

Immortal Shard

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By *Eli Margolese-Malin*

Thesis Director
Professor Dayid Hopes

Thesis Advisor
Adjunct Lecturer Patrick Finn

Eli Margolese-Malin
35 Sevier Street
Apt. 35F Asheville,
NC 28804

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By E. S. Malin

Prologue

Walking up the ramp to his personal transport, Solomon David Rashi tried hard to mask his disappointment behind a smile. No one had come to see him off. The docking bay was empty. He hadn't been expecting much in the way of fanfare; he knew the affairs of biological beings like him were beneath the concerns of the transcended, but he had rather hoped his decision to end his life would have drawn a little more attention. He was the last true human living. Surely, that fact

alone made him important. Sol paused at the top of the ramp and glanced over his shoulder one last time, hoping to see even just one transcended standing there in its host body, paying its respects to him. No one was there. He dropped the smile and boarded the transport. Why did he still care about such pointless vindication, when he, Sol, had completed all that he had been appointed to do and more, so long ago? Perhaps something in his biological side still needed the approval of others.

He climbed into the acceleration tank at the heart of the transport and let the life-support's tentacles wrap slickly around him, the larger ones forming a cushioning spider web lattice over his skin as the smaller tendrils wormed their way under his clothes and inserted themselves, gently but insistently, into his every orifice. No matter how many times he went through this process, he still strained against the invasion, clenched his teeth and shuddered at the wrenching nausea as the tendril tips branched into tiny filaments and attached themselves to his internal organs and nervous system. And then it was over, the neural link engaged and the unfeeling digital existence of the transport flowed into his mind and pushed aside the biological. The transport's sensors became his senses, its engine, his heart. He was the transport. The confines of the tank and the discomfort of the support system

melted away, leaving him crouched, waiting, on the cool composite plating of the docking bay floor. A thought and he uncoiled, moving up out of the bay and into space. Then, clear of the bay doors, he kicked out with his thrusters and accelerated swiftly away, rising in a steep arc.

Behind him, the massive star-sized structure of Reality's Heart stretched across his entire rear field of vision. It had grown since the last time Sol had seen it from the outside. Thousands more Arks bearing the transcended members of alien races from across the multi-verse had joined up with Reality's Heart, each new Ark's unique design adding to the already jumbled hodgepodge of self-contained worlds that was the Heart. Sol had always thought a structure of such magnitude and importance ought to have been something of great beauty, more like an Olympus or Heaven of legend, and not the pile of interstellar flotsam it resembled. But as the g-forces of his acceleration built and Reality's Heart began to recede, he turned his attention to his forward view. Ahead of him lay the empty expanse of the Core, the region that joined all the universes of the multi-verse together.

Leaving Reality's Heart, Sol experienced a strange mix of emotions. One half of him felt like he was slinking away like some unwanted pet, abandoned by and abandoning all those he had known and guided through the millennia, all those, who at last,

had out grown him. His other half felt like the beaming father who had just sent his children out from his protective confines, prepared and ready to move into a larger world. On most days, the first half won out, even when he told himself it was completely irrational to feel guilty about having fulfilled one's purpose. But now, as the power in his reactors surged and he prepared to generate the bridge that would cross the barrier between Core and universe traversing the gulf of light-years to the Sol system, he felt very much the father.

The jump went smoothly, the bridge winking out as soon as he passed the threshold into real-space. Sol decelerated and slid into a tight orbit about the Earth, and with a growing sense of relaxed happiness, he reopened his visual scanners, closed during the jump, and let the image of the Earth pour down the neural-link into his mind. Here was his true home. Here was where his stewardship had begun and here he was going to end it. He had almost forgotten this place; time and new memories had pushed his days on Earth to the dimmest of shadows.

