stand watch at the door, and will come back when the danger has passed. Or—God forbid—when it is right upon us."

He had started to turn back for the stairs when Sue's voice stopped him.

"Will we be OK?"

He turned back to give her a reassuring smile. "Think of them out there, how they behave and what they value. Then think of ourselves. Who, ultimately, will be 'OK'? But if you mean, will we be safe from their violence? Then the answer is 'probably', and they will certainly need to destroy me entirely before they can even touch any one of you."

He went up the stairs, and stood before the bunker door, facing the attackers who he could feel out there, moving through their buildings and gardens. They were kicking in doors, and trampling through the plantings. Somebody found the hidden entrance to one of the other bunkers, and there were shouts of triumph. Presently he heard hard, loud crashes, which he recognized as law enforcement "flash bangs". They expected to find people cowering beyond those doorways, and once they found them all empty, they sullenly started burning all the buildings and their contents.

They even dragged in tanks of kerosene, and poured large amounts into the other bunkers. An ignition device was tossed in, and the the ground all the way to where Ben stood hummed with the violence of the combustion. Then further tanks of poison were brought in by their trucks, and Ben could feel the sharp tang of chemicals as they splashed it on all the plants and all of the ground. Everything here would die, and nothing here would grow again for decades to come.

But through all of their hate, and violence, and poison, he could feel their uneasy puzzlement. *Where are the people?* And they used all sorts of instruments to sniff, and scan, and probe. Men with dogs also came in, and the search swept around and around their compound in ever-widening circles.

Through it all, Ben stood facing the door. The searchers would near his location, and then pass it by unaware. The dogs, even after all their conditioning, accepted his wishes and led their masters in other directions. Finally, the technical men with sensors which beeped and booped went probing around, trying to find anything hidden in the ground. They carried an evil with themselves, but it was a watery, submissive evil. Nothing registered on their instruments, and they would never know why.

Ben reflected. Standing here, evil outside the door, his people behind him. He was sure his presence was interfering with their search, and as they missed this entrance again and again, he slowly relaxed. Even if he had never done anything else, nor would ever in the future do anything else—keeping the people behind him safe from the people out there was enough to justify his life. He faced outward, and waited.

The troop’s “triumph” soon paled; this whole area had held good people doing good work. As the day wore on, they became more and more uncomfortable. Their skin itched, and many of them developed facial tics, while their breathing became labored. After a dozen had been sent back, blinded with migraines, the leader surveyed the remaining force, then looked around the ruined, empty site.

“They must’ve run. I’ll send out an APB, and we’ll have them soon enough. The fumes from our ground treatment are causing a little discomfort, so let’s wrap it up here.”

Nobody pointed out that their chemicals didn’t create fumes. They all wanted to leave, just like their leader. So they packed up, and loaded vehicles, and presently the last of them drove away, leaving wreckage, smoke, and poison in their wake.

Taking Stock

Ben waited. A half hour later, one last spiteful drone flew by, casting its cold electronic eye over the devastation. The area was silent in its desolation.

The hidden panel with its grassy face swung outward, and Ben came out, followed by his people. Everybody stayed clustered near the bunker’s doorway, moving outward just enough to make room for those behind them. Then Sue pushed her way through to reach Ben, and take a look at the ruin. Tears ran down her face, and she turned to beat her fists on Ben’s chest.

“Why didn’t you *do* something? What *good* are you?”

Ben gently grabbed her wrists to stop her fists, and then she collapsed against him, sobbing against his chest.

“We’re alive. This day was going to come, and it was important that we survive it.”

Her voice was muffled. “You should have killed them.”

He pondered. “Me? Kill?”

She pulled back to look at him. “Yes! You’re an angel or something, make them drop dead, or burn, or get teleported to hell.”

“Angels don’t do those things! ‘Angel’ comes from the word for ‘messenger’. And I’m not an angel anyway.”

“But Saint Michael defeated Satan, and drove him and all his hosts down into hell. And it was angels that burned up Sodom!”

“Different battles. We didn’t fight in theirs, and they’re not going to fight in ours. But we’re glad they won, and they’ll be glad when we win.”

“Will we?”

“Yes. Have you really forgotten Jesus’ triumph?”

She sighed in defeat. “I know. But this is the first place I’ve ever loved. And *now* look at it.”

They ran their eyes over the ruined buildings and plantings and dirt. It was not pretty.

Sue turned back to Ben. “You make it sound like you were expecting this.”

“Well, I knew it was a possibility. I would have been perfectly happy to have it never happen—but here we are. We’ve saved just about everybody who can be reached, and now we should join up with others who are doing the same thing. It’s hard to hide here, because so much of the population around us is lost to the dark. There are better places to use as our base. So yes, I thought this day would come. But I’m not sorry we had our time here.”

“So we could watch it all get ruined?”

“No. So you all could rest your minds, and let your bodies become healthy. You weren’t ready to travel, before.”

Sue looked at her arms, and then twisted her body, then considered her legs. She looked across at the other children. They’d been pasty, and skinny, and they’d hardly been able to think or do work or even see clearly. Now they stood tall, with healthy muscle tone and clear eyes. She sighed.

“We grumbled when you took so much of the food we were collecting, and just locked it away down there for ‘no reason’. That’ll help feed us as we travel?”

Ben smiled gently. “We’re going to bring that food along, and lots of other travel supplies too. Sister left you a gift to bring along, too.”

Sue pondered. “Our prayers?”

“That too. She taught you how to make a home. This was your first home, and it’ll be a part of your memories. But you’ll make new homes, and those will be the first homes your children will ever know. They’ll be good ones! And presently you’ll watch *them* make homes for their own children. Today will become a memory, so your great-great-grandchildren can appreciate their own homes that much more.”

“So there’s no way to make them pay?”

Ben shivered. “They *will* know justice. But leave that to God.”

The Escape

After getting all the supplies loaded into packs, Ben led them to the tunnel he’d used when the angel had sent him on his way. Sean made his objections known quite clearly.

“There’s *nothing* back here. It’s a wall of brush as dense as a roll of barbed wire. You’re just walking us into a dead end—”

They reached the tunnel Ben remembered. Sean was dumbfounded, then offended.

“Where did *that* come from?”

Ben shrugged, then led them onward into the tunnel.

They had to walk single file, and Ben was very glad Rob and Ellen brought up the rear. They could help any stragglers, and Rob would also know to keep an eye on their back trail. Although Ben was also sure that it would be very hard indeed for one of the other side to find this trail.

The trail remained a single, round opening through brush. They went up hills, and then down. Sometimes it seemed like there were roads not too far beyond the walls of their tunnel. Other times it seemed like they were deep in wilderness. They finally reached a concrete wall with an enormous pipe going through it—a culvert. Even as they listened, a vehicle went by on the road above them. They could walk upright as they went through the culvert, and they came out at what was apparently the end of their trail. To the right, concrete steps led up to the road above.

Ellen had been peering at the surrounding terrain for the last several minutes, and now climbed the steps to peer carefully about at the road above. She returned back down to them, and shook her head.

“I know where we are. You know that it’s impossible for us to have reached this place from where we started?”

“That’s how it is with the best secret paths.”

Ellen snorted dismissively, then pointed with her head at the road above.

“We’re outside of town. There’s an old bike path which runs parallel to the road for quite a distance, so you don’t have to run the risk of vehicles spotting you. You’re leaving town?”

“Yes. And that bike path is very good news indeed.”

“Then this is where we leave you. Rob and I have a backup camp which they haven’t found yet.”

There was a stunned moment, and then many of the children surrounded Ellen, pleading with her to stay with them. There were tears, and not just among the youngest. Ellen’s eyes were suspiciously bright, too.

“I’ll always remember all of you. But I’m a *real* doctor, and you are all healthy now. Go with Ben; there’s no good left for you in this area. But there are so many ill people left, and not all of them are evil. Healing the sick is what I do; I can’t leave them.”

Ben looked at Rob, who just shrugged.

“I go where she goes.” He looked at Sean. “Watch over them, like I taught you. Mind Ben. Watch your temper.”

Sean looked like he might argue, but Rob’s gaze was unyielding. He lowered his head in acquiescence.

Ellen interrupted. “I’ll take you to the bike path; then you head out of town. We head back.” She went up the steps, holding a hand out to stop them from following. When she was satisfied that the road was empty, she motioned them to follow.

Out of Town

They’d made it to the bike path without incident. After one more round of tearful good byes, Ben led them away from town. By the time they looked back, Ellen and Rob were out of sight.

Ben had worried about whether the bicycle path was still used, and had Sean at the tail of their line to watch out for anybody coming up on them. But the trail was entirely silent, and after coming across several places where branches and broken asphalt made it hard for even people on foot, Ben told Sean that they didn’t need to watch so carefully any more.

Presently they came to a sign “City Limit”. Ben came to a halt, and waited as the entire group came together, facing the sign. Ben then took off his shoes, and shook the dust off of them. Every face registered puzzlement, and then Terry, moving mechanically, also removed his shoes and shook them. He put them back on, and stood back up. His facial expression hadn’t changed during the whole operation.

“Thank you, Terry. That’s a biblical way to express your condemnation as you leave a town. Let’s get out of here.”

Prairie Church

The Plains

It was a relief to finally clear the last vestiges of human settlement. After the city limits, they’d expected to be walking among uninhabited hills. Instead, after a few hundred yards, there was a new clump of houses. And then some industrial buildings, and after that some sort of dilapidated shopping center.

They’d scout, and skirt, and hide, and try to sneak past whatever pool of humanity they’d come upon—whenever they saw people, the people looked feral. Then it was an old town, and a mile beyond, a truck stop. And once safely past, it was always far too soon before the next remnant of civilization appeared. Each new one was a new puzzle of dangers. A few had no people, but most had obviously been pressed into service as a last desperate housing solution.

Slowly but surely, the intervals between buildings and people widened. And this time, they’d made it three days without seeing anything beyond the odd, empty building. A relief, to be sure, but now Ben started to carefully track their food and water. He himself still liked to eat and drink, but they seemed optional. So he went through the motions, but took almost nothing for himself. Even allowing for that, the food and water didn’t seem to get used up as quickly as it should. He watched everyone carefully to make sure nobody was thirsting or starving themselves to death, but it wasn’t that. He decided to just be grateful that the food and water were holding up.

Ben always watched the horizon, not knowing exactly what he'd spot which would help them. It was their fifth day traversing the open prairie when something stood out far away to the right—off the old road they had followed ever since the bike path had ended. He couldn't make it out, and kept shielding his eyes from the sun to study it as they proceeded. Finally he could see some details, and laughed in relief. He knew where they'd go next.

He whistled for everybody's attention, then pointed off to the still-distant shape on the horizon.

"Let's go to church!"

Gaining Access

They discussed whether to cut straight towards the building, which would take them at almost a 45 degree angle from the road they followed. But the fields very often had fences, and all too often the fences involved barbed wire, even if it lay in rusted snarls upon the ground. Ultimately, they continued on, guessing that there would be a turnoff to reach the church.

Almost an hour later, they reached what was probably the right road. It was narrower, with most of the pavement cracked and potholed. There was no sign, but then their experience was that churches never dared advertise their presence in this modern world. They took the turnoff.

Within *another* hour they had almost reached their target. It was a large, whitewashed structure, a cross still triumphantly displayed at its front peak. The windows were dark and dusty, but Ben recognized them as intact stained glass. The road did not reach the structure, but swerved away without any sign of a turnoff or driveway. Right at this point, a small hillock blocked view of the church, but Ben knew it was directly beyond it, so they left the road and walked through the grass.

When they crested the hillock, the church was right there in front of them. It was surrounded by a wrought iron fence which entirely circled the property. They hurried downhill to stand before the fence. There was no sign of any path or road to reach this place, nor was there any sign of how to pass through the fence. It was as if the church and its containing fence had been dropped here from somewhere else.

Ben sent Sue one way around the fence, Kit the other. Even if they met each other on the far side, they should each keep going to maybe spot something the other had missed. They presently were back, each having followed the fence all the way around seeing neither break nor locked gate. There was no hint of access.

He nodded, then led them so that they were at the point of the fence looking directly across a grassy field to the front doors of the church. Bowing his head, he closed his eyes, gripped a post of the fence with his left hand, and prayed, *please, Lord, permit us access to your house*. He opened his eyes, and looked at the post in his grip. It was actually a clever joining of *two* posts, and by sliding a bit of ornamental iron, they clicked and came apart. One half of the post was actually a part of a gate which he could pull towards them as it swung open, making an opening through the fence. They all walked through, and then he clicked it shut again.

The Church

They walked across to the church, and went up its steps to stand at the front door. Ben pushed down on the latch, and the door released with a smooth click. He pulled it open towards them, finding that a flip down door stop was mounted on the inside bottom face of the door. He locked the door open, then peered into the building.

There was an entry hall—or perhaps he should term it the *narthex*. An inner pair of doors were shut, but through their windows he could see the center aisle leading up to a raised sanctuary space with altar. He had guessed at the presence of stained glass windows, and The tone of the light told him he had been correct.

"Come along." He stopped short. "How many of you know how to behave in a church?"

All the faces were blank. He sighed.

“Right. We’re going to walk up the central aisle, called a *nave*. Stay off the raised area at front until you’ve talked to me. I see a tabernacle in there—it’s the rounded golden container behind the altar—and a sanctuary light to its left. In the unlikely event it’s lit, I’ll genuflect. You can, too, but at a minimum you *bow*. Consider it being polite in somebody else’s home.”

Sue had listened closely, but now wrinkled her forehead. “I don’t want to be an outsider here. How do I get to be holy like you?”

“It’s not a question of holiness. Well, not as such. It’s a question of *intention*, and then *baptism*. When we can catch our breath, I can start your instruction. But I’m not sure about my status, so ideally I’d like to find somebody who’s been ordained to take over at some point, and then baptize any of you who are willing.”

With that, he opened both inner doors. They didn’t have fold down stops, but clicked into a detente when fully opened, and stayed in their open position. He’d been afraid at how musty the air might have gotten, but the only smell was of dry, still air. And the slightest hint of incense remained, too. The church’s surrounding grounds hadn’t been bad, either. Maybe somebody was still around maintaining the building and grounds—and better yet if they were ordained.

Ben led his group down the center aisle, stopping short at the place where the floor was raised to form the area containing the altar. He didn’t see a burning sanctuary lamp, but he still genuflected, on one knee and making the sign of the cross. Everyone behind him genuflected too, to judge by the shuffling as they attempted this unfamiliar courtesy. He stood back up, then looked around.

There *were* stained glass windows, intact although a little dimmed by the accumulated grime on their exterior side. They were beautiful, and even the ones featuring Jesus had Mary somewhere in the window somewhere. This would be “The Church of Saint Mary”, or something along those lines.

To the left of the sanctuary area with the altar, along the back wall, was a statue of Mary with a metal and wire arch framing her. Ornaments around Mary within a church were generally frowned upon, but presumably they’d received a dispensation here. Ben could imagine what it would look like with roses threaded all through the arch, Mary standing within an outline of flowers. He could almost smell the perfume of the roses.

Ben realized that he’d walked right over to Mary, and his group had followed. He gestured them into a half-circle facing Mary.

“I’ve been remiss; it’s time to learn some prayers. Repeat after me, one line at a time: ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.’”

They repeated, and followed as he led them through the ancient prayer. When done, he realized his mistake, and led them back in front of the altar; they all genuflected smoothly, and he again got them into a half-circle facing the sanctuary and altar and tabernacle.

“How could I not teach this one first? I’m getting old. Anyway: ‘Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.’”

They followed along. After a pause, he finished:

“For yours is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory. Now and forever. Amen.”

They repeated the doxology, and then everyone stood silent, regarding the altar, and the tabernacle, and the cross holding Jesus, above. Every texture and shading of color was intensified by the sunlight as filtered through all the stained glass.

Mother

The silence was broken by the sound of shuffling steps behind them. As one, they turned around to see a large woman in a habit come through the doorways, followed by a pair of young women—maybe girls—in a different sort of habit. The woman stopped, her eyes rising above Ben’s head to regard the crucifix, then bowed, the girls behind her mirroring her action.

Ben studied the cut of her habit. It looked Orthodox, and he would apologize for intruding in her church, but... this church was certainly a *Catholic* church. Odd.

Ben gave her a small bow, "Greetings, Mother."

She studied him. "Greetings, *Missa*. We both have our little ducklings along." From her thick accent, he guessed a Russian background. But her English was easily understood.

Missa meant "sent". He wondered how she'd settled on that title.

"We fled from trouble after saving as many as we could. I need to work with a priest to see about baptizing them, and we also are short on food and water."

She turned to her two girls, and spoke in a stream of some language. Russian? They bowed again towards the crucifix, then scurried back out of the church.

"Roman Catholic?" she queried suddenly.

Ben nodded.

"The Pope made peace with the Patriarch of Constantinople. Right before he was lost. Other patriarchs accepted. One thousand years, the schism is ended."

"It is good that it's over, but how could it take so long? And, did you say the Pope is 'lost'?"

She nodded. "No more churches in Rome, they pulled them all down. Not one stone upon another. Not museums, no—all rubble. Clean break from history, they say. Two thousand years, they still tear down temples."

She thought for a moment. "Sad, not too sad. No real priests, all gone rotten. Pretty robes, no God."

Ben shook his head. "But how is *this* church still standing? It seems entirely intact."

She acted as if she hadn't heard.

"There are rooms through that hall, kitchen at the end. Door from kitchen to garden, also well. Pump well."

She pantomimed pumping a handle up and down.

The two girls she'd sent returned, each with a large, heavy basket. They shyly set them in front of Ben, then returned to stand safely behind the older woman.

"I'm 'Ben', but the way."

"Mother Nena. Two novices here, all goes bad, now Rassaphore. Sister Ana, Sister Lipa."

The girls each bobbed her head when named. They were dressed all in black like their Mother, but their outfits were plainer.

"Stay and rest. I send word."

She turned and started to leave.

"Thank you!" Ben called, echoed by all of his children.

Mother and her two followers turned and waved briefly, then went out through the fence opening, closing it carefully before disappearing off over the hillock.

A Meal

The baskets contained a treasure trove of food, and there were exclamations of wonder at the small, dense loaves, the variety of nuts, the dried fruit, and even a couple different types of cheese wrapped in wax paper. Ben led them towards the kitchen, which had a connecting room with a long table and benches.

On a shelf, he saw plates, cups, utensils, even tablecloths and napkins. He showed them how to lay out the tablecloth, then set places along the table. Sue went out with Newt to fill a pitcher with water from the promised well.

“The first water out of the pump might be murky. Dump it and fill the pitcher again until it pumps clear.”

Sue nodded and continued out the door, coming back with a pitcher full of clear, cold water. She filled most of the cups, and went out to fill it again. With so many hands at work, the table was ready in just a few minutes.

All eyes turned to Ben.

“Each of you, go stand in front of one of the place settings.”

After some shuffling, Ben continued,

“We’ll eat a little more than usual, but we can’t assume the Mother and her Sisters can supply us like this very often. Now listen and learn: this is a prayer for right before a meal—especially dinner.”

Bless us oh Lord And these, Thy gifts Which we are about to receive through Thy
bounty Through Christ, our Lord Amen

Bedtime

After the meal and cleanup, they went back out to the church. Ben got them settled in the pews, then went to the ambo (the podium for reading and speaking in a church) and pulled out the lectionary book from where it was stowed on a shelf built into the ambo. He leafed through it until he found what he wanted.

“Here, in a Catholic church, the reading of the gospels is reserved to those who are ordained. That leaves many, many possibilities. I thought of one which serves as a good reminder. It’s from Ezekiel.”

Thus says the Lord: You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of
Israel, when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me....

He continued, reading the warning that to stand by and permit evil without saying anything made you a part of the evil.

Sue wrinkled her nose, then raised her hand.

“Sue?”

“How can we warn them? They’ll shoot us, or inject us with chemicals, or something.”

“This is an old problem. Jesus himself told his disciples to be ‘wise as serpents, and innocent as doves’. But up until now we’ve been reactive, either hiding or running. We’ve saved a few, and I think the time is coming when we can save many more.”

They all looked a little worried, except Sean. But Ben was sure Sean was thinking about much more direct ways of dealing with enemies.

“Don’t worry. Just think of sharing your own experience with somebody new.”

With water right outside the door, he was able to get them all reasonably clean before bedtime. They were all tired from the day’s excitement, and were soon asleep upon the bunks in some of the other rooms. Ben was finding less and less need for sleep, and instead went back out to stand just in front of the sanctuary area of the altar, facing the crucifix after genuflecting. He prayed for guidance in the coming changes, then let his mind go blank, standing guard while accepting the thoughts which came to him.

The Priest

The next morning sprang to life as soon as the sun rose. Ben found some empty shelves, and had each of his party choose their own part of a shelf, and carefully stow their possessions. He could tell they were all hungry but, mindful of his admonition of last night, they all held back to see what he decided.

If they were resigned to a light breakfast—or none at all—they were disappointed. In one of those wonderful baskets he had noticed some eggs in an actual cardboard egg carton, with salt packed around them to make sure they didn't go rotten. There were wide eyes as he demonstrated cracking several eggs, then whisking them together with a fork. A few of the kids weren't sure about this questionable, gummy yellow mess. He cooked them on a skillet, had the bread sliced and browned on another skillet, then added little slivers of cheese to the toasted bread. He finished by placing a layer of cooked egg upon each open faced piece of bread with cheese. After a few bites, all hesitation was lost in this new culinary miracle.

Cleanup happened without any particular guidance; last night had taught them what was needed, and how to do it. Shortly, the dining area was back to being spotless, everything in its place. Personal washing up was finishing and Ben was just pondering a morning prayer when he heard a knock on the front door, then the door being opened.

It was no doubt Mother and her Sisters, but Ben felt a twinge of unease. He knew Sean, a reflection of past experience, always carried a knife. Sean thought he didn't know, and Ben hadn't been sure if he should ever say anything. It was suddenly clear to him that Sean's preparations were right for Sean.

"Sean, please come with me." He walked out of the kitchen towards the entryway. Sean had sensed something in his voice, and followed silently, off to his left, eyes alert, hand inside his shirt where the knife rode.

It was Mother, but without her two assistants. Instead, a man in black shirt and pants with a clerical collar stood beside her. He caught sight of Sean, and clearly disliked Sean's body language.

"Boy, go fetch this 'Ben' I've heard about."

Sean looked sidelong at Ben, wanting guidance on how to handle this odd behavior.

"Sean, give him my apologies, and ask if he can try again tonight?"

Sean looked at the priest, and said, "Ben asks me to give you his apologies, and can you try again tonight?"

The priest snorted. "I think not. Gather all the children, and we'll get you connected with the appropriate social agency. I take full responsibility."

Sean didn't even look at Ben. "No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean, 'no'. We know all about social agencies. We aren't doing that."

"Do you know who I am?"

"You dress like a priest."

"I *am* a priest. I am also the local authority for implementing the Regulations of Religious Practices. So gather the children—that is an order."

"No."

The priest started to take a step forward, and finally realized what Sean might be ready to bring out from under his shirt. Bullying children was one thing, but this young man had a very un-childlike steadiness to his gaze.

"I'll be back, and then we'll see. Sister?"

Elena didn't move. "'Mother.'"

The priest stared at her. "I can have you in prison, and your two girls in a reeducation camp. Your call." He stalked out of the church.

Mother looked at Ben.

"He didn't see you. Now I know."

"Ben?" Sean was calming down, and back to being puzzled.

“I don’t know why, but the more evil someone is, the harder it is for them to see me.”

Mother nodded. “Gentled.”

“I’ve never heard that term.”

She shrugged. “‘Gentled of Mary’. Stories only.”

Ben was curious, but there were more pressing issues.

“Who is that priest going to call? Have we brought danger?”

“Danger everywhere. Good people, bad people. This church, hidden. No help for bad man. But . . . we leave soon? He gets help from bad men in town.”

Ben walked to the back rooms to rap his knuckles on the doors.

“Morning! Time to hustle! Get packed, it’s time to go!”

Kit came out of her room to look at him with sad eyes.

“Why don’t we stay here? I like this place.”

Ben nodded sympathetically. “Bad people know we’re nearby. Even if they don’t find us, they’ll follow people, and hunt the woods, and ask people, and eventually hurt people. We aren’t the first this place has helped, and we won’t be the last. But it’s a step along the path, not the place to stop.”

Ben looked over his shoulder to see Mother Nena watching.

“And Mother Nena and her sisters are coming with us, so we leave this place much stronger than when we arrived.”

Messenger

Fleeing

With the knowledge that pursuit would be coming as soon as the priest could gather it, they hurried across the fields and cut into the forest as soon as they could. In along this part of the forest the undergrowth was thick, so Ben and the other boys had to take turns breaking through and trampling down the saplings, prickly canes of blackberry, and extravagant growths of stinging nettle. They heard no sound of pursuit, but there was no doubt that hostile eyes would be watching for them soon enough.

When they finally reached a regular forest path, it was with mixed feelings. They could move quickly and without the catches and stings of the underbrush. But now they were on the same path a search party might well use, so every minute or two Ben would halt them and listen in silence before continuing.

Their cross-country trail blazing to reach the path had been far from silent. Another danger was that somebody had heard them, and moved to lay an ambush. Ben didn’t like to send Sean out ahead—if he met conflict, he’d likely kill without compunction—but Ben could conceive of no other way to hedge against this danger. So Sean ranged far ahead, then let the whole group pass him. Ben brought up the rear, often turning to look for any sign of somebody following or stalking them.

Turnoff

They finally stopped for a meal in the late afternoon. The young were gaunt of face, hungry and thirsty and tired and scared. There was no sense trying to hide themselves; it was so open here that they’d have to go a half mile or more to have any chance of avoiding detection from the path, even if they could conceal their trail. So they just settled right on the path, and Ben organized a division of food and water.

The remainders were just being packed when he heard the sound he’d been dreading. Coarse voices, and then shouted commands. They came from behind, and then he also heard them from up ahead. Everybody froze, looking at Ben with frightened eyes.

Ben's father had taught him a lesson for military officers. You didn't always have to be right, but you always had to be certain.

"Ok, we can move ahead and then turn off before we encounter that group. I'm sorry, it's going to be a pretty brisk pace." With that, he urged them into motion.

Sean looked at him questioningly, but Ben shook his head. "No need to scout, now that we know they're there. Take the end of the line, and keep them from straggling. Let me know if you spot anybody coming up on us from the back."

They had gone up a rise and back down twice, and Ben was expecting to run into the group ahead of them any time now. And then he saw it—a path which curled up around a large rock with a tree growing against it. It wasn't really a path; he couldn't have said why he even noticed it. But he led them off the path, this turnoff leading them up, around the tree and boulder, then hooking down and back around through a dry creek bed which hadn't been visible from the path.

He got them all settled, nestled against the side of the creek bed and invisible from the path, and motioned for absolute silence. He then darted back, grabbing a fallen branch, and swept the dirt where they'd turned off from the path to hide any sign of where they'd exited. He had just faded back from the path to duck behind the rock when he heard somebody coming rapidly up the path. Then they slowed; Ben was afraid something had been spotted. But the steps were steady, the man breathing hard, then his breath slowing as he caught his breath. Presently he started up to a run again. The sound faded away.

Scout pace Ben thought. Run fifty steps, then walk fifty. It ate up a lot of ground, and was favored by the military as the perfect balance of speed without exhaustion. They'd gotten out of the way just in time, but once that scout reached whatever group was coming from the opposite direction, they'd be very busy searching off the path to see where they'd left it. He placed his branch, and a few more, to screen the path back around this boulder and make it even less obvious.

Cancelled Hunt

Ben quietly rejoined his group, then led them off using the dry creek bed as a trail. It twisted and turned, and presently they came across a rough footbridge at about chest level which carried a path at right angles to their own, letting that path cross their creek even when it wasn't dry. Ben considered which direction would gain the most distance from the pursuit, and then led them up the bank, and then across the bridge to follow its path towards some grassy hills in the distance.

Something told him, even with the lack of trees, that it was the right direction. Their path took them between hills, comfortably screened from their pursuers off to the left. Even better, the path gently curved to the right, leading them even further away from pursuit.

Presently, it took a final curve and opened into a wider path which led down into a small, grassy valley. The grass was golden on the hills on either side, and right down in the center of the valley a glowing figure stood, apparently waiting for them.

"Wait here." Ben walked down the path and stopped before the figure.

Another angel, he thought. The angel was tall, slender, and glowed with a quality of light totally unlike the sunlight of the day. Ben bowed.

"That's unneeded. Great changes have started. Take your charges onward, teach them, bring them into the sacraments, follow the coast south. Help them start anew; others will join you."

The voice wasn't sound, in the same way that his glow wasn't light. Ben was trying to think of at least one question when his shoulder was shaken.

"Ben! Ben! Wake up."

Ben opened his eyes. He was laying down. He got up, looking around. The whole group had come down from where he had left them, and the sun was setting. Sean was there, his hand still on Ben's shoulder.

“What did you see?”

Sean seemed relieved to hear Ben talking. “You stopped us, came down here. We watched, and watched. Then just now you laid down, so we had to come down and see if you were OK. You *are* OK?”

“Yes, thank you. Any sign of our pursuers?”

“Yes, that’s the other thing. We heard them coming near, and then they were silent. At first I thought they were sneaking up on us, but now I’m not sure.”

“We’ll set up camp here. Sean, watch over them, I need to check our back trail.”

About a half mile back, Ben came across some figures lying beside the path. They were military, pistols on their belts and automatic weapons slung on their backs. And they were dead, the expression on their faces one of surprise.

Nothing Ben knew of angels would ever have them killing mortals like this. He could think of some mass death events in the bible, but in personal encounters it was usually afflictions like blindness, not dropping individuals in their tracks. He guessed “great changes” meant something had gone very wrong, and it very likely involved the man-machine brain integration which was so very popular with the modern government. Looking further back along the path, he assumed he’d find the rest of the pursuers in similar circumstances. Then he raised his eyes to consider all the people out there in every direction. Most people had technology embedded into their heads. What had just happened? He offered a silent prayer, then turned to rejoin his group.

Towards the Coast

Hospitality

Ben didn’t know this area in any detail, but he knew which direction led to the coast. So after bunking down for the night, they proceeded on the path where they’d met the angel, presently coming upon a fork where the leftward one should take them straight towards the coast. He decided to interpret the angel’s guidance as meaning they didn’t need to keep a desperate pace. Especially the young couldn’t have done it anyway, so he led at nothing more than a gentle walk.

Sean still insisted on ranging ahead before they reached the crest of each hill, and not long before Ben would have called a lunch break, Sean hurried back.

“There’s a building beside this path, and I think there are people there.”

Ben called a halt, then hurried to follow Sean up to peer at the building. Sean was already studying the terrain to either side.

“We can go up and around behind that hill.”

Ben followed Sean’s gesture with his eyes, studying the path they’d need to blaze.

“That’ll cost us a day. I think this place might be OK; let me go down and talk with them.”

“And if they kill you?”

“Remember me in your prayers.”

Ben got up and walked straight down the path. He could feel Sean’s eyes on his back, and then up ahead somebody came out of the building to stand on its porch, waiting for him.

Ben walked up to turn and face the man watching him from the porch. He studied the place as he approached—it was obvious the building was a country store, with the owners living upstairs. The man had a pistol in a holster, and his hand hung near it. But he made no other threatening move.

“Good afternoon, stranger.”

Ben bobbed his head. “Good afternoon. I’m heading towards the coast—do you know anything about the conditions along this route?”

“You know that lots of people just dropped dead yesterday?”

“I saw some, yes.”

“This road used to have bullies patrolling it all day and all night, but I think those days are over. There’s one medium big town between here and the coast, and I’ve heard they still have some bully-boys in control there.”

“How about children?”

His face registered a pang of pain. “I had children.”

And then Ben was sure. He waved to Sean, and presently the whole group stood before the man. He studied them for a moment, and then a smile crossed his face.

“Come on in, it’s lunch time and you look hungry.” He turned to go in, then turned back. “I’m Len.”

As Len made them lunch—bread, eggs, greens, and a hard white cheese—Ben told him about their travels. When the story was complete, Len shook his head.

“I wish you’d come by here two years ago, before we lost all our young’uns.”

Ben shrugged apologetically. “I was in no position to help back then, I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m glad you saved as many as you have. So on this road, by day’s end you should be in sight of the town. It’s a bad place, and I’ve heard it’s still held by the same sort of people, even after so many dropped dead. It straddles a pretty big river, and they purposely destroyed all the bridges up and down the river so you have to go through the town to get to the other side. You only get to cross if you have *permission*.”

“Is there anybody with a boat who might help us?”

“No, they’ve been hunting down that sort of thing, and there’s really nothing left for as far up and down the river as I’ve heard. They’ve worked hard to make their bridge the only option.”

Through Town

They bedded down at the invitation of Len, and he was up early making them breakfast the next morning. Ben awoke, and joined him as the rest of his group started to stir.

“We’re eating up all your food.”

Len shook his head. “Nah, I have plenty. And I’d give it all up and go hungry just to see this many young, healthy kids get free of this whole mess.”

“How do we get through this town? There’s one bridge?”

“And that bridge is gated and guarded, day and night.” He paused. “I know there used to be a pedestrian bridge as well. But a madman took it over, and he’s so dangerous they just let him be the guard of it.”

“Madman?”

“He screams in a language nobody knows, and has superhuman strength. He kills with his bare hands, and it’s so ugly they sometimes force prisoners to go out on the bridge and fight him. For amusement. They say he can move so fast, the eye can’t even follow.”

“Tongues, huh?” Ben felt a stirring of hope. “He’s possessed?”

“Could be—I’m no expert. You have a priest who can do an exorcism?”

“Not a priest, no. I also doubt most of the priests in recent years would even attempt it. But we might be able to work with this.”

They spent the rest of the time until breakfast started getting Ben fully briefed on how to sneak through the town.

The Town

They'd helped Len clean up after breakfast, and now they had been walking at a good pace for hours. The road was almost entirely empty; just once, they had scrambled into cover beside the road as a vehicle approached. It was a jeep, driven by a single haggard man, and racing away from the town. The driver looked neither right nor left, apparently entirely focused on putting distance between himself and the town. Ben finally motioned them back onto the road to continue.

"There might be pursuers, so be ready to hide."

But nobody else came, and they had stopped for lunch and walked until the sun was low in the sky when they reached a steep hill. The hill was bare, so Ben decided to keep the group back until he knew how they would approach this town.

"We'll be up high, looking down on the town from this hill's crest. Stay here until Sean and I return."

Ben led Sean up the road, then swung off to the left where he saw the grass had grown a little higher beside the road, and the hill contoured a little lower than at the road itself. This would give them a nice view, while minimizing their own danger of being spotted from the town. They finished the final few feet to the "military crest" crawling on their stomachs, then studied the town below.

It started at the base of their hill, no more than a half mile away. It had been a small town, perhaps a couple thousand residents at its peak. Time had not been kind here, for a number of blocks held shattered, ruined buildings or ones which had burned to a husk. The town had been built straddling a river, about half of it on each side. Ben spotted several broken places which had been bridges across in the past. The largest bridge was intact, but had green military vehicles blocking it on both sides.

Not far from the big bridge was a much smaller one, making a proud, slender arch over the river. Ben studied it closely, and decided it really was intact. It was also empty, not even guarded at either end. If there was a madman—a possessed—he could guess where such a creature might shelter, ready to jump up and bar passage.

How to reach that bridge? How to cross? And how to proceed away from the town on the other side? Ben studied a path to the pedestrian bridge which would probably avoid the few military-type people he could see. On the other side, the buildings were taller and, though quiet, made it far too hard to tell what they'd encounter. Take Sean and work their way through the town? He was pretty sure they'd be spotted, and without the element of surprise, he'd never got back and take the group safely through.

Sean had been quiet beside him, pursuing his own thoughts. Now he looked at Ben.

"I think I can kill them all."

Ben looked at him in shock.

"And if you *only* kill half before they gun you down? Where does that leave the rest of us?"

Sean shrugged. "You have a better plan?"

"As a matter of fact—yes." He sniffed. "By the way, did you burn something?"

Sean shrugged again. "Probably just me working with the cook fire."

The pair slithered carefully back away from their vantage point, then hurried to the waiting group. They all watched apprehensively as Ben and Sean returned. Sean shrugged, then turned to watch Ben.

"Sean and I had a good look. *I* have come up with a plan to distract them, over on the side of town away from the small bridge. When the sun sets, we'll all walk up to the top of that hill. Then Sean and I will go down into the town, and set up a distraction. Sue and Mother Lena will wait with you up here, and when you see everybody running around in excitement—they'll lead you down and up to the small bridge. We'll join you there, and then we'll all cross and try to get through the rest of town and out into the country beyond before the bad people in town even know we've been here."

Sue raised her hand, "What do we do if they catch us?"

“It’s better to be caught and alive. You can always escape again, and we’ll be working on that. Sue, you will have to be the judge of when you can elude and escape, and when there’s no other option.”

Sue frowned, but didn’t say anything else.

The Distraction

It seemed to take forever, but finally the sun had fully set. With Ben leading and Sean guarding the rear of their column, and Kit tasked with keeping Terry moving along, they started up the hill. The sun was all the way down before they crested the hill, so Ben just let them walk right up to the crest, and they all looked downward at the town.