Fortunately, back when those memories were still relatively fresh, he had been in the habit of regularly imprinting his mind-image on the recording devices of Reality's Heart. Before leaving for Earth, he had made the day's long trip down into the Vault deep beneath the Heart's millions of biospheres and their associated automated machinery, where the hardcopies of his

mind-images were stored, alongside the minds of all the transcended. The Vault was a hive of twisted corridors lined with honeycomb data storage banks stretching for thousands of miles around the Heart's interior. A host of automated attendants maintained the banks and expanded them haphazardly whenever more exabytes were needed. No one had set foot in this place since it was built; the whole structure was kept in a total vacuum. A thin stale atmosphere had been pumped in for his visit, but he would have rather worn a skinsuit. Then he wouldn't have had to listen to the oppressive echoes of his own footsteps and the hollow tapping of the attendants' scuttling feet. An attendant led him to the requested storage bank, which was mercifully close to the Vault's entrance, only a few miles in, and he transferred all the old images back into his mind before erasing the bank and ordering the attendant to destroy it. Then came the long trip back to the surface. At least now, he wasn't alone. The past went with him.

But the Earth of his memory was gone. Five billion years had passed since his last visit to the planet. His scanners revealed a ruined and blasted world, all reds, browns and grays, with only the barest wisp of an atmosphere, no oceans and no life. A dead world, baked by a bloated Sun. Even the continents, now in unfamiliar shapes and arranged in an alien pattern had

died, their once ceaseless grinding frozen as the last vestige of the core's heat slipped away into space.

The Earth before him was a ghost, hauntingly full of memory and history to those who cared enough to remember, but nothing more than a voiceless and meaningless specter lost to the vastness of the multi-verse to the transcended, who hadn't even cared enough to say goodbye to the person who had ensured their very existence. The Earth was not unlike himself, Sol mused. He too, was nothing more than a holdover, an outdated and outgrown remnant of Humanity's childhood, long cast aside and left to gather dust. He felt the dry burning that once heralded tears and quickly collapsed the image. How long had it been since he last cried? He thought he had prepared himself for this. He had known before leaving Reality's Heart what he would find when he returned to the Earth. At least, he knew the geography of it; while he was gone, the Sun moved into the red giant phase, consuming Mercury and Venus and burning away the Earth's oceans and atmosphere as it reached out to swallow the planet. But he had discounted the emotion of it. Emotion was weak. He found it hard to believe after all this time he still couldn't rid himself of it. Yet another way he was obsolete.

Hoping he had the right coordinates, Sol dropped out of orbit and spiraled gracefully down to the Earth's surface. There was no way to tell, of course, if this was the right place, the

landscape had shifted and changed, but somehow, it felt right. His thrusters threw up a cloud of red-brown dust as he landed with the barest of bumps.

The neural-link terminated and Sol was thrust back into the confines of his own body in time to feel the life-support's tentacles unwind and extract themselves. Then, with the tentacles back in their resting positions, Sol pulled himself out of the acceleration tank, yanked a skinsuit pouch off the wall and headed for the airlock.

Stepping in, he opened the pouch and emptied the shiny black rectangle within out onto the floor. The skinsuit immediately softened into an amorphous mass that slithered over to his legs and flowed up them, stretching itself over his skin forming a flexible, skintight suit. This time, the sensation was quite pleasant. Once the skinsuit was in place, Sol slid an air tank into a slit running across the suit's back, sealed it in and toggled the airlock.

Sol hesitated at the bottom of the ramp. The dust thrown up by the landing had settled into the walls of the shallow crater dug out by the transports thrusters, leaving the landscape completely silent and still. It had the sanctity of a tomb, and for a moment, he was worried about setting foot on the soil lest he disturb its peace. A silly a thought; he had disturbed it well enough just by landing. Shaking off his misgivings, he

stepped off the ramp and out onto the Earth's surface, the skinsuit dutifully transmitting the dry crunch of the sun-baked dirt as he stepped.