Ben remembered when a town or city would be aglow with light. No more. But there were jeeps moving about, and here and there a patrol would use a flashlight. There were oil lamps hanging at strategic places where military checkpoints had been established. A single company from the military in Ben’s memory would have defeated the whole lot in a few hours of fighting, but he and his children would have to use stealth and misdirection instead.

Giving them all parting hugs or reassuring pats on the shoulder, Ben left, Sean in tow, and walked down the hill alongside the road into the town. There was a security post right where the road reached the town, so well short of it Ben led them off to the left. Whatever that security post on the road was intended to do, prevention of infiltration was no part of it. Once out of the puddle of light from the post, they walked straight into town, protected by the deep shadows.

Ben’s target was harder to find in the dark, but presently the sign of a long-ago hardware store chain loomed up in the darkness, barely visible in the little light reaching them from the nearest security post. The front door was chained, but Ben went around to the side and saw a ladder laying in the alley beside the hardware store building. He motioned Sean to help, and they quietly brought it up vertical, shifting it until it was resting against the wall, ending right beside a window. Ben climbed up.

This was one of the ticklish parts of the plan. Depending on how stuck—or securely locked—the window was, the forcing of it might make enough noise to bring somebody. But he smiled as his hands traced the window frame; it was nothing but dry rotted wood, and crumbled away at his touch. Soon he had the window pane of glass loose, and pulled it out and handed it gently down to Sean. He slipped through the opening, twisting so his feet came through and then lowering them down onto the inside floor.

Ben brought out his flashlight—a gift from Ellen way back at their camp—and made sure it was thoroughly wrapped in black cloth. He turned it on, and saw no light at all, then carefully unwrapped cloth until the barest glimmer of light let him see the room. There were boxes stacked against the wall, and a gaping hole in the middle of the floor. He realized that they had stacked things until the weight made the old, rotting floor fail. He hoped he was lighter than the boxes, and worked his way along the perimeter of the room where the floor was probably strongest. The doorway had hinges on one side, but whatever door had been here was gone.

He looked out into a hallway, seeing open doorways on his right, and a staircase going down to the hardware store proper. The floor was in much better shape here, and he went down the stairs to find himself in among shelves holding every manner of supplies—screws, bolts, tools, rope, even plumbing fixtures. He grinned; his plan was probably going to work. He had hoped that the local militia would choose to stockpile any remaining supplies in the logical place—a hardware store. He spotted bolt cutters, then went out to the front of the store, snipped the chain binding the door, then carefully opened it to let Sean in. He made sure to re-tension the chain so, on the outside, it would look like the door was still secured.

Ben sniffed, “it smells like something burned.”

Sean shrugged. Ben looked at him sharply, then also shrugged. No time to worry about it now.

They went down to the camping supplies and grabbed a pair of big backpacks, then Sean followed along behind Ben as he chose the items he thought he’d need for the mischief he planned. He noted several full-size welding rigs, holding the light close to verify that they were the expected green and yellow. Satisfied, he

continued until they reached the old children's section. It was obviously not used by the current military townfolk, and he was hoping to find some medium sized balloons. He stopped short when he saw what was stacked on the shelf in front of him.

"This is going to be *epic*."

Sean looked at him in puzzlement, but Ben just gave Sean four of the boxes. They were quite bulky, and then ended up going back to trade the backpacks for full rucksacks. The final item was a pair of 5 gallon kerosene cans, and both of them staggered a bit under the load.

"The welding tanks are way too big—we'll come back for them on a separate trip."

After gingerly peeking out the front door, they made their way towards a park Ben had seen from up on the hill. It was late, and there was little traffic—all of it patrols in jeeps. They kept to the shadows, and made it without incident. Tucking their supplies in behind some shrubs, they went back and did the trip a second time, bringing the bulky tanks of oxygen and acetylene.

Sean had affected some annoyance early on, but by now he had picked up some of Ben's enthusiasm, and his eyes gleamed at the thought of what Ben might do with the supplies they'd stolen. Ben waved for Sean to follow him.

"Let's pick the best place in the park for our show."

They found an abandoned, bedraggled park area with several large, dead hedges. Skeletal trees grew alongside them, and Ben had almost decided to just set up under the largest of the hedges when he caught side of a large mound of some sort. He led them over to study it.

As they neared it, Ben reached down to lift up a chunk of wood. He looked up at the enormous mound, and realized they were storing a large amount of firewood here, nodoubt as a heating supply. Many logs had been bucked, split, and then tossed here to build up a mound of firewood twice as tall as Ben, and at least fifty feet across. With electricity and fossil fuels in short supply everywhere, this was a natural solution. And now he *knew* they could make a distraction big enough to do the job.

One side of the mound even rested against a small maintenance building, and Ben was delighted to find its door unlocked. He turned to Sean.

"Give me one of those boxes, and then pour the kerosene all around the perimeter of this firewood pile."

While Sean went off making glug-glug-glug sounds as he poured the combustible liquid, Ben pulled out the contents of the box. It was a play balloon, one of those which inflated to gigantic proportions so teams of children could bounce around an inflated balloon as big as a car. Ben set it up inside the building, then carefully connected the hoses from the oxyacetylene rig, made his best guess on the mix, and inflated the balloon to fill the building's entire interior. Shutting off the flow, he carefully tied off the balloon and backed out, shutting the door on a building which was now full of a very dangerous gas mix.

Sean had finished, and had been watching Ben as he backed out of the building.

"Light it up?"

Ben shook his head.

"No, we have three more balloons."

Sean's eyebrows raised at this, but he made no other comment. They snuck around the surrounding neighborhood, placing and filling the balloons, which they tucked into an alley, in an abandoned yard, and the final one right inside the hardware supply store. In this last place, they poured out several more of the kerosene tins, ensuring the complete destruction of the supplies.

To ignite the three balloons, Ben had improvised a timer out of a 4-hour utility candle and some tape, the candle's glow hidden by some shaped aluminum foil. He cut the candle down to just its last 1/8, giving them a half hour to start the main event. They lit each candle, then hurried back to the park.

He hadn't considered how to light the kerosene-soaked wood, but finally found some dry waste paper crumpled up against the park's fence. He soaked one edge in the kerosene puddle, then lit it from a book of matches he'd grabbed. The flame burned along the paper, faltered as it encountered the soaked kerosene, and then suddenly flared bright. He pushed it into a puddle beneath the nearest wood, and then he and Sean scrambled backward as the problem of lighting the kerosene went away. A lapping sound like a giant's tongue was the flame racing outward, encircling the wood pile as it gobbled all the air available. The heat was now considerable, and even as the flame engulfed the entirety of the wood pile, it also lit up a nearby hedge and then promptly climbed the nearest tree like some sort of desperate animal.

The heat was terrible, even as far back as they had retreated. Ben pulled Sean to run across the street and head back to get their group. There was a screech of tires, and the first jeep full of guards arrived behind them. Ben and Sean's shadows stretched out ahead of them, lit by the wood pile and tree-torches now burning like suns behind them. The guards were no doubt blinded, and the roaring of the engulfed wood pile, trees, as well as the park's hedges made it hard to hear the arrival of many more vehicles. Then the volcano of the burning firewood entirely consumed the plants, and the flame's light grew even brighter.

Ben had just a moment to wonder when the fire would burn through that utility building's walls when a POP sound hit him so hard he actually felt all his insides compress. The building had simply disappeared, and its explosion blew burning chunks of wood outward in every direction, turning the inferno into a circle of flame as big as a football field.

So that's what an oxyacetylene balloon sounds like when it explodes Ben mused. They had barely started to run again when another balloon went off. In the moment after the second explosion, Ben thought it had blown out the fire in the park. But no, there it was roaring away. It just didn't seem so loud after that pair of explosions. He hoped everybody down by the park was OK; he'd intended a distraction, not a deadly trap. It now looked like everybody in the town was converging on the park. Some reversed when a loud but more distant explosion announced the hardware store's balloon bomb had gone off. Soon flames were visible above the roofs of the nearest buildings.

They hurried off, eventually hearing one final explosion from off in the distance.

The Possessed

Ben and Sean moved at almost a sprint, slowed only by their need to stay hunched over and less visible. By the time they reached the road Sue had used to lead the children, there was no further sign of men racing to the fire and explosions. They had moved at such a pace that Ben caught sight of the tail end of Sue's group, and they quickly caught up.

They passed up the group, starting with Mother Nena, who with her two sisters was making sure nobody straggled. They gently pushed their way past all the children in a line, who gave small gasps before recognizing them. Ben reached Sue at the front just as she stopped short of the small pedestrian bridge. She had heard the children, and turned expectantly to Ben.

"I'm glad you're here. There's somebody near the far side of the bridge."

Ben patted her shoulder, then edged past her so he could step onto the bridge itself. He had made no sound at all, but it was still as if he had stepped on a button to ring a door bell. A figure jumped out of the shadows on the other side onto the bridge at the far end, then scrambled to reach the halfway point of the bridge. It was a man, but he moved like an animal. Ben remembered seeing a dog dying of rabies, and this man looked much like that poor animal.

But afflicted animals didn't speak.

"Oh, a great holy man and his little lambs! He's leading you to the slaughter, you poor little fools! Once he sells you, he'll be high and mighty. As for you..."

Here he proceeded into a great deal of unseemly detail, and Ben quickly paired up the older children with the younger ones, sending them back so they didn't need to hear such language. As he turned back to face the

bridge, Sean stepped beside him holding a walking stick, which Ben realized would make an excellent cudgel. Sean made as if to pass him and fight the creature on the bridge, but Ben raised a hand to stop him.

“No, Sean. This one’s for me.”

“But you don’t fight!”

“I’m not here to fight things *of this world*.”

Ben stepped away from him, and again faced the bridge. The possessed man stopped screaming, and watched him narrowly before breaking out into a grin.

“Oooooohhhh! A little lamb of Mary come to be killed and eaten. Come on my bridge, you gentled victim, and I shall turn you into a meal.”

Ben smiled. The possessed man was wearing nothing but rags, and he held his hands out like claws, the fingernails ragged and bloody. But when Ben took his first step onto the bridge, the man’s face showed trepidation. He tried to rally his courage.

“You forgot your weapon, Gentled! Why not send the little boy with his little stick, and save yourself?”

Ben made the sign of the cross, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The movement of his finger left a line hanging in the air, a bright burning red. There was now a cross before him, and it moved forward with him as he took another step towards the possessed man.

“Lord Jesus, accept me to act as one of your Sent, as there is a demon here who needs to be cast back into the pit.”

Ben’s voice was quiet, yet a great electric tension rose in the air. The possessed made as if to turn back, but Ben raised a hand towards him, and he stopped, brought back to face Ben, who took another step.

The possessed’s face now had a haunted, terrified expression. “Stop, Gentled! We have your wife, and. . .”

Ben’s voice rang loud, drowning out the claim, “You have *nothing*, demon. There is *nothing* which can be built from lies, and that is why there will be no deal here. Do you want to leave, or do you want to be driven out?”

Ben had continued his slow walk forward, and was just six steps from the possessed. The man raised his head, shrieked, then tried to come forward, clawed hands reaching for Ben’s face. Ben was ready.

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I cast you OUT demon. Saint Michael the Archangel protect me. Holy Spirit, drive this spawn of hell down into the PIT.”

The man’s shrieks cut off as if a switch was thrown. Something rushed in the air, and for a moment it was as if a gap was left in the world. Then the world was whole again, and Ben faced a simple man, who lowered his hands.

“I’m sorry,” he whimpered, then twisted to the side and jumped off the bridge.

“Wait!” Ben shouted, then stopped as he saw it was too late. “We could have helped. . .” he murmured as the body dashed upon some exposed rocks below, then was carried away by the current.

“Ben!” Sue came running up to him on the bridge. “We saw you talking to him, and then he. . . jumped. What did you say?”

“Someday, Terry will explain it to you.” Ben felt tired, and sat down to catch his breath. Sue just looked puzzled, but Ben noticed that Mother Nena had come up; her face was sad with understanding.

Getting Back Out

The Bad Side of Town

They had all been so focused on getting across the pedestrian bridge that they hadn’t noticed what was happening over where Ben and Sean had set the fire and explosions. As they stepped off the small bridge,

Ben looked towards that part of town and saw that the sky was even brighter with a yellow glow. Either the fire in the park had spread wider than he would have thought possible, or possibly one of those balloon bombs had ignited a building. Parts of this town were certainly on fire, and he doubted they had enough of a fire department left to stop it.

Not a result he'd wanted, but he still couldn't think of any other way to get past. The best of the bad options; on his conscience it would be, then.

The buildings on this side were tall and, even in the poor light, obviously dilapidated, if not crumbling. They were mostly built close together, with just dirty narrow lanes between them. Ben could see the dingy lane leading straight ahead from their small bridge was interrupted by a chain link fence, topped with a coil of barbed wire. To their right, a couple buildings over, was a wider road which also headed in their desired direction.

Ben led the group, looking down the next narrow lane to their left as they approached the larger avenue. This lane was filled with piles of garbage. Ben sighed and walked on until stopping short of the larger thoroughfare.

"Sean, can you get down low, and peek around the corner? Can we use this road?"

Sean was down on his stomach and carefully peering around the corner before Ben was even done speaking. He watched briefly before withdrawing his head. He turned to address Ben from down on the ground.

"There are four men and a jeep with some sort of gun mounted. Two are standing beside the car, but the driver's in place, there's man at the gun, too."

So it wasn't going to be the quick and easy path.

Ben led them back to the original narrow alley, and walked up to the chain link fence. They'd kept a pair of bolt cutters from the hardware store—basically, gigantic strong scissors, and Ben brought them out of his pack.

Sean had been studying the padlock on the gate, which was snapped on to a chain wrapped around the gate and to a post, holding the gate shut.

"The padlock's pretty good, but this chain is cheap garbage."

Ben nodded, then put one side of a link of chain in the jaws of the cutter and brought the handles together to make it cut. He felt nothing, and heard only the slightest *snick* as the chain was cut open. He cut the other side, and the chain fell away. Sean unwound the chain from the gate as Ben put the cutters back in his pack.

Thus they proceeded through what was apparently the warehouse district of the town. They followed narrow alleys, and usually found a gate fastened in an equally careless matter. Some paths were blocked by mounds of trash, and then they'd search for a parallel alley which was either open or had a gate. At one, Ben had to hoist Sean up to the top of a wooden fence, and Sean dropped down on the other side to release its latch.

They'd periodically check the main avenues, hoping to leave any guards behind. But this warehouse district held too much of value, and there were guards posted at regular intervals, keeping watch despite all the fire excitement which was finally quieting over on the other side of the river. Their luck held in finding ways alongside these buildings until they reached one almost at the far edge of the district.

The building made up most of the block, directly fronting the main avenue to their right. Not only was there a jeep parked out in the avenue; it even had a floodlight going, making it dangerous even to try and take a look around the corner. There was just one equally large warehouse to its left, and then the next guarded avenue on that side. The one alley between them was blocked by a sheet of steel 12 or more feet in height, welded to posts sunk into the ground. Ben lightly rapped the metal with his knuckles, and it felt like rapping on a bank vault door. Ben traced along the wall of the warehouse, stopping at a door inset in the wall. But it was as solid as the sheet of steel between the buildings, and there was no knob or even a keyhole on its face.

He heard a noise up above them, and started in dismay to see a small figure climbing up the concrete wall of the building. He looked over at the children, did an inventory in his mind, then looked upward again. It was Newt. She was so small and quiet that it was easy to forget about her. But there she was, using a drain pipe and whatever irregularities the concrete offered to shimmy her way up.

Ben could see that the second storey had a window which was shuttered with a steel plate. But Newt didn't even look at it, continuing past the third floor before reaching the roof of the warehouse. She was quite high up, and Ben had dreaded something giving way on her. But she snaked over the top without incident, and after a truly worrying delay, the door beside them clicked and then swung inward, Newt peeking out at them.

"Newt! You need to talk to me before you do something like that!" Ben hissed.

She studied him. "You would have said 'no'." She turned and motioned them to follow. "You're not going to believe this place."

The interior of the building was one wide, open space. One wall had a spiral staircase going up to the ceiling, obviously Newt's path down from the roof. Up near the roof, mounted at intervals of ten feet, were banks of LED lights. They were gently glowing, making it possible to see the contents of the warehouse.

"I saw solar panels on the roof," Newt offered.

The lights shone on row and after row after row of glass display cases. Each was a cylinder seven feet high, with a rounded glass top. Ben approached one, and saw that it contained a store display dummy wearing an intricate, beautiful dress.

"That's a Dior." Sue had some up quietly beside him. "It cost \$50,000."

Ben looked at her quizzically, "Do you know a lot about such dresses?"

"I hid a bunch of catalogues when I saw that beauty was going to be outlawed. Sometimes I felt like those were the last pretty things in the world."

They walked to the next case. Even in the dim light of the warehouse he could see this dress featured rich green colors.

"Valentino." They walked on. "Another Dior," then "Armani."

The whole group had filled in behind Sue, as if she was a tour guide.

"Do they all cost \$50,000, Sue?" asked Kit.

She shook her head. "No, the Dior's are the cheap ones. Most of these are more than \$100,000. That one—" she pointed at the Armani—"is probably more than \$200,000."

Kit's eyes were bright, "This is like your catalogues, Sue, except for real!"

Sue brushed a tear from her eye. "I almost wish I hadn't seen these. They took away my catalogues and burned them. I'm so tired of seeing things which the bad people ruin."

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "Let's get back outside, and then we'll offer a prayer for the protection of this building."

They continued along the line of dresses on display, realizing that they were seeing just one of the many rows of dresses beckoning off into the recesses of the warehouse. Ben slowed as they reached the end of the row, at a wall with a steel door held by a complicated frame of locking bars.

"Somebody wanted one little corner of this fallen world to remind us what kind of beauty the old world offered."

He turned a wheel at the center of the door, and locking bars smoothly retracted from the door. The final turn of the wheel caused springs on the wall beside the door to slowly compress. The wheel came to a stop with a final click.

They all watched Ben in silence. He waited, making sure the door mechanism had no more surprises, then pulled on the wheel attached to the steel door. At first he thought it hadn't moved, but then he realized it was coming towards him smoothly, but slowly. He stopped pulling, and it continued to move for many seconds afterward. The door was unlocked, but must weigh thousands of pounds; the inertia of its mass was incredible.

He continued pulling, but stopped as the first crack of an opening to the building's outside appeared around the door. The door continued opening, slowing to a halt with several inches of opening exposed. He wanted enough of an opening to take a peek outside, so he continued gingerly pulling the door open. It finally stopped with more than a foot of gap, and he carefully stuck his head through to look outside and see if it was safe to exit.

Their warehouse's lighting, dim though it was, had ruined his night vision. He also realized that there was a dim but visible bar of light cast out of their cracked door and onto the sidewalk in front. One way or another, this door needed to be closed soon. But there was some illumination, and he realized that the moon must be up in the sky somewhere. It let him make out a few details of their immediate environment.