He strode quickly away from the transport, letting his feet take him where they would. He had no real plan once he reached the Earth, no set way of ending his life, just a vague notion that here, back where it all began, was where he wanted it to end. He only half saw the dead landscape as he walked, only barely felt the heat of the angry Sun dominating the sky. The rest of his vision was given over to mirages of past memories as ancient mind-images began to crowd out the new. A blue sky and a normal-sized sun at sunset wavered in front of and fought with the black starless sky. For a brief moment, he could feel the tickling brush of tall grass lining the roadside. Sights, smells, sensations of touch, moments of happiness, sadness, terror and pain all came rushing back and vied for his attention. And with those memories; a whole cascade of faces, all those who had died because of him. Allysia, Celena, all he had ever loved were dead. He saw their faces twisted in agony and was once again forced to ask the one question he couldn't answer: was it all worth it? He had saved more than he had killed. He had provided a wonderful future to those who had survived. But was that any consolation? Weighed down by such thoughts, he stopped along the crest of a steep hill.

Before and below him stretched a wide red-brown valley, cradled on either side by gray rolling hills. The twisting snake husk of a dry river curved across the valley floor. More memories flickered in and out of the bleakness. Yes, this was the spot. The pomegranate tree, twisted, almost dead, yet still managing a single bloom at the height of the drought, shimmered into being on his left. His heart beating faster, he turned to face the tree, and there tucked in among the tree's gnarled roots was the gravestone he had erected and carved. He knelt in the dust beside the grave, put his hand against the stone's cool surface, just under the carved name, and for the first time in millennia, tears came.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter One

Laurie McKenzie watched the setting sun with growing fear as she stomped back to the well. The walk shouldn't have taken this long, and wouldn't have been, if her brother weren't so busy being selfish, leaving the path every few seconds to check out yet another gross dead animal. She kept telling him to hurry, that Dad had warned them not to stay out past sunset unless they wished to be caught by the evil men who roamed the area at night, searching for lost kids to kill and roast over a fire. Travis hadn't listened of course. He said Dad was just trying to scare them and teased her for being a daddy's girl and a sissy. Well, maybe she was and Dad was just joking, it didn't matter, it wasn't good to disobey him. And now, thanks to Travis's selfishness, all that was left of the Sun was a thin sliver of blood red peeking over the barren hills lining the horizon. She tried to match the sort of glare Mom gave Travis when he did something stupid, which was often.

Travis looked up at her from his perch on the well's stone wall, blinked at her dumbly, and then bent back over the stick he had picked up, she wasn't sure when, during the walk, and continued carving. She shook her head and sighed. He was so stupid. He thought he was above being helpful just because he

was oldest. She was eleven and more adult. And she would prove it.

"Put down that twig and help me fill these jugs!" She pointed to the four still empty jugs.

"Ouch, Laurie!" Travis looked sourly at his hand. A trickle of blood, black in the deepening gloom ran from his ring finger. "You scared me. And look what you did." He had cut too much away from the stick and was now hurriedly trying to make the best of what to Laurie looked more like a sickly twig than the staff he insisted he was carving.

"Oh give up on that stupid stick already." "Hey," he pouted, "you can't rush these things." Laurie rolled her eyes. "All you do is cut the little twigs from the bygone."

Travis snorted. "You don't understand." "You cut off the twigs, sand the bark smooth and../" She trailed off. It was pointless. She was smart and did all the work and he still couldn't admit she was as capable as him. He was a boy she was a girl. "Okay," Laurie said, trying to start over, "Let's get these jugs filled. It's getting dark and I'm cold." Travis kept working on his stick. "Give me that." Laurie grabbed the stick with both hands and wrenched it away from him. "Hey, wait!"

"Come on." Laurie tossed the stick as far as she could. She heard the distance dull thump of its landing and was about to turn back to Travis and stick her tongue out at him, a childish thing to do she knew, but satisfying nonetheless, when Travis jumped up off the well wall and went crashing through the dead brush after the stick, pursuing it like a play-starved puppy, and was quickly swallowed up by darkness. Laurie just stood there, frozen in mid follow-through of throwing the stick, her mouth hanging open. She wanted to call after him, to demand that he stop and come back, but nothing came out. The shock of Travis suddenly abandoning her had taken her voice away. Finally, she became unstuck and she backed up against the well wall and slid down it until she was sitting in the dirt. And then, despite her best efforts, she started to cry.

Time passed, Laurie wasn't exactly sure how much. Travis was still gone, but at least now so were the tears. It was embarrassing, crying like that; something only little girls did. She stood and brushed the dirt from her pants. All this over a stupid stick. She'd be sure and tell Dad about Travis's running off when they got back; he'd be in so much trouble. Laurie tried hard to focus on her annoyance with Travis to keep herself from worrying whether he was okay. But worry crept into her mind anyway. Where was he? Why was he taking so long? She hugged her

arms tight to her chest. It was getting cold and she hadn't brought a jacket. Then a horrible thought came: what if the evil men got him? It would serve him right, but she didn't know what she'd do without him. She told herself repeatedly he'd be come back fine, and her fear slowly faded.

Laurie surveyed the darkening landscape. Nothing moved among the banks of dead, waist-high grass and brittle shrubs. He had probably just found another dead animal to poke. Laurie remembered the dead dog he had found on their walk. He nudged the rotten dog with his foot and wriggling river of white maggots poured from its open mouth. She shuddered and bile rose to her throat for the second time that day. But she wasn't about to give Travis an excuse to laugh at her, just in case he was watching, so she fought down the nausea and shook the image from her mind.

She turned back to the well, grumbling loudly about the uselessness of older brothers and wishing Travis was there to hear her. There was no use in waiting any longer. Laurie went ahead and checked the well's filtration system as Dad had told them to do.

It was a little metal box attached to a thin pole, one end of which stretched up from the well to a foot above her head, the other fell away into the dark well shaft. A sheet of sun-cells were wrapped around the box's top and a green light

blinked on and off on its bottom. Dad had said the green meant the well still had some water and that the water was safe to drink, unlike the settlement's own wells, which had all dried up over a year ago now. There were other wells closer to home than this one. But none of them still had a working filter and they were too busy, with all the other families drawing from them. Laurie put the first jug under the filtration system's spigot and twisted the handle. Water splashed into the jug. She stuck a finger into the falling stream, smiled at its cold tickling, then brought up the finger to her mouth and sucked in the cool freshness. She couldn't remember the last time it had rained. The first jug was full, so she shifted it over, letting the stream of water pour onto her shoes and soak into her tired feet for a moment before placing the second jug under the falling water. She was being wasteful, she knew, but that was okay, Mom and Dad weren't watching.

The sky boomed and a wave of thunder rolled and echoed off the distant hills. Laurie gasped and looked upwards just in time to see the blunt arrowhead of a transport vanish in a glow of red taillights behind the far horizon. Laurie stood there, eyes transfixed on the spot where it had disappeared. Where was it going? She wondered. Could it be carrying an actual Spaceborn? She frowned and looked glumly earthwards at the water jugs. It didn't matter. She'd never get to go on one of those, never get

to visit the Ring Mom had told her so much about. Mom and Dad both said it was too dangerous for her. They were just worried she wouldn't come back if she went. She didn't want to stay, just to see. Was that so bad? Apparently it was. She kicked a pebble against the well wall and reached for the third jug.

Just then, Travis returned from wherever it was he had gotten off to, pushing his way through the crackling dry brush, and then running up to her as soon as he was clear of it. Laurie had to suppress the urge to hug him. But then, as he got closer and his face stopped swimming in the darkness, she realized he looked scared. He stopped on the far side of the well and breathing heavily, he hunched over with one hand braced against the well wall and the other on his knee.

Laurie hurried over to him. "What's wrong? What happened? Did you find another dead animal?"