This last, enormous warehouse apparently made up the outermost edge of the warehouse district. It fronted on a wide avenue, across which he could see the beginnings of a residential area. None of the houses had lights, and where he could make out any details in the dim night light, the front yards of the houses looked unkempt. Hopefully they could make their way through this unpopulated, desolate remnant of a town which had lost most of its population, and then be on their way across the fields he'd seen beyond the town.

They each in turn slipped past the massive warehouse door, and clustered around it on the outside. When the last person was through—Mother Nena, making sure no child had been lost—Ben pulled on the door slowly and steadily. It swung towards him as he maintained his effort, and Ben stopped pulling when he judged its momentum would suffice. It swung shut with a solid but quiet THUNK, and then they heard a rasp-tick-tick-tick. Ben pushed, but the door had re-locked itself, doubtless using the impulse from those compressed springs on the inside. He crossed himself, then placed his hands on the door.

“Lord, protect this storehouse of the beauty which our old ways of living created, that we may be inspired by the best of our past even as we repair the ravages of its worst.”

“Amen,” the whole group intoned.

Ben turned to study the distance across the road and to the nearest house.

“Let's get out of here.”

Across Suburbia

He looked both ways up the wide, empty road in front of them. It appeared unguarded, so their best bet was to get across as quickly as possible, and hope nobody with headlights turned onto the road while they were crossing.

“Is everybody ready? You'll follow me as quickly as you can run?”

He watched for each head to nod at least once, and then:

“Go!”

He sprang forward, and heard the scramble of feet behind him. As he reached the middle of the road, headlights turned on, spotlighting the whole group. Nothing had turned a corner, the vehicle had been in place, dark and waiting.

They knew we'd have to cross this road, so they waited with dark-adjusted eyes and just quietly watched. I hate clever enemies.

“Keep going! We need to get in among those houses.”

He heard an engine start as they reached the first house. It had no fence on one side, and he led them into its backyard, through a hole in the back fence, and out past another empty home. Its fence was intact, but they were on the inside of the yard, and Ben operated its simple latch to let them out onto the street in front of this house. They were now one block in away from the warehouse.

Decision time. If they knew anything about law enforcement, they would race to get out beyond where they could possibly run, and establish a perimeter—a box with them inside. After that, they could work their way

in one house at a time until they found his group. The houses in this neighborhood were laid out in a grid, making such a containing box easy to undertake.

He looked quickly in both directions down the road in front of this house, then raced them across. He heard no engines and saw no lights, probably because they had gone forward at least another block, to make sure their perimeter contained them. The gate for this latest house was unlocked, and as they crossed its backyard, Ben noticed it had a large tree. So had the house across the street; probably it was a standard feature. It was a Big Leaf maple, and he saw abundant drifts of still-green leaves on the ground, and he finally had an idea.

They crossed three more roads before Ben spotted the headlights of cars at both ends of the next road. They'd reached the outer edge of their box, then. Ben quickly huddled with Sue and Sean, handing them each a lighter and a number of other supplies.

"First, *make sure your house is empty*. Then fill the downstairs with green leaves."

He demonstrated how to gather up a large armful of leaves.

"The leaves will provide smoke—the light breeze will blow the smoke out to fill the street—that should make it impossible for them to see if we cross. With three smokey houses all along this road, they'll have to hurry and make a new, larger perimeter."

Sean wrinkled his nose.

"You want us to set the house on fire?"

"Yes."

Ben proceeded to tell them how such a thing was done (and I don't see any reason to include such details). Sue went off with Kit one way, Sean with Newt the other, and Ben kept the rest of the group with him, and set them to work filling their own house with leaves. When they were ready, Ben waited until Kit, then Newt rushed up.

"Ready!"

Ben went back inside the house, and hurried out with a glow already building from inside the doomed structure. Sean and Sue ran up, and Ben could see their houses were even further along.

A remarkable wall of smoke was streaming out of every door and window in their own house, and Ben could hear honking and shouts in the distance. He listened hard for any sign of a vehicle coming through the smoke, heard nothing, and waved them to race across the street.

They gathered in the side yard of the latest house; Ben could see the children's faces were both excited and a little shocked by the spectacle of a house burning like a torch. Then smoke drifted down the street, and the burning house became just a reddish glow lost in the smoke. Ben had to tap several children on the shoulder to draw their attention away from the fiery light, then led them through yet another backyard.

They crossed several more sequences of road-house-yard-yard-house-road as they worked their way across the blocks of this abandoned suburban sprawl. The fire and smoke had thrown off their pursuers, and nobody spotted them as they crossed each road in turn. Ben was almost thinking they were going to get away without further trouble when they reached the final block of houses.

As they emerged from the backyard, ready to scramble across the road to the next block, they instead saw that they had reached the limit of the suburbs. Across the street was just open fields, all the way out to a line of forest several hundred yards away. Their pursuers had obviously given up on trying to catch them in among the ruined houses, and instead had parked jeeps with spotlights. The lights glared brightly; they would be instantly spotted if they walked out onto the road.

Ben briefly considered starting more fires, but he could hear men working their way down the line of houses towards them, kicking in doors and making sure there was nobody inside. There was no way they could use their trick again. A jeep drove out into the field, then stopped to let its own spotlight sweep back and forth across the expanse of grass.

Trapped

Twisting his head back and forth, Ben realized that there were soldiers coming from *both* directions along the block. The soldiers were closer now, apparently sensing that their trap was closing on Ben's group. He could hear the voices of the soldiers, the words taking on an anticipatory hunger.

"Come out, little ones. I will show you *my* religion!"

This, further crudities, and rough laughter made all of them shrink down even lower beside the nearest house. Ben saw nothing but long shots, but it seemed like he had to play the hand he was dealt.

"Ok, I'm going to go back and surprise them, get control of a gun. I'll shoot at that jeep out in the field, and when they get distracted and chase me, use that opening to get over to the forest. Travel as fast as you can—I'll catch up."

Ben started to move towards the back of the house, planning to work through back yards until he could surprise an armed soldier. But then he was stopped by the gentle—but unyielding—hand of Sean. Somehow Sean had quietly strapped on more knives than Ben would have guessed he even owned. Over his shoulder was a *sword*, and he had changed to clothing which was entirely black. That burnt smell from last night was now explained—his face was blackened, no doubt from a burnt cork.

"Sorry, Ben. It's a good plan, but you're the wrong one to go fight these men. I'll get *all* those jeeps to close on me, and then you head out. And like you said, keep going—I'll catch up. I love you, and if you see Sister again, please tell her I'm sorry and I love her, too."

Ben looked Sean in the eye. Where he had always before seen a wild, restless fury—sometimes hidden, never absent—there was now peace and gladness in Sean's eyes. Ben leaned his head forwards until their foreheads touched. After a few moments, Ben lifted his head and placed a hand gently on top of Sean's head.

"If you must do this, do it as a Warrior of God. I had hoped. . . ." Ben shrugged, and withdrew his hand.

"Your gift is that I *have* learned how to do this thing as a proper member of the Church Militant. Pray for me."

Sean stepped away, and was gone around a corner before Ben could even think of an answer.

"Deus tecum."

Sean

They could hear the soldiers getting even closer, the sound of each building's doors and windows being smashed in as they searched. But Ben began to realize that although the search was approaching, it was getting quieter. As if the number of people was shrinking. His suspicion was confirmed when he heard a voice raised in alarm, and many people shouting back and forth as they realized something was wrong.

Whatever they had found took the gloating right out of their voices. Anger and even moreso fear had replaced it. Whoever was in charge out there sent people to check across all the squads, and more and more shouts of dismay rang out as they discovered the extent of Sean's work. Ben heard as an officer called them all back to a point well up the road, and started to organize them against this threat. And also to rebuild some courage.

"Ok, we have somebody good with knives, gets in and kills quietly. We'll group here, and sweep the streets in squads. He can't get at us one at a time when we are grouped. . . ."

The voice broke off as an automatic weapon opened fire on them. Grouping together was a good defense against a knife or even sword attack, but it was a horrible thing to do if your enemy has an automatic weapon. Sean had, apparently, laid hands on such a thing, and hosed them with a full clip before flitting away.

There were shouts and cries, and presently a new voice started giving orders—the old officer apparently having been rendered "combat ineffective".

"Fall back. Get our jeeps back to meet us. We'll sweep behind the jeep, which can return fire while we flank these insurgents."

Sean had somehow become a group of insurgents.

Ben saw the jeeps—including the one in the field—wheel away, and sent one last prayer to Sean as they raced for the forest.

Last Stand

From within the tree line, Ben stopped to watch the town. They had heard fire periodically, but it seemed mostly like high strung nerves on the part of the soldiers. Twice there were explosions and shouts, so Sean had probably set a trap or two with “borrowed” hand grenades. Now the jeeps, having led their squads all the way through the town, were emerging again at the final road fronting the field. The troops following the jeeps were no longer confident, and multiple times one of them would open fire on a house, with every other soldier joining in using the technique known the world over as “spray and pray”. It would keep up until officers or their sergeants would finally get them to stop firing.

Each jeep had a string of soldiers on foot following it, and a final jeep at the far end was just emerging from town when Ben noticed it had no soldiers following. It turned to play its light across the other jeeps and soldiers, and a figure leapt lightly to the .30 caliber machine gun mounted just behind the front seats of the jeep. It opened fire.

The stream of bullets swept across the gun mounts on each of the other jeeps, then swept back to scythe down the dismounted troops. It went across them once, twice, and a third time. Then, probably finding it was getting a little hot as return fire began, the gunner jumped down into the drivers seat and spun the jeep smartly to head back into the cover of town.

From back among the burning jeeps and fallen troops, a *whoosh* sounded, and a streak of something burning and bright shot out to reach the rogue jeep in the blink of an eye. It exploded in a bright fireball, pieces raining down over the next ten or twenty seconds.

Ben blinked the splotches of color from his eyes, it had been so bright. Truth be told, he also blinked away a few tears, since he had probably just seen Sean’s last, great act of defiance. Sue tugged on his arm.

“Are they going to chase us now?”

“No, now that they’ve found out what sort of entertainment we can provide, I think they’ll stay back there and treat their wounded. They must know that if we have one more warrior like that, they’ll die to the last man.”

“But we don’t, do we?”

“Whenever one is needed, a Christian warrior will appear.”

He led them into the forest, presently finding a path which headed towards the coast.

The River

They hiked at a hard pace for most of the day, finally stopping just short of the top of a ridge. Ben turned to address the group sternly.

“Do not go up near the top for any reason at all. Your outline will show up like a flag saying ‘here we are’ if you go up there. We’ll be back to tell you what we find.”

Ben and Mother Nena carefully crept up to near the top of the slope, then lay down on their stomachs and slowly wriggled up to peer from beneath some low brush which had grown near the top. From this height, they could see they were at the top of a steep rock face, dropping down to the shore of a river which drained into the sea about a mile away to their left. The river was large, at least 100 yards wide, and right below them it was crossed by a line stretched from their side of the shore to the other. The line was made of rope, or perhaps steel cable—it was hard to tell at this distance.

Each side had a dock, and on the far side they could see a barge attached to the crossing line. Further inland to their right they could see what had once been a car bridge which had crossed the river at about their height. Its middle was missing, with broken pieces scattered on the shore beneath.

“Dare we take the ferry across?” Ben asked.

Mother Nena didn’t hesitate, “Yes, but we do it before bad men block it off.”

“Do we need to hike down there tonight?”

“No, too dangerous. But please start early tomorrow.”

Early to Bed, Early to Rise

They carefully wriggled back down the slope, then returned to the camp which was tentatively being set up. Ben explained what they’d seen, and the plan. He’d expected some groans about the early start, but everybody seemed perfectly aware of the danger their pursuers presented.

They cooked quickly with a small fire built right up against the nearest large tree. What little smoke the fire made was dispersed as it passed up through the branches and needles of the tree, and they put it out as quickly as they could once some food was cooked and water heated. After eating they then re-packed everything so they could start as soon as there was a hint of morning light, and then everybody bedded down.

The night was getting cold, and Ben knew he’d be watching until morning. Using a small flat of bark he’d found, he scooped aside the place where they’d cooked against the tree, then sat on the still-warm earth where the fire had been. Leaning against the trunk, he looked up at the stars in the clear sky and let his mind wander even as his ears listened for the slightest hint of an intruder.

The night passed without incident, and Ben watched as morning slowly arrived. When there was just enough light to make out the trees and ground beneath, he stood up and began gently waking everybody, starting with the oldest, Mother Nena. Her eyes opened slowly, and he could see her almost make a complaint before her life of discipline asserted itself.

“Good. You wake boys, I wake girls.”

There were a few questions about breakfast, which Ben brusquely dismissed.

“Cross now, eat later.”

He’d already planned out their descent in his head, and had his longest length of rope coiled beside the tree he’d picked right near the edge of the drop down to the river. Having cut a shorter length of rope and looped it around the tree’s trunk, he now tied it to anchor a large pulley wheel. With one end of his long rope pulled around the wheel, he fed rope around the pulley until about half its length was through, then threw it over the side of the slope. He took the other end of the long rope, and threw it over the edge as well. He now had a rope which went up the slope, through their pulley, then back down again.

Ben put on some leather work gloves, then grabbed both ropes and held them together as he started down the slope, working hand-over-hand as he descended. Even with the steepness of the slope, he was mostly able to place his feet to support his weight, working his way carefully down the slope’s face. On the steepest parts, he had to hang on the rope and hand-over-hand downward until he found footing again. This was physically demanding, but fortunately it was needed only a few times.

When he reached a point towards the bottom where the slope smoothed out and he could safely stand, he pulled on one end of the rope until the other end was even with him. He cut off the rope length, and knotted the two ends together. This gave him a big loop of rope, one end with him, the other going through the pulley up there.

He made it a very big knot, then pulled on one rope end, making the knot climb up the slope as the rope fed through the pulley up at the top. The knot disappeared from view up above, and when he felt the knot bind as it reached the pulley, he called up to the many faces up at the top who’d watched this all with great interest.

“Each oldest come down with one youngest right after you. Catch them if they slip. Hold on to the rope on the side of the pulley with the knot. Mostly the slope’s not too bad, but you’ll have to guide the young past the steepest parts. Hold on to the rope, and I’ll feed it out slowly so you don’t have to worry about sliding down too fast.”

With Sean gone, a boy named Scott was the oldest and strongest of the group. There now proceeded a major shuffling above, and presently Scott came down the slope, a little boy named Teddy right above him. Scott’s strength and agility made the descent easy, and they shortly arrived at the bottom. Then came sisters Ana and Lipa, supporting Mother Nena who followed them. The descent was slow and they slipped many times as they tried to support Mother Nena. Ben and Scott together had to bear the weight of all three more than once, and they ended up just feeding rope to bring down the group of three as a dead weight. When the trio finally arrived at the bottom, Ben thought about making a joke about the old helping the young, but one look at Mother Nena’s pale face made him hold his silence. The three went off to the side to help Mother recover, and the train continued. The last two required Scott to climb back up to the top and guide them down, and then he looked to Ben.

“You doubled the rope so I can pull it down now that we’re all here?”

“Right.”

And so Sean cut the knot, then fed one side up while pulling on the other side, and presently they had all their rope. If their pursuers came this way, they’d have to run out their own rope. Ben wished they could have taken the pulley, but it was still tied to the tree up at the top.

Crossing

It was a short walk now to the dock on their side, and the ferryman had spotted them and had already brought the craft across. He was short and barrel chested, with a long grey beard and an incongruous baseball cap on his head.

“Mother Nena! These can’t all be joining your convent?” His voice was deep and rumbling, and he followed this observation with a booming laugh.

“Mister Stolt, they are Christians and we are all in danger. Can you please get us across—soon, soon, soon?”

The smile dropped off Stolt’s face at this news, and he hustled to make some adjustments to a mechanism having to do with the cable on which the ferry rode.

“Sure, sure. Everybody get on, tell me when you’re ready.”

Ben shepherded the last of them on, did a quick head count to be sure, then gave the word.

“Ready, ferryman!”

Stolt grabbed something which looked a bit like the pedals of a bicycle, except mounted high so he could “pedal” with this hands on it. It was geared to the cable, and the ferry raft began moving across the river. When they were a bit more than halfway across they heard a rifle shot from behind them, and looked up to see a number of figures at the top of the ridge.

Ben noted with dismay that they’d be within easy range of a rifle up there, but it looked like the shot had just been a signal to tell the ferry to stop.

Stolt looked to Ben and nodded towards a box beside him, “Can you please get the pistol in the box and point it at me?”

Ben understood immediately, and brought out an old six-shooter. He swung out the cylinder, made sure there was no cartridge under the revolver’s hammer, then pointed it at the ferryman. He made a mock grimace and said in a low growling voice,

“You keep going or I’ll blast you!”

Stoltman nodded in pretend fright, and they continued moving across the river. When they reached the far side, Ben looked back to see quite a number of their pursuers were out on the dock they'd departed. Apparently they'd quickly found a way down, and were now shouting at them but not yet firing. The reason became clear, when they broke out some sort of straps, and one after another started to inch their way across the cable, each man hanging off the strap looped over it, feet dragging in the water, but coming across at a steady pace.

Stoltman watched this, then shook his head in resignation.

"It's been good running this ferry, but I guess it's time to move on."

Their ferry came to a stop with a bump as they reached the dock on this side of the river. Stoltman looked rueful, but motioned to the thick steel post which anchored the steel cable on their side. There was a large mound against it.

"Explosives?" Ben guessed.

"Lots! Let me set the timer and then I'll come with you. We need to get far away, but at least for me I need to watch it blow up. Get moving away right now."

Stoltman watched them until he was sure they had gained a little distance, then opened a small box mounted to the post and fiddled with some circuitry within. After a final twist of a dial and throwing of a switch, he closed it, then ran towards them.

"Let's go!"

They hustled along a trail which ran parallel to the river, heading inland. Presently Stoltman motioned them off the trail to hunker down. He then went back up the trail a bit. Ben couldn't resist, and followed him. They ended up side by side behind a large boulder, peering over its top to get a view down the river to the dock. The first of the men were well past the halfway point, still hanging from their straps and inching their way across.

Ben was going to ask a question when the explosives went off. There was a shockingly bright flash, and a moment later a sound like the whole world had been hit with a hammer. Ben guessed that all the air had been driven out of his chest, but he hardly noticed because his legs had collapsed. Or maybe the ground had come up and crushed him against it. He was trying to figure it out when Stoltman pressed Ben's head to the ground, then jumped on top of him protectively. He could feel things hitting him, and realized it must be debris raining down from the explosion.

Eventually everything quieted, and Stoltman crawled back off him. Ben raised his head, a large purplish splotch floating in his field of vision where he'd seen the flash of the explosion. Looking out the side of his eyes, he could see Stoltman, grinning with a bloody gash on his head.