"Not animal." Travis gasped, as though he had to force the words out of him. "Not dead." His voice shook and cracked. "Come on, follow me." He turned around and staggered back towards the gap in the brush he had created.

"What? Travis wait!" Laurie darted after him and grabbed his arm. He wasn't leaving her this time. "What happened? What did you find?" She pulled him around to face her.

Travis, panting heavily, stared at her wide-eyed. "Please. We have to help him." He yanked his arm free, spun around,

hurtled back into the brush and was gone again. This time, Laurie sprinted off in pursuit of her brother. And when his back was lost to the darkness, she followed his pounding footsteps.

Laurie ran as fast as she could over the uneven ground. Dead twigs swatted and poked at her legs, snapping off with dry cracks as she passed. Her left side began to cramp, but she kept going. She collided with Travis who was on his knees in the middle of what looked like an overgrown ditch. She had just crossed a strange narrow clearing in the brush that ran too straight to be natural and was busy wondering if it was a piece of old road and if it was, where it led to when she hit him. Her knee jabbed hard into Travis's back and she lost her balance, stumbling off to the side before catching herself with one outthrust hand, scrapping her palm painfully over the loose gravel. Travis was knocked flat on his face. He screamed the instant he hit the ground and scrambled up and away from her, staring at the spot where he fell.

"Travis? I'm—" Laurie began.

"Ouch. Laurie! Be careful." Travis straightened up, one hand rubbing his back. He didn't look at her.

"Are you okay?"

"You just scared me, that's all." Travis laughed faintly, but the tremor in his voice told Laurie her sudden arrival wasn't what scared him.

Her eyes followed his stare. There was something lying in the grass where he had fallen. He had fallen on top of it. The smell hit her as soon as she stepped around him; a mix of all the worst things she could think of, decaying meat, spoiled milk and eggs, the sickly sweet stink of rotten fruit. She backed away. "What have you found, Travis?"

He finally turned to look at her. "It's a man. He's hurt real bad." He bent down next to the man and motioned her closer.

Laurie shook her head, but then, despite herself, took a few steps closer. It was definitely a man. He was sprawled face down on the ground. It was too dark to get a good look at him, but he certainly didn't seem alive, since he had made no noise when Travis fell on him. Trying her best to ignore the smell, and keeping her eyes shut in preparation for another river of maggots, she bent down over the man and put her hand on his back. It rose and fell almost imperceptibly. The man shuddered and groaned and Laurie jerked her hand back as though threatened by a snake. The palm of her hand came away warm and wet.

Travis didn't laugh at her. "I'm going to go get Dad. You stay here with him."

Laurie nodded silently as she backed up out of the ditch, her heart still racing. But then, after shuffling backward a few steps, she found she couldn't move. Her eyes were stuck on the man. Who was he? Who had done this to him? It was only when

Travis turned and began to run back the way they had come that his words sank in.

"Wait, Travis? Don't leave me here! What am I supposed to do?"⁷ She wanted to run after him, but her feet were still not obeying her.

"Just look after him."⁷ Travis called over his shoulder. "Keep him alive till I get back with dad." And with that, he was swallowed up by darkness.

Laurie sat down on the embankment a little ways from the wounded man. What was she supposed to do? The man obviously needed help. But a doctor's help. Not hers. The only medical things she knew how to do were to make the little cloth bandages and stinging ointment Mom made for her whenever she got a scrape or bruise while playing soccer with the boys. Mom had never actually shown her how to make them, but she was sure she could, she had had plenty of opportunities to watch the process, much to Mom's annoyance she was sure. But she didn't have the stuff to make them and they probably wouldn't make much of a difference anyway. What did she have? Water was the only thing she could think of. She had plenty of water. She looked over at the man, still laying facedown in the ditch. He must be awfully thirsty. She crawled over to him on her hands and knees. The smell wasn't so bad now. And this time, her squeamishness was gone

She stuck her hands under the man's chest and with a grunt heaved him over onto his back. The man groaned weakly, but showed no other signs of life. Laurie brushed the dirt away from around his mouth and nose and then stood and ran as fast as she could to the well.

The return trip took a lot longer; she had overfilled the water jug and was trying hard to keep from spilling it, but even so, with every few steps, another splash of water sloshed over the rim of the jug and soaked into her shirt. Fortunately, she managed to reach the man with most of the water still in the jug. Breathing heavily, she placed the jug on the ground next to the man and sank exhaustedly to her knees. Then, she dipped her hands into the jug and dribbled the cupped water into the man's half opened mouth. The man coughed and sputtered but then seemed to swallow the water. She dribbled a second handful and he swallowed it readily. She smiled. She was helping. She got a third cupped handful and poured it slowly over his face. She then gently wiped away the dirt and dried blood from his cheeks and forehead with her hands and ran wet fingers softly over his cracked lips, hoping the moisture would help. The man was breathing evenly now. He seemed to be asleep. There was nothing left to do now but wait. She sat back on the ground next to him, watching his face and wondering if he was dreaming.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter Two

Travis returned to West Jordan to find the settlement under lockdown. The main gate was shut and the wide paved square before its walls, normally crowded with merchants trading busily well into the night, was deserted. Several light-circles of searchlights blazed out from the watchtower above and behind the gate and flowed over the ground. The settlement had never been like this before, at least, he couldn't remember a time when it was. But the searing cramp in his stomach and side kept him from thinking too much more about this strange and ominous change. He stumbled out onto the main road leading into the settlement just before it broadened out into the marketplace square and immediately, a light-circle slid onto him. He winced and shielded his eyes from the stabbing harsh brightness. A second and third beam focused on him, blinding him and pinning him to the spot.

He stood stalk still in the middle of the blazing light. And now that he had stopped moving and the pain had died down to a dull throb, the fear came flooding in. Why were they doing this? Why didn't they open the gate? Surely, they realized he was no threat. But what if they didn't let him in? The man would die. And where would he and Laurie go? Jerusalem was too far

away to walk. What if the other settlements didn't want them? What about Mom and Dad? Come on, he told himself. You're braver than this. He pushed the questions and fear from his mind for the moment and forced himself to stand up straight against the weight of the searchlights.

One-by-one, the light-circles slid away and resumed their swooping scan on the surrounding landscape. And as Travis's eyes readjusted to the welcome dark, he realized the main gate had opened. But his sigh of relief caught in his throat. Two soldiers were marching towards him. It was too dark to make out their uniforms or faces, the soldiers were a pair of ghostly shadows moving in lockstep against the pale yellow backdrop of the walls. A searchlight beam passed overhead and something in the hand of each soldier gleamed silver with reflected light. Travis's heart froze. Whoever they were, these soldiers were not part of West Jordan security, none of them would approach a kid with guns in hand, pointed straight at him. The soldiers kept glancing from side to side as they neared, as though they expected more people to materialize out of the darkness at any moment, but their guns never wavered. They halted their march about ten feet away and Travis, not knowing what to expect, tensed and held his breath. He wished now that he hadn't told Laurie to stay behind; he always found it easier to be brave around her, as much as she often annoyed him.

"ID card." Travis jumped at the soldier's sudden snapped statement. His hand reached instinctively into his pocket for his card. But he didn't have his ID. It was still in his desk drawer. The only time he ever needed it was to get into Jerusalem. Otherwise, it stayed in the drawer. Instead, his hand closed on the strange necklace he had taken from the wounded man. He jerked his hand out of the pocket. Something told him the soldiers shouldn't find out what he carried.

Travis took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Why? I've never needed one before? I'm just trying to get home. It's dark and I'm cold." He hoped he didn't sound too whiney.

The soldier on the right stepped forward. "Your card." Travis shrank back from the outstretched hand.