Ben tried to say the drollery "Did you use enough explosives there, Butch?" but it was hard to speak clearly when you can't hear your own words. And probably Stoltman couldn't hear him in any case. So he gave that up, simply commented "blind and deaf, great" to which Stoltman grinned again, probably guessing his meaning. They headed back to the others.

Only then did Ben think to look for the pursuers. On their side, there was absolutely nothing except a larger crater, still smoking. He found no sign of the crossing cable and its mount, until he looked all the way over to the other side, and saw that it was still attached on that side, and pulled off down the river. Ben realized that anybody holding on to that cable when the explosives went off was probably already talking to Saint Peter.

His eyes went back to the far side, where he saw that several dozen of them must have been standing when the shock wave hit. Many of the bodies were still, and a few were moving sluggishly. In addition to the shock wave, he could see places where rocks had been blasted straight across the river—probably skipping like stones on the water's surface—and had cut swaths of them down like cannon fire.

He turned to follow Stoltman.

Friendlylies

The whole group was still crouching down when Ben and Stoltman reached them, probably afraid of a second explosion. Ben's eyesight was clearing up, and he thought maybe he was hearing a little bit of their voices. He'd always been good at regulating his voice, even with earplugs in. He hoped he wouldn't use a shout by accident.

"We've lost our pursuers, but pretty much everybody in the world now knows where we are. So we need to be somewhere else as soon as possible."

Mother Nena rushed past him, spotting Stoltman and his gashed head. Sister Ana followed with a medical kit, and soon she was at work cleaning and stitching up his wound. Ben realized his hearing had recovered a bit when he heard Stoltman bellow.

"Hello, Marcus!"

A man emerged from the woods on the other side of the path from them. "Yah, Stoltman, blew out your eardrums, you old fool."

The man was in his thirties, with dark clothes and a large, dark bushy beard. Amish, or something along those lines, Ben guessed. Apparently a friendly.

Ben walked towards him, hands held out and empty. "Mister Marcus, we're sorry to bother you, but we were hotly pursued by some men with ill intent."

"Hah, you mean no-good government thugs. I know, when you say 'government' then 'thugs' is redundant. Anybody left?"

"Some."

"It'll take 'em several hours to go up to a usable ford. Let's get back to my place, and I can hitch up my wagon and take you over to the coast. There's a fisherman there who can take you even further up the coast—and faster—and hopefully then you'll be rid of 'em."

"Any danger of you getting hurt on our behalf?"

"Probably not. There's no proof, and they've learned to be a little cautious. If they push too hard for no reason, a patrol or two disappears. They'll be mad about this, and Stoltman should probably leave with you. But we'll be OK."

Mother Nena was done with Stoltman's bandages, and they quickly got moving on the trail, Marcus leading. Ben was afraid that the rigors of the morning would be repeated on this side of the water. He doubted Mother Nena, for all her fortitude, could do any more steep hiking. Fortunately, Marcus led them on a trail which skirted the hills in a way which kept the slope gentle.

Across the Water

Escape

Marcus led them at a very hard pace, with only brief stops to catch their breath. Ben had been watching all of his charges, and decided it was time to speak with Marcus. They were going at such a brisk march that Ben almost had to trot to catch up with Marcus at the head of their column.

"Marcus, my people can't do this for even a little bit longer."

"I know, and I'm sorry. But I know what kind of men are after us, and we're almost there. Tell them it's less than two miles from here."

Ben dropped back, and shared the news with each clump of children in turn. Their faces looked feverish, and several of the youngest were quietly crying. When he reached the end of the group—Scott, providing a rear guard—he decided that he was going to have to stop Marcus no matter what kind of urgency drove him. This

grim thought was interrupted by a call from up front, and with a deep breath, he hurried back up the line to see what was happening.

He reached Marcus to find him facing a cart pulled by a pair of horses. The cart was stopped, and a woman sat in a seat at the front of the cart, reins in hand and talking to Marcus.

“You’re killing the children, you old fool. Get the youngest in the cart and we’ll get all of them back to our place as quick as we can.”

Long-married couples sometimes begin looking alike, and that was the case here. But even with her current ire at her presumptive husband, she had a kindly face which Ben liked immediately.

“Thank you! I was getting worried about my children; I wasn’t sure they’d make it these last couple of miles to your place.”

Her glance sharpened, and Marcus’ attention became fixed on his shoes.

“More like *five* miles. I’m glad I guessed that you’d need some help, although many of you will still need to walk. Hitching a pair of horses is all I can manage on my own.”

Ben and Mother Nena quickly sorted the children who were most exhausted, and placed them on the cart. Marcus’ wife, whose name was Marilee, declared she’d lead the team, and had them pick two more to sit where she’d been. Bringing the wagon around, they proceeded towards the farm.

Marcus’s and Marilee’s Farm

The first sight of the farm was not farmlike at all; a skeletal frame of metal tubes which Ben spotted appearing beyond a nearby hill. More of the structure emerged as they drew closer, and Ben saw it was a large antenna, mounted on a vertical steel tower. Marcus noticed Ben’s interest.

“Ham radio. Not that there’s a government to license us to use it any more, but there’s lots of equipment available, and it serves us well. Of course, we have to be careful because there are still bits of ‘government’ who try to find people to rob. And there are plain old bandits out there. But most of that’s going away, and it’s good to talk with others like us.”

“That’s how you heard about us?”

“Well, not with that antenna—it’s used for longer distances. But we have smaller radios and antennas which are perfect for us locals.”

They came around the side of the hill, and the farm opened out before their eyes. Their path led past a large two storey farmhouse, and ended at a very large barn. To one side was a chicken yard, with a dozen or so coops and sizeable flock which briefly stopped their pecking and scratching to study the wagon and its entourage.

On the other side was a fenced vegetable garden. It was several acres in size, with about a quarter of it in potatoes. Marcus guessed Ben’s thoughts.

“We rotate the potatoes through the four quarters of the garden. Even with that, I’m worried that we’re accumulating pathogens. But it’s our best source of carbohydrates, and we’re working to get some other plots started in the next field over.”

He waved to a point beyond the barn.

“Grains?”

“We did some experimental crops, but it’s too labor intensive. We hoped the equipment from failed farms in the area would help, but they’re all complicated machines which are impossible to keep running. And they’re all sized for hundreds or thousands of acres. Some of our local metal smiths are planning to build small scale equipment based on what we’ve found in old farming magazines. There’s always more to do than we have hours for.”

A bell rang, and for a moment Ben thought it was an alarm. But Marcus’ face lit up.

“Let’s eat, then get you folks on the road again.”

While Mother Nena rested, her sisters had helped organize the children to set up some planks on sawhorses out in the garden, an improvised dining table. Food was shuttled out of the farmhouse, and everybody sat down to a prayer of gratitude followed by a quick meal. It was peaceful, but they all knew that trouble might be arriving at any moment.

Marcus faded away, and as they finished Marilee told them to leave the dishes for her.

“It’s time for you to go.”

A jangling sound, and Marcus came up from the barn, riding on a much larger wagon, pulled by four horses. The wagon was just big enough for the whole group—if they crowded—and Ben noticed some bags and water canvases hanging off the sides of the wagon. Marcus waved his hand at them.

“Food and water for the horses on the way down. On the way back, I’ll have time to let them graze. There’s also some decent water, but it’s several miles off our path. I think it’s high time for you folks to be away.”

They headed off, almost exactly away from the path they’d used to get to the farm. Stoltman, Marilee, and some children waved at them as they rolled away. Ben hoped they’d be OK, but Marcus waved away his concerns.

“They’ll never find Stoltman, and for my family—they know better.”

At first it was a path, but presently the horse team was pulling them along over grassy fields. Ben was glad the season was dry, for Marcus kept them down in the lows between hills, where in the rainy season this would all be deep mud.

Marcus was driving his horses hard, but not to the point of cruelty. He’d stop periodically, giving them water and at one point grain from the bags in the wagon. The sun set and still the wagon went onward. In the middle of the night Ben woke as the wagon stopped, but he heard Marcus doing something with the horses, and presently they were moving again.

The Fishing Boat

The first beams of a morning sun stirred the group. Ben sat up to see that they were coming down a final slope to the ocean shore, with a view out over the water. There was a boat out at anchor, and he was unsurprised when the wagon came to a halt at a steep, narrow footpath which ended at a sandy shore below.

“Well, Ben, take your young’uns down that path. I think you’ll be OK now, but there’s no good way for me with the horses to get any closer.”

“Marcus, thank you so much for your help. Without you and your wife and Stoltman—I don’t like to think how this might have worked out. Be sure to thank everybody who had a hand in this.”

Marcus shook his head. “The days when we look the other way while they hurt children are over. I expect to hear great things from your people.”

“Me too.”

They shook hands as the last children hopped off the wagon. Ben turned to start down the path to the shore when he looked back to see some horsemen on a distant hill.

“Marcus! That hill—”

Ben pointed, and Marcus took one glance before turning the wagon with team to head southward on a path along the coast, rather than back towards his home.

“Get to the boat! I’ll be fine.”

Ben watched the wagon head away, and realized that there was nothing he could do to help Marcus or hinder the pursuers. Leading the group, he hurried down the path to the shore, and found a launch pulled up

partially onto the beach. Everybody filled in behind him, clustered a small distance back from the boat and three men who stood beside it. Ben walked forward to greet them, and one of the men stepped forward.

“Ben, I presume? I’m Lieutenant Foster; Captain McLeod is waiting for you on the ship. Marcus called, but we were already on our way here. The Captain had a dream. I’m told you’re in danger, so please let’s get your group off this shore.”

With the same sort of rush which had loaded the wagon, they now all climbed onto what the men called their “launch”. They then pushed out into the water before scrambling aboard. The launch had a small outboard motor, and the children were fascinated to watch it purr as it propelled them over to the waiting ship.

By the time they reached the ship, all eyes had turned from the little motor to the side of the ship which now towered above them. The men busied themselves with attachments to cables lowered from above, and there were squeaks of amazement when they realized that the entire launch was being raised up alongside the ship. Presently they were level with the deck of the ship, and the launch swung inward and settled on a waiting cradle.

There was no need to ask for the captain, for the man waiting as their boat settled in its place on board could be nobody else. All the other crew were obviously under his authority, and they went about their tasks with the briskness you only see by those with an eye of a leader upon them. The captain was a lean man with a lantern jaw. Not a face Ben would have generally trusted, but there was a peacefulness in his eyes, and a cross hung on a chain around his neck.

Ben knew he needed to ask permission to come aboard, but decided not to presume even that. He called from their boat.

“Captain, we’ve been chased and they’re probably still after us. Can you take us up the coast?”

The man studied Ben closely, then reached a decision.

“Certainly, Gentled. We are at your service. Please, come aboard. I am Captain MacLeod.”

Stick and Carrot

Ben would have called this a fishing craft, and it certainly had an endless variety of ropes, nets, and booms which all blurred together to his uninformed eye. He had worried briefly about the women and girls in his party, but the crew all treated Mother Nena with respect bordering on fear, and it was obvious she and all of her charges were safe. When led below, Ben expected to make do in dirty, cramped quarters, but instead they were given two pairs of rooms. They weren’t fancy, but more than clean and comfortable enough for their purposes. The children spread out, chattering as they figured out who was to sleep where, and where their scant possessions could be stowed.

Ben went back up on deck; he had heard a great deal of activity up above, and expected it was in preparation for sailing away from this shore. Even before he came up on deck, he heard the metal clank-clank-clank of the anchor chain being drawn in. Emerging back into the light of day, he saw several sailors were pointing telescopes at the shore. The captain handed a telescope to his lieutenant, and stepped over to Ben, pointing a finger in the shore’s direction.

“Friends of yours?”

Ben stared where the captain pointed, and spotted quite a number of figures along the shore, with some still descending from the bluff above. He also saw puffs of smoke, and after a delay heard a *pop* sound.

“They’re shooting at us?”

The captain nodded. “I’m going to teach them some manners, but wanted to make sure this wasn’t just a misunderstanding.”

There was suddenly a *ping* as a bullet hit something metallic towards the front of the ship.

“Right, that’s enough of that.” His voice deepened as he roared, “Lieutenant Foster, we will beat to quarters!”

The ship turned into a swirl of controlled, disciplined chaos. All manner of shouts were passed back and forth, and Ben later found that his people were hustled even lower down into the ship, beneath the water line. Within a few minutes, everything settled back to quiet. Lieutenant Foster stepped to the captain and touched his cap.

“The ship is at general quarters, captain.”

“Ready the mortar.”

Presently a squat metal assembly resting on four long legs was assembled on the foredeck of the ship. The ship was riding in a lively fashion now that the anchor was up, and the captain gave an order which brought the ship closer to shore, even as he judged the progress of the assembly of the mortar launching device.

The man at the wheel could have been from the 18th century, except that he was watching a digital screen and calling out numbers to the captain. Depth, Ben figured. The ship was powered by wind, but the ancient skill of dropping a weighted line overboard and feeding out its length had been replaced in favor of an electronic device. Ben looked upward, knowing that there were likely solar panels on top of the superstructure.

He'd been ignoring the back-and-forth of numbers and orders, but turned his sight back as a loud *POOT* showed that the mortar was now in action. Quite a few figures on the beach were now firing, as were a line of them on the bluff up above. The ship was closer to them now, but he hadn't yet heard another bullet hit their ship. He didn't see the mortar shell in flight, but its arrival was unmistakable.

The line of men were right above the water line, and the shell apparently landed in the shallow water in front of them. It must have been fused to go off a foot or more deep into the sand, for an enormous mass of sand and water erupted which knocked most of the shooters down, even as it covered them with a sheet of grit.

The men at the mortar hadn't looked up, busy as they were making adjustments to the launcher. The leader of that crew looked up to the captain, who had been watching their progress.

“Fire!”

Another *POOT*, and this time Ben's eye caught the arc of the shell. It landed up above on the bluff, blowing several men off their feet to fall down the face of the bluff. There was a rumble, and then a large chunk of the bluff itself came down as a landslide, the men who'd tumbled down first scrambling away to avoid being buried. The ship came around, and soon the mortar was packed away.

“Not a gentle business, Gentled—but necessary.”

Ben was curious. “How so?”

“In the old days, men wouldn't have shot at my ship for two reasons. First, because they were civilized. Second, because they feared the consequences. You and I both labor to return mankind to civilization, but I've concluded that we will get there by way of violence. Controlled violence, to be sure—measured, like medicine.”

“That was measured?” Ben was more curious than accusatory.

“I could have used anti-personnel shells, and killed the lot of'em. Blowing sand and water onto them, and knocking them down that hill? I may have killed a few, but most of them will walk away from this to tell stories. The word needs to spread that the time of brigands and warlords is passing.”

“The carrot of civilization, and the stick of your mortar shells.”

“We have great hope for projects like yours. It looks like you're already doing a good job, and praise God that an Orthodox nun and her sisters have joined you. I'll push, and you pull.”

“You called me ‘Gentled’—why?”

“Is it the wrong word?”

“Well, no.”

“There you have it.” Captain MacLeod's face was inscrutable.

Under Way

The military situation over, the ship quickly resumed its more civilian appearance. Ben noticed that numerous crew with rifles had climbed up the mast, apparently as sharp shooters if needed. They were now back on deck. A pair of squad machine guns, one positioned on each side of the ship, were also carefully wrapped and stored. Every single crewmember had carried a pistol, and each in turn went somewhere forward to turn in their weapon for storage.

Captain MacLeod watched all of this with an eagle eye, and once satisfied, came back to Ben.

“Captain, this ship is *not* fishing vessel.”

“It fishes, also. It can fight. And, as in your case, it can carry people to where they need to be. It’s a little bit of everything, and because of that, we can usually provide whatever kind of help is needed.”

“I’m afraid I’ve been remiss as your guest. Let me offer you my heartfelt thanks for providing your help.”

Captain MacLeod laughed, pleased. “You are very welcome, Gentled. I don’t think you will ever pay me back. But you *will* pay this forward many times over, and I am well satisfied.”

The ship stood out to sea, the coast sinking away and disappearing over the horizon. They presently turned north, and the ancient rhythm of a sailing vessel took over. The ship would lean sometimes one way, then the other. There was a ship’s bell, and the periodic pattering of feet as watches changed. Several days in, Ben came up on deck in the evening to find the captain with a sextant, carefully measuring something having to do with the moon. The captain finally scribbled on a page, then looked up to Ben.

“We have an accurate clock, so I’m able to keep a decent idea of our location. We’ll stand in nearer the coast tomorrow, because I think we’re getting close to your destination. You’ll need to come up on deck every hour and tell us when it’s time to put you ashore.”

“We’re both betting that I’ll know it when I see it.”

“Have faith, Gentled.”

Where to Land

It was their fourth night on the ship, working their way against a wind which came almost straight down the coast. Most of the children suffered seasickness, and Mother Nena and her sisters probably did as well, although they were too busy helping the desperately miserable children to fully give in to it. Ben had never been a good sailor in his old life, but whatever changes had befallen him, he felt no pangs at all.

Everybody had finally fallen into restless slumber except for him, and he wandered up on deck. Night watches were two officers in fine weather—and despite the children’s unhappiness, in all truth they were experiencing the kindest weather they could have hoped for. If they needed to come about, more crew would pour up on deck, they’d complete the maneuver, and then all except the watch went right back to bed.

Ben stood beside the helmsman at the ship’s wheel for a bit. At first the crew had looked at him askance, but somehow the word had gone around that he brought good luck, and now he received the kind, proprietary reception of a protective charm. Presently, he walked all the way forward and rested his hands on the bowsprit pointing out off the front of the ship. He looked straight ahead, and thought he was seeing the moon. But the taste in his mouth of starlight and electricity made him look again, and a silvery shape resolved itself, remaining floating just ahead of the ship.

“Gentled. Tomorrow you will see your beach.”

Suddenly a crystal clear image of a sandy beach beneath rolling, green hills appeared. Just as suddenly, it was gone and the shape of the angel returned.

“You will find a place once dedicated to God, and you will dedicate it to Him again.”

The angel didn’t say “God”, but something which made his pulse quicken. The word in the angel’s native language for Him, perhaps. The angel looked into Ben’s face, even as he looked at the angel’s face. He

suddenly felt a desire to wing through the heavens, speaking such a language and carrying messages to wherever they were needed. Just as suddenly, he felt the angel's desire to be encased in flesh and blood, working towards God's plan with nothing but faith and ignorance.

They both smiled, and then the angel was gone. Ben was looking out into the dark night, and heard the call from the second man on watch, deciding it was time to come about. Ben dodged the rush of men and went to bed. He fell asleep immediately, and knew nothing more until several children chided him awake, the new day already hours old.