A third soldier joined the other two and stepped between them. "You're one of the McKenzie kids aren't you?"

Travis swallowed and nodded slowly. "Yes," he said tentatively.

The new soldier holstered his gun and turned to the other two. "It's all right. I can vouch for him. He has nothing to do with why we're out here. Let him pass."

Now the guns wavered. They lowered slowly and the two guards stuck them, still moving together like twins, into their hip holsters. They turned as one and marched back towards the West Jordan gate.

"Come with me." The third guard motioned him to follow and then headed back to the gate.

Travis found he could breathe again. But his legs shook slightly as he walked and his throat felt tight. He kept telling himself that there was no reason now to be afraid. He concentrated on keeping his back straight, on looking proud and brave even if he didn't feel it, but despite his best efforts, his shoulders quickly hunched and his gaze dropped to the ground.

Travis glanced up nervously as the third guard led him through the half-open main gate into the settlement. The iron toothed grating loomed only a few inches above the soldier's head and Travis braced himself for its sudden descent as he passed underneath. He had never felt this way before. Whenever he came back to West Jordan from one of the few long trips outside the settlement, it was the brief dark of the gateway as he passed through the four-foot-thick walls that told him he was truly home. Now, it was as if he entered a forbidding fortress out of one of Laurie's fairy tales.

The field just inside the sandstone walls, beyond the gate-mouth and its iron teeth, was full of soldiers, most either milling aimlessly about, or sitting huddled around a dozen different campfires. A few, close by the gate, sat around a wooden table playing cards. In the face of this unexpected

scene, Travis's walk slowed to a crawl. Then his eyes widened and he stopped outright. Here, in the grey glow of the settlement's streetlights and the orange light of the campfires, he could finally make out the soldiers' uniforms; the blood red of the Brotherhood. The third guard placed a hand on Travis's shoulder and pushed him stiffly along. He had only been gone a couple of hours. How could so much have changed? Where the campfires burned and the soldiers sat, Travis and his friends had played soccer the day before. And when he and Laurie had left with the empty water jugs, there had only been three guards, all sitting around the table by the gate. And those guards were happy, laughing and joking, only breaking away from their fun to give Travis the briefest of nods when he told them he and Laurie were going out to fetch some water. None of them were armed. But all of these soldiers had guns and other assorted weapons and not even one was smiling. At least none of them seemed to pay him or his soldier escort any attention. Through the crowd of soldiers, Travis saw the two who had first stopped him going into the door at the base of the watchtower. He had never seen it in use before now.

"Why are you helping me?" Travis asked his soldier chaperone once they were clear of the field and tower. "You're Brotherhood. I thought you were supposed to be our enemy."

The soldier smiled. "I am. And the Brotherhood is the sworn enemy of the Loyalists."

Travis frowned. "I don't understand. Why me? And who are the Loyalists? Dad always said you were everyone's enemy."

This time the soldier laughed. "What you must understand, Travis, is that nothing is ever black and white. I may belong to the Brotherhood, and you may be a Loyalist, but that doesn't make the two of us enemies. I fight the Brotherhood's fights when it suits me, but I also have my own agenda that takes precedence when necessary. So does any good soldier."

"Ah." Travis said, though he still didn't understand. He was about to ask who the Loyalists were for a second time when the soldier pushed him forwards again.

"We have to hurry. I can't be away from the gate too long."

Travis nodded glumly. He had so many questions. But he understood the soldier was done talking, so he swallowed the rest of his questions and let the soldier shepherd him through the streets of West Jordan.

Away from the activity of the gate, the rest of West Jordan was abnormally quiet. The streets they walked down were all empty. The houses and shops on either side were dark and shuttered. Even the twin assembly plants, their white domed roofs just coming into view over a line of dark buildings, which normally filled the air with a sort of happy electrical humming,

were inactive. Surrounded by the strange peacefulness of the settlement and constantly watching for the approach of a patrol or another soldier, Travis found himself growing increasingly scared as he was steered off the main street and down the branching side street at the end of which was home. None of this was right. The soldier's grip on his shoulder tightened and steered his increasingly sluggish legs forward. How did this man know where he lived? He hoped Mom and Dad were all right. Travis's hand crept back to his left pocket and closed around the necklace.