There, On That Hill

Somehow, Ben knew they weren't there yet. He dressed, washed up, and enjoyed some of the breakfast remnants. When he came up on deck, the captain stood beside his first mate, who was managing the wheel himself. The helmsman on watch stood to the side, apparently resigned to having an officer doing his job for him. The captain saw Ben and came over.

"Gentled, I dreamt of a sandy shore last night. The midwatch reported you were out front, talking to the moon. Is today the day?"

"Yes." He ran his eye over the visible stretch of shore. "But not yet. I'll stay up here all day until I spot what I was shown."

It was early in the afternoon, and they had just stood further out to clear a jutting headland when Ben saw the hills beyond. He walked over to the captain, who also had also remained on deck all day.

"I think it's those hills just coming into view. When safe, can we come in a little closer?"

The captain studied the land and waters minutely, first by eye, and then with a telescope which he snapped open to its full length. He went to the depth display, and tapped its screen many times, studying a history of the depths it had measured. He finally returned to Ben.

"It's a bay; not a great one. I'd get out to sea rather than just anchoring during a storm. It shoals over there to the left, but this headland we just passed will probably keep this end of the bay quite deep. We should be anchored within two hours."

Ben realized with a start that his group would be back on their own. Though they'd been on this ship only a handful of days, there had been a timeless quality to it. It had also been very restful to have somebody else handling all the details of where to go, and how to do so safely. A good time to rest, but now it was time to continue.

Within the promised two hours, the ship had worked its way well into the bay, found a sandy bottom, and dropped anchor. The same launch was swung out, though this time they only took half the group at a time.

"No rush, and it's safer."

Ben saw it was more than boating safety; Captain MacLeod sent four armed seamen with the first group to provide a guard on shore. Ben watched closely, but nothing alarming happened as the ship's boat returned. Then Ben with the rest climbed into the boat, the captain watching.

"I'd like to come with you, but I don't know that shore, so my place is with my ship. We'll be back if we can, or it might be the task of another ship. Be sure that we'll send word up the chain that you've landed here."

The boat went across, unloaded Ben with his people, and then the four guards were in the boat and it was headed back out to the ship. There was a tendency to stand at the shore and watch the boat recede from them. But a chivying voice was suddenly raised. It was Scott—and he was detailing several of the older boys to keep an eye on all possible approaches to the group. Ben eyeballed the place where their sandy beach met the headland, and saw a clear path up.

"Scott! Can you and one more go up top and see what's in the neighborhood?"

Scott waved acknowledgment, then picked a boy and went up the path, slowing as they neared the top, then carefully peeking from a prone position. Scott left the boy at the top on watch, then came rapidly down the path to stand before Ben.”

“There’s a shallow valley off the left—it’s mostly a big field with a river winding through. And there’s a building near the middle of the valley. It has a cross!”

“Great. You and one other stay here and be our rearguard. Up we go.”

Presently, the entire group was at the top, looking downward at the coast and bay behind them, and over towards the building with the cross. It felt very quiet and watchful, and nobody wanted to stand up and risk being seen by whoever lived in the building. The more Ben studied the terrain, the more he was sure that there was no way to move unseen from where they’d landed. He looked out to sea; their ship was already quite distant. No escape there if this went badly.

When he heard the word “badly” in his head, he felt silly. There was a time to be careful, but his intuition told him this wasn’t it. Standing up, he motioned everybody to follow him.

“Come on, let’s go take a look.”

The Garden

The Mission

The path up from the beach had petered out when they reached the top of the bluff, and now Ben simply led them towards the building, angling a bit left to avoid a part of the field which had a deep green color promising mud if not standing water. The grass was uncut, but not tall enough to make walking difficult. The sun shone down, warm but not yet uncomfortable. From back at the bluff, this path had looked level, but the ground actually dipped enough that the building disappeared from sight as they walked down the slope from the bluff.

In modern Catholic parlance, a “mission” is a church which does not have a resident priest, but instead is opened up by a visiting priest or deacon when having a service or other event. Ben guessed this was such; the cross at the peak made it a church—probably Catholic—and its isolated quiet suggested that it was unoccupied. Sue with Kit were up front, their pace picking up in their excitement to see the building up close. They were leading the march with a number of the younger children, and as they reached the crest of the slope they’d been ascending, they all stopped with a collective “ooh!”. Ben caught up, Scott right at his heels. They gently moved the children aside, and studied the terrain.

It was clear that the undulating land when viewed from a distance was even more misleading than he’d thought. It was a remarkable optical illusion, and he guessed that its effect was deliberate. Close in to the building—Ben was more certain than ever it was a mission—he could see that there were many previously hidden features, the mission sited precisely among them.

To the left was a depressed bit of coastal land, an estuary curving down to the ocean. To the right, there was a shallow valley opening out to a couple square miles of field, a small stream passing through the middle, and the ground rising in gentle slopes to the hills at the far end of the valley. The stream was not straight, but rather ran in wide S curves back and forth. Ben’s limited farming experience noted that this land had been permitted to run to weeds, but the path of that stream had been adapted to curves containing much of the land, and he guessed that subirrigation would support crops without any additional need for pipes or pumps. They could grow food here.

The mission was slightly uphill from the start of the open field and river, with one curve of the river arching out to come within a hundred yards of them. The mission was a stone building with a pair of turrets as well as a bell tower, and a stone wall extended back to encompass some areas which were probably for a kitchen garden and such. All the walls were substantial, and there were no ground-level windows. It wouldn’t hold up against modern munitions, but it would provide considerable security against roving trouble makers.

Little Tina, one of the youngest of the children, came up and took Ben’s hand.

“Are we home?”

Ben’s eyes had never stopped roving across the building and its surrounding lands. The valley was quiet, and he spotted nothing moving anywhere.

“Yes, I think so.”

Open Sesame

They walked along the path, down a hill and to a bridge which crossed the stream and led to the mission. The children were both excited and subdued. This was grown up land, where you did grown up things like build, and grow food, and raise children, and protect your community. It was as if the adults they were going to be were already standing on the land, welcoming them.

Tina had not yet let go of Ben’s hand, and since he had now taken the lead, she was with him as they stopped at the front door of the mission. It was more like a front gate, as the doors were big enough to pass a truck when open. But they were closed, and quite stout, old thick hardwood bound with iron straps. Ben gave them a push, and he as well should have pushed the stone wall into which they were mounted. There was a keyhole with a sliding cover. When he moved aside the cover, he saw the shiny complexity of a modern lock. He knew how to pick a lock, but this was nothing to take on with a couple paper clips.

Tina pointed to the left, “there’s a mailbox.”

She was right. Ben went over and lifted the top of the mailbox with his free hand (Tina had still not released the other one). He managed to hold it open with his pinky while picking out a piece of paper resting within. The top of the mailbox closed with a *clank* as he ruffled the paper open.

Missionaries know where we grow. Grow a stash, cure some rash.

He raised his eyes to look around, remembering which medicinals were commonly used for rashes. It would have to be visually distinctive, and so. . .

“Everybody, search all around for a cluster of plants growing which have purple flowers all along their stalks.”

While the children spread out, searching and making excited, happy comments, Ben got out a length of stiff wire, and bent it out straight. It was just about ready when he heard voices calling him, and everybody converged on a point over beyond the nearest edge of the stream.

Joining them, he saw they were clustered around a nice stand of lavender, its flowers bright and purple in the sun. As he neared, the sweet smell washed over him, and he started probing the ground by sticking his wire straight down to see if it bumped against anything. Presently it stopped with a hollow thump, and before he could say anything several children were scooping the earth away with their hands.

It was a plastic container, still sealed. And within, a key which rattled around loosely as they handed it to him. Opening the container, he held up a golden key which was a tube with many intricate channels engraved into it. Returning to the mission’s gate, he inserted it, and heard a *click* as he turned the key. After a dramatic pause—every eye upon him—he pushed the door open.

Search the Mission

Inside was a courtyard, flagstoned, with the front doors of the church straight ahead. There were paths among smaller buildings off to both the right and the left, and a walled garden was built directly off the side of the church to the right. Its entrance was a closed, a wooden gate with a statue of Mary beside it, stone plants growing abundantly at her feet..

Ben turned to the group.

“Leave the church alone for now. Otherwise, explore everywhere—only open doors which are unlocked. Search in *pairs*, or three of you if it looks tricky. Watch out for rotten floors, and don’t anybody try to go up to any second storeys. If it’s too dark to see clearly, leave it for later. I’m going to search the garden here.”

With that, he clicked open the latch on the gate, stepped through, and closed the gate behind him.

Mary's Garden

There was one constant associated with leading his group—a continuous blend of noises. Questions, complaints, arguments, things being opened, things being closed. The gate closed at Ben's back, and he was suddenly in a vast silence. Across the garden he could hear a little water running, but it added to the quiet rather than disturbing it.

He ran his eyes over this enclosed garden space. It had been immaculately maintained, with raised beds in a herringbone pattern, a path running down its center to reach a central square featuring an overarching trellis which supported an explosion of rose flowers, apparently blossoming from canes which had been trained up the structure.

Each raised bed featured a different kind of plant, but each displayed flowers. At first he thought this was a rose garden, but he then spotted carnations, and daisies, and hydrangeas. He walked towards the central trellis, admiring the variety and wondering when he'd meet the gardener. The thought of somebody active in this complex might have worried him, but he knew with confidence that whoever maintained this garden would never be a danger.

As he looked and pondered, he reached the central trellis, and saw at its center a pillar sticking up out of the ground. It was about two feet in diameter, and three feet high. Its top was flat, and laying on this top face was a metallic bar.

Ben picked up the small bar, about the size of a small cell phone. It was surprisingly heavy, and had a rich yellowish luster to it. *Gold*. What was a bar of gold doing here? Probably a test. He put it back, and looked out over the rest of the garden, which was now visible from here. The herringbone pattern continued, and in the far corner was the source of the sounds of water. A pool with a statue standing above it.

He walked towards it. The glorious flower garden continued, but he walked among it all with eyes only for the pool and its statue. He didn't really remember covering the distance, but suddenly he was at the pool, looking at a statue of Mary.

She stood on the other side of the pool, facing Ben. Her hands were held out slightly, encompassing the pool and anybody who stood before it. The stonework of the pool included figures of creatures, and on each side of her knelt stone figures of girls, facing towards her. The pond was an oval eight feet across and twelve feet wide. The water held some hyacinths, and a single golden koi fish swam quietly past him. The water he'd heard was a single small jet of water, coming out of a stone flower to Mary's right. He watched where it hit the water with a gentle trickle, small bubbles drifting away.

The edge of the pool was made up of fitted blocks, high enough to be comfortable as a seat. Right in front of Mary on his side of the pool, an extra block of stone had been placed, so one could sit while facing the Mary statue. Ben sat.

He didn't know what he was waiting for, but suddenly he realized that it had happened. He had gathered children, brought them to this place, and now they could finish growing up. This would be their land, and they would make something beautiful of it. He wouldn't leave soon, but he would leave. He had found a home for *them*.

Bethlehemite Brothers

Presently, he wandered back through the garden, not taking the direct path but choosing directions randomly to admire all the different plants and planters. There were some trellised flowers, and even raised beds with flowering bushes. When he reached the gate, he turned back to enjoy one more look, then opened the gate, stepped through, and clicked it closed behind him.

All of his own group had their backs to him, facing a man dressed in the robes of some religious order—they were a light blue, tied with a dark belt. Ben didn't recognize the artwork of the pin attached to his chest. The sound of the gate closing apparently interrupted their discussion, and everybody turned to look at him.

Sue spoke first, "Ben, this is Father Luiz. He is the last member of his order, the Bethlehemite Brothers."

Ben lowered his head and gave a brief prayer of thanks.

“Father Luiz, I am Ben, and my task was to gather as many children as I could and bring them to safety. Which, I think, is here. As the last member of a recognized order, I take it you would be the Superior of the order?”

The priest looked taken aback. His voice was soft, with the accent of a Spanish speaker, though his English was excellent.

“I hadn’t thought of it this way. With no members, who would I be superior *to*, please?”

“We’ll have to find a copy of Canon Law, but I’m pretty sure that you will have the authority of ordination. We’ve lost so much of the Church, and now it’s time to rebuild. Starting with baptisms, and in due time, sending new priests out into the world.”

Father Luiz studied Ben with dark eyes. “You are neither priest nor prophet, and now you speak of the duties of a bishop. But a dream brought me here, and I will do my part.”

“Did you maintain this place?”

“No, I have just arrived. Your people tell me they have explored much of the buildings, and you were back there in a garden?”

“Yes.” Ben turned and opened the gate, then stopped in surprise. The carefully tended garden was no longer behind the gate, but instead a wildly overgrown wall of vegetation blocked him. He thought he could see some parts of the garden he’d visited, but now it was all hidden by the growth of a garden which hadn’t been tended in decades.

“How’d you get *in*, Ben?” Sue asked, perplexed.

“Um. No good answer for that one.” He closed the gate. “Add ‘cleaning up the garden’ to our work list. Let’s take a look at the church. Father?”

Gesturing the priest to follow him, the whole group headed towards the front doors of the church.

The Church

The entrance was a pair of doors, framed within a stone opening where the sides curved upward to meet at a level many feet above Ben’s head. There was a black latch which clicked open smoothly, and Ben pulled the doors towards them, swinging them all the way open. He and Father Luiz proceeded side by side into the church.

The entry space here was wide, nearly the full width of the main church, which they could see through glass windows. At the far left, the entry space had an alcove with Mary; on the far right, an indeterminate man. The patron of the church? He’d examine it later.

Through the glass the church was quite large, surprisingly so for a mission. The ceiling rose up, and apparently had windows out of view from their angle, but made of stained glass. The entire sanctuary was illuminated by the glow of them. There were the usual pews, stations of the cross along the walls, and banks of prayer candles on the walls to the right and left of the raised sanctuary area with the altar.

The tabernacle was partially present; its top was missing and its doors gaped open. There was no doubt a crucifix with Jesus mounted on the wall above the altar, but it was covered in some sort of drop cloth. *Deconsecrated*, Ben mused. So now they knew what mass needed to be said first. Father Luiz had walked past him, opened the door, and walked down the center aisle to stand in front of the altar. Ben joined him.

Father Luiz beside him was thinking along the same lines.

“We’ll need to place the church and altar back into service. I’ve never done such a mass, any missal will have it. I have a relic I rescued when . . . bad things happened. This is all OK.”

Ben was searching along the sides, and spotted the expected door.

“I’m going to try and find the sacristy.”

The Sacristy

In a church, the sanctuary with its altar is the center of everything which happens. The sacristy is the place where all the preparations are made, and where everything is cleaned, and tidied, and stored. It was also where anything vaguely religious was stored, and Ben hoped to find the missing parts of the tabernacle.

The door behind which he expected to find the sacristy was locked. First he pondered picking its lock; it had been decades since he had last done such things. But then he put himself in the place of the last sacristan, who had locked this door after the last sacred use of the church. He looked along the wall to the right and left of the door, and saw one of the stations of the cross not far away to the right of the door. It was the fourth station, Jesus and Mother Mary. He saw there was a small gap behind it, and gently ran his finger behind the tableau to find a key hanging from a small nail.

He brought the key down, and turned the lock of the door. He was about to swing it open when he realized that Terry had quietly joined him. Terry was generally dull-eyed, although he had gotten much better at keeping up with the group. Ben was used to a child or two staying with him to keep him moving. Ben had assumed that he would always be a dependent of the group, but now Ben saw his eyes bright and alert. The door swung open into a completely darkened space—no windows at all, apparently. Ben brought out his small flashlight—he used it as little as possible, since no new batteries could be had—and played the light over the room.

It had a table with drawers down one side, and a countertop with a small sink and drawers below with cabinets above. On the table were the various books needed for mass, along with the a selection of crosses with loops of cord to be worn by those serving the altar during mass. And—glory be—the missing parts of the tabernacle. He opened cabinets and saw the usual supplies—candles, brass cleaning supplies, extra glassware. In full-height cabinets on the back wall he found robes, and in others shelves holding objects in velvet bags. No doubt chalices, ciborium, patten, communion cups, and such. A final cabinet on the back wall held rods mounted horizontally, with soft cloths hanging on them.

“For the final cleaning, drying, and polishing of the cups and bowls,” Ben explained to Terry. He had never seen him so interested. In fact, he’d never seen him interested.

“For the things in those bags?”

Ben was surprised. “Yes.” He looked at Terry. “Shell we give them all a polish right now?”

“Yes!”

So they brought out each item, admired it, and then Ben let Terry carefully give each of them a polish in turn, first having him put on a pair of gloves to make sure his fingernails didn’t scratch the soft gold and silver of the various cups and bowls. When they were finally done, Ben decided to deal with the final issue.

“Brace yourself.” A section of the counter was its own segment, with a small ring pull which was flush with the surface. He hooked his finger through it and carefully lifted this separate part of the countertop. Beneath was a second sink, and the smell of mildew rose from it to make both of them wrinkle their noses.

“What is *that* doing here?” asked Terry in an offended voice.

“It’s the sacrarium, a special sink. After mass there are sacred substances—the body and blood of our Lord—and you are forbidden to just wash it away as if it was your usual household waste. In fact, canon law is quite strict about this; being careless is a very serious matter. This sink drains into the ground, in an area where nothing else drains. I think I would have liked the sacristan who took care of this church, they were quite thorough and careful. But it’s inevitable that some trapped moisture would result in this.”

“The sink is no good?”

“Probably it’s fine. We’ll boil a little water and rinse the sink and drain using as little as possible. That will probably take care of this.”

“I saw some cleaning supplies in one of the closets.”

“No, this sink and its drain are really just for the sacred, plus the water used to do the cleaning. I knew one priest who permitted stain remover to draw out the wine, but the older sacristans didn’t even approve of that!”

They proceeded with Ben’s plan, and presently the smell faded away, pleasing both Ben and Terry. When they were finished, Ben turned to Terry with a penetrating look.

“Well, Terry, you’ve been playing at being a zombie ever since we found you. I suspected it was an act, but was never sure. I assumed that you needed some time to get to know us. What decided you to drop the act?”

Terry shrugged, “in the world back there, being broken and useless made them happy. There was no hope that things would ever get better, but at least they left you alone since it made them feel smart. When you took me away, I was afraid they’d catch us. Nobody would blame me.”

“I’ll never forget that slog through the forest the night we rescued you. You made us *work* at your rescue!”

“Sorry.”

“Things balance out. I suspect in time you’ll be given your own labors. And now?”

“Didn’t you hear it? When we first went near the altar, a voice told me to become His priest. And, really, I never was very good at thinking. It wasn’t *all* an act. But when I heard that voice, it was like seeing the world—really seeing the world—for the first time.”

“Lots of people receive their Calling, and ignore it. I’m glad you didn’t hesitate.”

Preparing

They rigged some lighting for the sacristy using candles from a very large supply they found in one of the extensive storage spaces in the mission’s lower levels. Father Luiz explored the sacristy, and announced himself very pleased with the supplies.

“But we must bake some unleavened bread.”

Mother Nena grumbled under her breath (the Orthodox use leavened bread) but presently supplied some flat, smooth wafers from the kitchen where a wood-fired stove had been cleaned and put back into operation. She even produced a small flask of a potent port—its alcohol content improving its storage life. Father Luiz sampled it, pretending to be knocked back by its potency, then thanked her and told Ben to make sure there was *lots* of water available to be added during Eucharistic preparation.

An old Roman Missal sat on one of the shelves, the years within it long expired, but Father Luiz calculated in his head and declared that he could work with its contents. Everyone became very busy sweeping and dusting, and Father Luiz asked Terry to help him with the preparations in the sacristy. Terry was almost vibrating with excitement, and presently came out of the sacristy with an awed face. Ben was on his way by, and stopped to study him.

“Terry, are you OK?”

“Yes.”

“You look beside yourself. What’s up?”

“You’ll see.” Terry hurried away as Father Luiz also came out of the sacristy.

“Father, you’re not over-exciting the boy, are you?”

Father Luiz shook his head, “That is a soul who’s been waiting to answer the Call. You’ve done your part, now please let me do mine.”

The Mass

Father announced that the mass would start out in front of the mission. Scott grumbled and detailed a couple of boys to watch from up on the wall during the event, while he himself remained beside the open mission gates. Everyone else stood together in a big group, and then Father Luiz emerged through the open church doors in resplendent robes supplied by the sacristy's cabinet.

He stood in front of the entire group, his back to the mission, and started.

Behold God's dwelling with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself with them will be their God.

After the opening prayers concluded, everybody except for Ben, Mother Nena, and her two sisters were sent in to the church proper to take seats. Ben, holding a cross, led the sisters, followed by Mother and finally Father. They'd even found hymnals in a closet, and everybody was prepared to sing as Ben led the way into the church.

Church of God, elect and glorious, holy nation chosen race; called as God's own special people, royal priests and heirs of grace

They continued as Ben reached the front of the sanctuary, flanked by Mother and the sisters, and then Father filled in the gap at the center. They all bowed (Ben only bowing his head), and then Father proceeded up to the altar as the rest of them went to their seats.

The mass proceeded as usual, with modifications for its function in newly blessing this church. Mother Nena's two sisters had done the readings, and Father Luiz—assuming Ben was a deacon—had asked him to read the gospel. But Ben had demurred, and Father had read Matthew 7:

Jesus said, 'Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it.'

Followed by a sermon on their new home, and how the building meant nothing unless its worshippers took the narrow gate.

Soon it was time to bring up the gifts—the bread and wine, and also some small copper coins Mother Nena had scared up. Ben let Terry take up the hosts in their golden bowl (he was shaky with his excitement, and Ben didn't dare risk the wine on him). The sisters took up the rest, their comforting familiarity with the task calming Terry.

For Communion, Father Luiz reminded all of them that only those who were baptized and had received First Communion could receive now, but that all were welcome to come up with arms crossed before their chest to receive a blessing. Terry received his blessing in ecstasy, and made as if to go through the remaining line and get a second one. Ben intercepted him with a quick shake of his head and pointed at his seat.

After mass, everybody helped drag a couple tables out in front of the church, and bread, fruit, and cups with water were shared out. Mother Nena astonished everybody when she produced a pot of honey, one dollop for each attendee. It turned out that she had somehow found out about somebody several miles away who still kept bees. The neighborhood wasn't as empty as Ben had thought, and he wondered who was living nearby, and what they thought of Ben and his new arrivals. The honey was a hopeful sign.

It was Sunday, so after they had finished the cleanup and moved the tables back, Ben ordered rest and reading for the day. Terry was already huddled with Father, and Ben could see them working out a program of education in all things Catholic. *Well and good*, Ben mused. They were going to need both a bishop and a priest as soon as possible. Hopefully, he was looking at them.

Building the Town

The Raiders

There was a shout of warning, and at the tone of it, Ben ran towards the sound of the alarm, not noticing Scott following at his heels.

Teddy had just become old enough to be permitted to keep watch during the day, and had done her job faithfully. The path north crested a hill about a mile away, and riding down along that path were four men on horseback.

“Secure the gate!” Ben shouted, and heard the gate, open only wide enough to permit one person at a time, slam shut. There were grunts, and then the heavy cross-timber was placed, barring the gate. It would take a great deal of force to break in now.

The group rode towards them at a trot, and soon reached the front of the mission at the gate. Seeing it closed, the lead rider slipped off his horse, handing its reins to the man riding beside him on his left.

“Hello, religious persons!”

His companions laughed.

“Little pigs! Little pigs!”

There was more laughter, and then Ben stepped forward to look down at them from the top of the wall.

“Yes?”

They hadn’t spotted him, and this startled them. The leader brought his pistol out, pointed, and fired.

Ben didn’t flinch. He didn’t know why, but the creature down there had no ability to kill him. The leader’s eyes narrowed, because he knew perfectly well that he hadn’t missed. He holstered his pistol, trying to regain control of the situation.

“Open this gate. Now.”

“After shooting at me? No.”

“Look, we’re *going* to get in, and how hard you make us work at it is just exactly how hard we’re going to use you up—”

There was suddenly an arrow sticking out of his eye, and even as he started to crumple the man holding his horse’s reins sprouted an arrow out of one of his eyes as well. The two remaining, still up on their horses, desperately spurred them around. Another arrow appeared, sticking out of one’s neck, and the last man received an arrow right into the back of his neck even as his horse picked up speed in an attempted retreat. The horses slowed as the bodies slumped to hang off the saddles.

Scott stood well off to one end of the front wall, a bow in his hand, and another arrow nocked. He watched closely, then returned the arrow to a quiver on his back as it became clear the action was over. He crossed his arms rebelliously as Ben approached him.

“Why did you kill them?”

“Because who they weren’t going to kill, they were going to *use up*.”

“You’re doubtless right this time, but I need to know that killing isn’t going to be your go-to move with strangers.”

Scott shook his head. “Sean *knew* about this sort of thing, and you aren’t the only teacher in our group. When it’s time to kill, I’ll do it as quickly and efficiently as possible. Without a warrior, this group would be doomed. I won’t let *anybody* doom this group—not even you.”

Ben studied him. “You’re good with that bow and arrow, and we *will* be talking about where it came from and how you became that good with it. But killing—even when done justifiably—has a way of eating up your soul. Militaries had chaplains, which is *not* a coincidence. Will you agree to let myself and Mother Nena counsel you?”

“Mother Nena?”

“She’s seen more brutality than you and I, put together, will ever see. It hasn’t eaten her up, and hopefully she can teach you about that. Do I have your commitment?”

“Yes, Ben. Of course.”

“And when there’s time, you *talk* to me before you start the killing.”

The First Neighbors

Several days later, another group arrived over the same hill, but this time mostly on foot, along with a couple horses. It was a mix of men, women, and children, and Ben went out to meet them. They were delighted to know that church services were available, and asked if they could homestead in the area? Ben asked them to camp up at the walls of the mission, and had food brought out to set a social picnic. He wasn’t worried about them at all; when men run *from* war, they bring their families. When they run *to* war, they leave their families behind. His initial thoughts were thoroughly reinforced over the meal, and at its end they agreed that the first task was to undertake a survey of the area. The four horses from the bandits were brought out, and the new group eagerly bartered to acquire them.

Within the week, official maps had been made for all the land within ten miles, and the group had picked a homestead site a couple miles out from the mission. Scott hastily learned about mutual defense agreements, and presently hosted their leader—a wild-bearded giant of a man named “Joel”. Over dinner, and then later into the night, Scott and Joel worked out details of how they could support each other when trouble came, and where further settlers should be placed to achieve a balance of successful farming and resilience to various threats.

The Tidied Garden

Within the walls, building after building was tidied, repaired, and put back into service. Whoever had left this building for them to find had planned well. They found a woodshop, all the tools wrapped and greased to keep them from rusting. And then on a back wall were sealed containers with woodworking books. A metal shop was next door, and out near the main gate was a blacksmith shop. It was a treasure house for a group which wanted to start a new home, and Ben wondered at who had assembled and protected this resource. Ben’s “children”—who were rapidly growing up—would naturally gravitate, one or two at a time, to each need of this growing community.

Nobody understood Ben’s fascination with the overgrown garden next to the church, but they added it to their list of chores with no argument. As each section was cleaned up, apparently dormant bulbs or rose stalks would come to life, and the garden slowly but surely regained all the beauty Ben had experienced during his first visit. The day came when Beck came running to drag Ben to the garden.

They had reached its center in their cleanup, and there was the golden bar, glowing in the sunlight. Ben looked around at the circle of eager faces.

“Did anybody touch it?”

All the heads shook “no” in solemn unison.

“Well, I *think* it’s gold, but I’m not certain. I *am* certain that it belongs here, right in the middle of the garden. So please leave it be, and enjoy its beauty.”

Eventually they reached the far end of the garden, and found Mary and the pool and even the koi just as he remembered. The water was still trickling out into the pool.

“Father Luiz says it’s probably from an ‘artesian well’,” Newt told Ben as she stood beside him, studying the statue of Mary.

Ben sat down, and listened as he prayed. There was a compost pile of considerable size outside the walls, and a wheelbarrow had just been rolled in to dress the base of some of the plants. There were clippers in action, and the roses were being brought back from their wild overgrowth. He looked up to see that Father Luiz and Mother Nena had joined him.

“Out here, *you* are the priest,” Luiz told him.

Mother Nena stepped forward and handed him a waxed canvas bag.

“From Sister.”

Ben almost asked, then remembered the healer from way back at the beginning. He opened the bag to see many, many bags containing seeds. Each bag was clear, with a dessicant pack inside to preserve the seeds as well as a slip of paper telling the type of seed.

Mother Nena was still watching him.

“Garden and gardeners are brought together, Gentled.”

Sarah

Ben was down in the wood shop, teaching a number of the older youth how to sharpen chisels and plane blades. Tina came running up, her face alight with happy excitement.

“Ben! A woman is on the trail, leading a whole *bunch* of children here. Can I go out with you to meet them?”

Ben looked over his students one more time. “Finish sharpening all the blades, but leave them out so I can check your work. Then sweep up and it’ll be about time for lunch.”

He walked out the front of the mission, Tina holding his hand as she bounced in excitement. She was looking forward to more friends! Ben was happy that she’d come so far from her terrible condition when they’d rescued her, and it wasn’t even occurring to her that these children might not be ready for friendship just yet.

With the group walking in their direction, and the rushed pace Tina urged on Ben, the groups soon reached each other. Tina dropped Ben’s hand, and skipped up to start talking to the children, who numbered at least a couple dozen.

“Hi! I’m Tina! I live in a church, and we grow food, and we have big walls to keep us safe at night. And we have Mother Nena who teaches us lots of things—even prayers and songs!”

But Ben wasn’t listening, because the group of children was led by a single woman, who now folded back the hood of her cloak.

Sarah.

Ben hadn’t thought of his wife since the first days of whatever happened at the church. He remembered how her memory was elusive even to those around him, and his own thoughts had grayed out the memories, as if to keep him focused on something else.

And now—here she was. All the memories came flooding back, like a curtain pulled to the side to let sunlight stream in. She came into his arms, and they held each other for a bit. She spoke first, her head still resting against his chest, her voice a little muffled.

“After you disappeared, an angel spoke to me. An actual angel! And he told that I needed to let you do some of the Lord’s work, and I should ‘save the children’. So I did preschool work, and everything went bad and I took a bunch of children up into the local mountains.”

“We hid there, and they started hunting us. But then things got even worse down in the cities, a bunch of people were dead, fuel and water and parts and food became scarce for all the remaining thugs. The hunts became less frequent, and then they stopped, but even with what we could grow, and what friendly neighbors could supply, it was pretty hard. An angel—the same one, I think—came again and told me my home was ‘north’. Somebody was watching over us, because the journey wasn’t even that hard. And here we are.”

Ben gently touched her hair.

“You and your kids are going to be a great addition, and Mother Nena will be beside herself with the extra help in schooling.”

Sarah tightened her hug on him.

“I don’t get to stay—I have to go back. I don’t know when I stop saving children, but it’s not yet.”

Ben shifted reluctantly. “I don’t get to stay here, either.”

“I know, the angel warned me. But it’s good to see you one last time.”

“Well, I won’t be leaving *immediately*. Your help is welcome for as long as we can have it. Come on, let me introduce you.”

Ben and Sarah, hand in hand, walked along with most of the children. At the front was Tina, who had showed all the youngest girls how to hold hands in a line and skip as they sang and walked towards the church.

That Night

Amid the uproar of the arrival of so many new children, Ben and Sarah were left alone, a buffer of space around them in respect for their shared burden and long separation. Ben related his own adventures in the same brief style of Sarah, but they mostly just sat together, watching the life of the mission swirl around them. Presently, it was time for daily mass, and later, evening prayer, and finally it was time for night prayer. It was dark outside, although a quarter moon gave enough light to walk safely.

“Walk me to the gate?”

Ben bowed his head, then walked with her to the mission’s front gate. Scott was there, on foot and armed.

“I can escort her.”

“Thank you, Scott, but she’ll be fine. Can you give us a moment?”

Scott drew a breath as if to argue, but then shrugged and stepped away with just a “God bless you, great lady.”

Ben looked through the open gateway, his eyes resting on the distant hills. Sarah wrapped an arm around his waist, resting her head on his shoulder. An owl out in the night hooted, and she straightened, kissed him lightly, then walked out into the night.

Ben went up onto the wall, and watched her figure become smaller and smaller. She passed some trees, and then she was gone from his sight. There was a change of watch, but word had gone out about her departure; he was left undisturbed. Ben only finished his vigil and went to bed as dawn broke.

The Ship

Life Resumes

The community was settling into a rhythm, and word was obviously getting out about their work. Every week or so, another group would appear on one of their roads, some desperate and hungry, others with wagons full of homesteading supplies. Their community should have been a target for pillagers and worse, but Scott had made sure that each arrival acknowledged their allegiance to mutual defense, and had built up a circle of those with expertise in military matters. The few attacks which came were met with such competent ferocity that often only a single survivor was left to flee and warn others of the experience.

Terry had joined the Church, and as soon as he’d received his first Communion, became an altar server. Ben and Father Luiz had pored over the Canon Law books, and decided that yes, Father was the Superior General of his order. As such, he had the competence to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation. This made the good priest uneasy, but Ben could tell that the dire state of the Church weighed heavily on his mind.

Ben had started dropping hints about ordinations as well, but Father changed the subject as soon as he saw what Ben was suggesting. But Ben knew that this humble priest could well be the ranking Catholic in the world. He would help him meet the needs of the Church.

The Sighting

With so much of community life settling, Ben knew he would soon be called away. Thus, when Teddy came running to him, he was ready for something new.

“There’s a *ship* coming towards us!”

Ben followed Teddy to the tower, then climbed up after him to the highest point in the church, the bell tower. From there, Ben could see the small shape of a sailing ship, distant out at sea, but clearly headed in their direction.

“It has *guns!*” Teddy exclaimed, handing Ben the binoculars.

It certainly did. He could see one mounted at the bow, another at the stern. He looked along the side and saw square hatches which no doubt opened to let cannons fire in a broadside. *We had satellites and missiles and nuclear propulsion, and we’re back to sailing ships with cannons,* he mused.

“They’ll land at our beach, Sandy Spit. Let’s get ready to meet them. Make sure Scott has a security team to provide overwatch. They’re probably armed merchants, not pirates or anything like that. But we should play it safe.”

It was late afternoon by the time the ship finally dropped anchor, brought the sails down, and put a small boat out to row across to their beach. Ben saw a couple sidearms, but nothing beyond the basics of self defense. No doubt Scott, from an overwatch up on the bluff above, was studying every inch of the boat. Ben had seen what Scott had brought along, and even if the boat was filled with heavily armed invaders, they would cease to exist after their very first hostile action.

The boat ran up onto the sandy beach, and a distinguished looking man with gold braid at his shoulders sprang lightly off the boat to walk towards Ben.

“Greetings! I am captain de Soto–Raul do Soto. You represent the Mission of Our Lady, yes?”

“I am happy to report that we have a resident priest, and it is now the Church of Our Lady. I am Ben, and we would be delighted to hear of your wondrous ship and what sort of adventures you have undertaken?”

Which was the nicest way Ben could think to ask if they were here to cause trouble. The captain did not appear to take any offense, laughing easily.

“I am from Spain, an armed merchant tasked by my King to carry civilization out to the world, and bring back word of others who are rebuilding. We have three ships, which I believe you would call Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria. Ours is named ‘Santa Clara’, but tradition demands that we call her ‘La Nina’. Spain has returned to Catholicism, and to a monarchy.”

“It is good to have traditions,” Ben let a note of doubt creep into his voice. He hoped Spain wasn’t going to resume *all* of their old Catholic traditions.

Captain de Soto nodded, a small smile on his face. “If you mean, do we have inquisitors on board, or are we preparing to sail treasure galleons? No. His Majesty holds an advanced degree in physics, to which he has added a degree in Theology. There is nothing of decadence to be found, please be assured of that.”

Ben bowed. “I meant no disrespect, and we are most eager to hear word from the wider world. We have some very modest radio equipment, but the radio bands have remained silent. We could transmit on the amateur radio bands—we have the equipment for that—but have decided to wait and listen for now.”

“Many others think like you, thus the silence. Also, there are so few since the Great Death. My own country does transmit, but not at terribly high power. Our astronomers say sun spots will be more active in the coming years, and then you may hear us.”

“You call it, the ‘Great Death’?”

“Yes. We may never know exactly what it was, nor whether it was caused intentionally. We do know that it happened quite suddenly in any one area, but it was not instantaneous across the world. There was a stretch of four days, over which different areas fell at different times.”

“I am being inconsiderate. Won’t you and your men please be our guests up at our church?”

“Thank you! It would be an honor. With your permission, may we bring some boxes with supplies you might find useful? I don’t want to bring them out until your friends above are assured that we are peaceful!”

A Feast

Word was passed up to Scott, and presently their whole procession had reached the church's gates, with tables quickly set up outside and an impromptu celebration meal was set out. The boxes contained medical supplies and an enormous number of reference books, all printed on the thinnest possible paper to permit a veritable library to fit in a small, waterproof box. Presently Captain de Soto opened another box, and Ben saw sacred books, something like pendants, and several flasks. Captain de Soto looked at Ben and hesitated.

"I don't wish to be rude, but this contents must be handled between myself as an emissary, and your highest ranking Church member."

Ben nodded, "Of course. Let me get Father Luiz."

The priest and captain went off into the church with the box, and presently returned, the box and its contents apparently stored. Father Luiz looked thoughtful, wearing a necklace of some bright metal, a cross hanging at his chest. Ben studied it.

"A pectoral cross?"

The father looked resigned. "I am not a bishop, but I *am* competent to ordain. So your wish has been granted."

"Don't forget that Paul said there were only deacons, and bishops. We can argue about presbyters. But you are much more than a deacon. I think the Church will shed its centuries of accumulated hierarchy, and bloat, and corruption. You will be an excellent bishop someday."

The Other Gifts

By the evening, the captain and his officers had spoken with a great many members of the community. Ben could tell that they were assessing his people, and by nighttime the captain had sent word back to his ship. Some more men presently arrived, and with them yet more boxes. These boxes were heavy, and longer than the previous ones. Ben wasn't surprised when Captain de Soto asked for Ben and Scott to meet with him in private.

"As captain of my ship, and under commission from my king, our mission is to help the world begin to recover. Knowledge and medicines, I can give out with few restrictions. But when I come across a settlement which I think will be a pillar of our rebuilt world—I can supply further help."

The captain opened one of the boxes, and Ben could see it held AK-103 rifles, the successor to the classic AK-47. Even as he studied the rifles, the captain proceeded to open other boxes. Ammunition, maintenance, parts. And then a box with some variant of the Russian RPG-7, a shoulder launched anti-tank weapon. Ben thought of the hatches on the side of Captain Raul's ship, and realized something much more dangerous than an old fashioned cannon would fire out of those openings.

The captain seemed to read his mind. "Yes, we are perhaps the last intact military power, and thus the world's super power. But we are so very much weakened, just like everybody else. We want many places to be a little dangerous, to stand against evil. But I think we've learned what happens when a few places become too dangerous. It is for me to judge. I have decided you should be one of those places which can be trusted with such weapons."

The final box held a radio, along with batteries, wire, and lines. One of the captain's officers demonstrated how to connect together the radio and its batteries, and how to string up the antenna so it could work at shortwave frequencies. There were even some folded solar panels to recharge the batteries from the sun. The captain watched with satisfaction.

"You are alone no longer."

Next Morning

The captain and his men bivouacked down on the shore, politely declining invitations to stay in and around the church and nearby farms. But he returned next morning with a few officers, and a bag which made Ben's

mouth water when he smelled its contents—coffee beans!

Word spread throughout the area, and soon there was a long line of people who had not tasted coffee in years. Captain de Soto laughed in delight to see the enthusiasm for his gift, and presently everyone was once again sitting down to a celebration—eggs, toast, and the captain’s coffee.

Scott came by with a cup of coffee and a frown. “It tastes like ash soup.”

Ben held out his cup, and Scott poured the rest of his own coffee into Ben’s cup.

“When did you ever taste ash soup?”

Scott just shook his head and walked away.

Ben turned to the captain. “I would like to speak with you about passage.”

Captain Raul was surprised. “For whom?”

“For myself.”

“My course reflects my orders and commission. I can not justify anything other than the most minor of detours. Where do you want to go?”

“I’ll know it when I see it. I think when the time comes, it’ll cost you at most a few hours.”

“Your people have supplied us most generously with food provisions; we would have left you all the supplies anyway, but we appreciate having the ship’s stocks restored. And we’ll enjoy fresh vegetables for as long as they keep! Let us consider your passage as part of this overall barter. Welcome aboard.”

Onward

Parting

The tide was going to be optimal early in the morning, so Ben was told to come across before the sun went down. There was a flurry as everybody tried to think up what they should send with him, and then a pause as it occurred to them that Ben never packed anything personal, just supplies which the group would need. When asked, he just shrugged.

“Send me away with memories.”

So he sat with groups, sharing memories, laughing and eating a tiny fraction of all the treats which were put on plates for him. There were many comments about how they couldn’t manage without him, but again this came with a dawning realization that he had been moving all of his own duties out onto others in the community.

Newt glowered, “You came out of that garden on the first day knowing you were leaving. Mary’s taking you from us.”

Ben nodded. “Right on the first, wrong on the second. I sat at that statue of the greatest woman who has ever lived, and I knew that I wouldn’t be staying here. But I didn’t take orders from her (or her statue!), although I was certainly inspired by her example.”

Boarding

By Ben’s strict orders, just Sue, Mother Nena, and Terry accompanied him out to the beach where a small boat they called a “gig” was waiting to carry him out to the ship. He turned and laughed at the glum faces.

“I’ll miss you too! Mother Nena, can you walk with me for a moment?”

They stepped away from the others, and she interrupted him as he made to speak.

“I’ll take care of them, yes. I’ll raise a good flock of nuns, yes. If the need is terrible, Scott can help. But mostly I will keep him peaceful.”

“You know a bishop is needed?”

“Yes, not my business.”

“You’re the superior of an order, too. They’ll make a far better choice if you help.”

“Never in history of Church have they listened. Why now?”

“Be ready if they ask.”

He walked with her back to the group, then motioned Sue to follow him.

“Sue. You’re the leader.”

“For now. Lots of people are coming.”

“For good. There will be times when the easy thing to do is step away. Let somebody else take over. Lean in. You’ll win the fight so long as you refuse to give up. Leading is wearying, dreary work. But its payment is that you can make good decisions, and then make them stick.”

He finished with Terry, who turned to him expectantly as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Ben, I’m sorry I fooled you for so long.”

“It caused no harm, so consider it forgiven. And I always suspected it anyway. It all dropped away as soon as you heard your calling.”

“Yes! It was like I waited my whole life to hear it.”

“And one of my great joys was to be a part of that. You know that eventually you’ll need to become a bishop?”

“I’m still working through the catechism. I don’t even know if I’ll make a decent priest.”

“Exert yourself to be a great deacon. And then be a great priest. Just keep in mind what I’ve told you.”

He and Terry walked towards the gig, Mother Nena and Sue walking to meet them there. Ben turned and gave each of them a last hug, then climbed into the boat, which was quickly rowed out to the ship. He waved to them one last time, then turned to study his home for the next many weeks.

Sail power! Even before the Great Death there had been fossil fuels only for government vessels, and even for them shortages were keeping most vessels tied up. Generally, when something broke, it stayed broken—in an engine, or steering, or even in the refineries which tried to make the necessary fuels. Most likely, there were no ships like that afloat any more. And so he was crossing the ocean under the power of wind, with cannons to keep them safe from pirates.

They reached the side of the ship, and there was a great deal of fuss with cables, after which the boat in its entirety was lifted upward. He again waited to ask permission, after which he stepped aboard to exchange some pleasantries with the captain, and follow him down to a tiny cabin. He suspected they were still watching from shore, but he didn’t turn to look as he went below deck.

Weigh Anchor

In the earliest part of the morning he heard large numbers of men come up on deck and busy themselves with getting under way. The captain had tactfully—but pointedly—told him to stay out of the way. Presently he heard the rustling of sails, the clank of chains, and the ship’s movement became much livelier. By the time the captain’s steward came to fetch him to breakfast, the coast was just a low dark presence on the horizon.

Part Three: Building

Return

A Grandma and a Metropolitan

Ben waved to the crewmember who had run him to shore on a small launch. Further out was the sailing ship he'd convinced to bring him along as they did their trans-oceanic run. He walked up the sandy shore, and picked out the path climbing the steep bank to reach the top of the headland. Here he was, back at Sandy Spit.

Having climbed the path up, he could see the launch was already stored, and the ship's sails were filling as it pulled away. He waved, not sure if somebody would have a telescope pointed at him. BOOM went the stern chaser gun, answering his question. They kept a blank charge in it for signalling. He laughed, waved again, then headed inland.

The new colony he'd left would certainly have survived. He came across a trail, surprised to see it was paved. He looked up and down the path, pondered if he could have landed at the wrong place? No. How long had he been away? There were many trees growing in what had been fields, keeping him from seeing much of the area.

Since the paved trail was headed in the right direction, he followed it, grateful at least that he didn't have to fight his way through any brush. It turned left, and crossed a rushing creek on a bridge which had definitely not been there when he left. He stopped at the middle to listen to the water running by.

He followed the path, pretty sure that it was leading towards the old mission. When he'd left, you didn't cross a creek to get from the path down to Sandy Spit, and he crossed it twice more before realizing that somebody had rerouted the flow of water. He enjoyed the shade of the trees, the level, paved road, and the tinkling of the creek as he crossed it each time. Leaving the final bridge behind, he went up a gentle slope and caught his first sight of civilization.

There was a loop of road, with houses spaced along it. Each was single level and faced south, probably using some of his old ideas about passive solar construction. Through some trees in the distance he could see other houses, multi-storey. More than one school of architectural thought had built in this community.

Between him and that road was a park; they had developed the path he had just walked as a community amenity to reach the beach. It ended here at a park, beyond which there was that larger road which looped out into the community. Ben walked through the park, noting its swings, teeter-totters, and a range of other items for the use of children.. The park also had a message board, some picnic benches, and several fire pits. Walking to the board, he read about community dinners, a proposal for a new house, some ideas on whether rail would ever reach here.

Having crossed the park, he walked along the road, towards some children playing in the road ahead. A couple parents sitting on a front lawn were watching. As he neared, the children adjusted their play to leave him the sidewalk, but didn't appear unduly concerned. He walked up to the pair of mothers, both in their later 20's.

"Excuse me, I've just arrived. When I left, this community was just being started. Is there a Sue here?"

The older of the pair nodded. "Susan McFarland, I'd guess. Sure, go down to the end here, take a left..." she reeled off some directions. He thanked her, and continued as instructed.

The woman had called ahead. As he approached what was obviously a governmental building, a woman with long, gray hair stepped out the front door. She caught sight of him, and froze. It was Sue. Gray hair, wrinkles, but the same clear eyes he remembered.

"Hello, Sue. Or is it now 'Susan'?"

She shook her head in wonder.

"Ben. Fifty years and here you stand, not a day older. I read those Narnia books, and decided to break the curse on that name. That's me—Susan. Married, kids, and grandchildren. You always seemed a little

unearthly in my memories, but this is really something. What did you do, dance for a night with the Elf King?”

“No, I just chipped away at my”to do” list. Well, not really my own list, since I don’t know what’s on it, just what’s at the top of it. But I’d be at the right place at the right time, or say the right word to the right person. And then it would be pretty easy to see where I should go next. Here I am.”

He looked around. “It’s good to see you. Some of my first tasks, and you all seem happy and safe? Did I really succeed?”

“We are happy... and blessed. And safe. We still have the old mission—it’s back to being a mission—and we built something big enough for the whole community. You’ll like our church—the end of the schism was the start of some very interesting work in bringing East and West influences into the worship spaces. After what happened towards the end in the Catholic Church, nobody’s in a rush to have a supreme leader. But the unified Church is getting along pretty well, and even had a council. Satan’s going to have to wait a couple generations before there’s any chance of people turning their backs on God this time. We have a service at 5?”

“I’ll be returning to a church soon, but not yours—though thank you for the invitation! I feel like I’m nearly finished. Not, apparently, by getting old in the usual way. But there’s a destination waiting for me.”

Susan looked like she was going to press him for details, when a small car turned the corner and pulled up to them. A tall man in Orthodox clerical robes climbed out of the car and joined them, looking first at Susan, then Ben.

“‘A stranger from the old days’ is what the rumor mill told me. But I didn’t expect to see somebody step directly, unchanged, *out* of the old days. Were you in cryogenic sleep, Ben?”

“No, Terry, nothing like that. I rattled around, taking care of this and that. The years just seemed to trickle by without me taking much notice of them.”

“You remember Newt? She ended up being our top doctor in the region. She’s going to want a vial of your blood.”

Ben smiled, “I’m not good with needles. But please do tell her that I’m glad she’s on the healer’s path. And you... a bishop?”

“Well, a metropolitan.”

“And metropolitans walk around in full dress?”

He laughed. “No, when I heard who might be in town, I excused myself and came straight over. It *is* a miracle, you know.”

Ben changed the subject. “Mother Nena?”

Terry answered.

“She lasted just about forever. During our big East-West council, we were heading towards a new schism. She barged in, lectured us as if we were wayward children, then stormed out. It put the council back on track. You remember her two sisters? Mother Ana took her place, and is at *least* as intimidating as Mother Nena. Mother Lipa travels far and wide, helping and guiding. Their Order does good work for a *lot* of people.”

Ben smiled.

“I did hear a story about Sean. The surviving officer of that last, great fight wrote a report on it—said it was a full squad of fighters who used surprise to attack them, and they cowered as soon as his men counterattacked. He easily killed them all.”

Ben shook his head in disbelief.

“His own men refused to permit it, and forced him to tell the truth. They had never seen a Holy Warrior before, and they needed to honor his memory. Quite a few of them quietly converted.”

Susan looked off into the distance sadly for a moment, remembering, then returned her gaze to Ben.

“I never heard any word of Doctor Ellen and Rob?”

Ben shook his head.

“Nor I. And I asked a number of people who would have heard of them. Maybe some day we’ll learn their story; I’m sure they did a lot more good somewhere, somehow.”

Moving On

A quiet descended on the three of them, and Susan and Terry watched Ben with sadness and affection. Ben squared his shoulders.

“Time to go.”

“Go where?” Susan asked.

Ben just smiled.

“I can drive you.” Terry offered.

“There’s no rush, thank you.”

Ben started down the road, leaving Terry and Susan standing where they’d talked. A memory nagged, and he remembered leaving the priest and Ollie at a church doorway right back at the very beginning. The same thing happened now to Terry and Susan; they looked at each other, then walked off to continue their day. He guessed their meeting with him would soon just be a vague memory.

Where It Started

The Road Back

Ben walked up the road, enjoying the sunshine and the calls of the various birds. The road’s surface was well-maintained, as was the footpath alongside, where he walked. A vehicle with a bit of a turbine whine to it swept past; it was probably one of those hydrogen fueled ones. The EV enthusiasts were still present in the market, although the now well-understood costs of mining and processing the materials for batteries and high power electronics had made them much less popular. He had heard of compressed air power, and the fossil fuel crowd was still there with ever-improving efficiency.

A bicyclist swept by. Bicycles with powered assist were still around, but it was in style to get around with just your own muscles.

All the deferred maintenance was being addressed with remarkably little fuss. Deferred medical care, too—most things could be treated for a day’s wages, by somebody who’d completed a one or two year program. Houses were either in good repair or removed—he knew there were extensive storage yards which held salvaged materials which would be available when needed.

Politics had faded to the background. Reforms on the influence of money on politicians and elections had been easier than expected once the active sabotage by the corrupt had been driven back. Being hurt when the government violated your rights now had a sentencing phase, and many politicians and officials had been impeached before the old habits of domination had faded. On so many fronts there had been people with good ideas. The ideas were finally being tried.

Old Town

The town was where he remembered it, but it was nothing but mouldering shells and debris piles. With all the rebuilding and renewal in the world, why hadn’t they at least cleaned this all up? He heard a bike brake to a stop beside him. A young man climbed off his bike, studying Ben for a moment before gesturing to the ruins.

“Admiring our Old Town?”

Ben shook his head. “Nobody wants to rebuild?”

The man looked up and down the piles.

“Right near the end of the bad times, everything went bad here all at once. The wood rotted, the metal rusted, the water from the faucets would make you sick. They said it was just a pipe problem, but even with new pipes you couldn’t drink the water. Sleeping here a couple nights gave you rashes and hives which took weeks to clear up once you left. They even tried building further out away from town, but that was no good, either.”

“But here you are?”

“Right. Eventually, a prophet—a real, live one wearing rags and carrying a sign! He told us that this town was cursed for all time, but we could start a new town once we’d rebuilt the old church which had been torn down. I remember my parents working on the rebuilding, it was a job and a half. But once it was rebuilt, a priest showed up, and then the current town—” he waved vaguely down the road, “—was built and turned out livable.”

Ben remembered shaking his sandals as they’d left.

“Thank you. That makes sense. I think I should visit this church.”

The man started to give directions, but saw Ben had already started off in the right direction.

The Church

Ben turned the corner onto the road with his old, original church from way back when this all started. He knew that it was time to be here, but he didn’t know why. It had been months since he’d last eaten, or drunk, or slept. The world had turned a corner, and he had helped all his precious children work for that change, and they became part of it. But he wasn’t.

He came up to the driveway of the church, and looked at the building. It had mostly been rebuilt, which suggested the craze of tearing down churches had touched it at some point. There were a few concrete walls which he recognized as originals.

It looked good. The lines were a little more elegant than he remembered, and it was taller, holding the cross at its peak higher. He looked for his old blood line of protection, but saw no sign of it. He hoped it had given the other side a lot of trouble before it was finally breached.

He noticed that a graveyard had been added off to one side of the church, and he walked over to it, passing through the open gates. His eyes went immediately to one stone over near the far corner, and he walked towards it, already knowing what he’d find.

Sarah. There were lots of words and dates, but he didn’t notice them; they didn’t matter. She had made it all the way back here, and now she was asleep with Christ. Soon she’d be telling him about her adventures. He could tell her his stories, too. He just knew she’d done many wonderful things. He turned back towards the church.

The parking lot was full, so he threaded his way among cars to reach the building. Against the side of the entrance was a bicycle rack, also quite full. It was quiet inside, but it was the thick quiet of prayer.

About to enter, he pondered trying to place a new blood line of protection around the building. But no, that wasn’t something for him to do. It was in the congregation’s hands.

Adoration

He entered the church, and realized that he hadn’t opened the door to do so. A profound silence enveloped him as he passed through the narthex and faced the sanctuary with its altar, and tabernacle, and crucifix. The pews were full, and everyone was kneeling. On the altar was a monstrance, holding a host for display. *The adoration of the Holy Eucharist.* Warmth washed across him, and he walked towards it.

When he reached the step up onto the sanctuary platform, he hesitated; he'd never approached the monstrance like this before. His impulse was to kneel, or at least genuflect. But another impulse came to him, *come closer first*. He stepped up, walking towards a Presence which filled all his perceptions. He should have bumped into the altar by now, but he kept walking forward as the light surrounded him.

Every single worshipper was crying, although they couldn't say why.

There's an afterword, but don't read it now. Tomorrow, maybe.

Tomorrow. Really.

The End

This is the third book I've written, and the first which is both a dystopian novel as well as a utopian one. If you made it here, thank you for working your way through the earlier chapters. I hope you found the ultimate result was adequate compensation.

My HHP (Humble Home Page) is:

<https://vsta.org/andy/>

I'm not big on corporate social media, but on the Fediverse/Mastodon I can be reached at:

@vandys@goto.vsta.org

Whatever happened to Doctor Ellen? Where did Ben go during the parts where he ducked off-stage? What is Sarah's story? Who was the woman who tended the children while Ben was away? I have a solid idea of what Ben did when he left that second time, so that's the most likely story to tell next.

No, actually, I started outlining "The Gentled Healer of Mary".

Thank you for being a reader.