A final curve in the street and Travis could see his house. It was as lifeless as the rest around it. He hoped that was a good sign. The soldier stopped at the edge of the driveway and released Travis's shoulder. He didn't look back. Dead dry grass crunched under his feet as he tore across the front yard, dashed up the stairs onto the porch and burst through the front door.

"Mom? Dad?" I'm back!"

"Travis! Thank God you're all right." Mom jumped up from the front room couch, where, Travis assumed, she had been perched since Laurie and he left, and hugged him tight. Mom was such a worrier; though Travis had to admit her worrying was justified this time. "Where have you been? Are you all right? Where's Laurie?"

"I'm okay, Mom. Really." Travis squirmed against the hug, though he secretly wished she'd never let him go. It was the first time since coming back to the settlement that he felt safe. But he forced himself to pull away. There was no time. "Where's Dad?"

"In the bedroom."

Travis ran out of the front room, headed down the hall, past the doorway to the kitchen and the closed door to Laurie and his room, and entered his parent's bedroom at the end of the hall without knocking. The overhead lights in the bedroom were off, but thanks to the dim light of the streetlights outside leaking in through the curtained window, he could just make out his father sitting at his work desk with his back to the door. He was hunched over something on the desk, Travis couldn't tell what, but the desktop on either side of him was clear, which was odd. Dad's desk was almost always overflowing with papers and who knew what else. Mom always yelled at him to organize the stuff, but he never did. Even stranger, he seemed to be mumbling to himself. Dad straightened up as soon as Travis came in and spun around in his chair to face him, and just for a moment, a faint flash of pale green light outlined his head shoulders.

Dad smiled but didn't show any inclination to hug Travis. "Hey Travis, glad you and Laurie made it back in one piece. Things have gotten kind of crazy here since you left." Dad

always prided himself on not showing much emotion, but Travis felt that seeing some real concern from him once in a while would be nice.

It took Travis several sputtering attempts before he could get out what he was trying to say; he was out of breath and was again trying to suppress a whole flood of questions. He finally managed, "Need help. Quick. Dad!'"

Dad stopped smiling. "What happened Travis? Slow down."

"We found a man by the well. He's really hurt. He needs our help. Laurie is watching him till we get back."

"What? You left Laurie out there by herself? With the Brotherhood all around? What were you thinking?"

"I-I didn't know that then, I just thought someone needed to look after him until help came. We will help him won't we?'"⁷

Dad stood and moved over to the bed and sat heavily on it, planting his elbows on his knees and massaging his temples with both hands. "West Jordan is currently under lockdown by the Brotherhood. It's going to be hard enough getting your sister back in. There's nothing I can do for the man. Maybe if it was on any other night. But not tonight."

"But I got in all right." Travis protested.

"Besides which, Travis, he's probably just another militia fighter. The militias are always fighting over something, and

there have been a lot of skirmishes lately. I can't risk our family's safety for that."

Travis frowned. "How could helping a person be dangerous?"

"What if he belonged to a militia that's an enemy of the Brotherhood? The Brotherhood soldiers would probably kill us for being traitors." This wasn't like Dad, Travis thought. He always went out of his way to help others; especially when doing so might upset the Brotherhood. Why was he being so cautious now?

"But what if he's not a militia fighter?" Travis pressed.

Dad's voice grew annoyed and he stood once more. "Look, Travis," he said, placing a hand on Travis's shoulder, "there's a lot of things going on right now that require my attention. The best thing would be if you went back out and got your sister. I'll make sure the guards let you through. Forget about the man."

Travis nodded and hung his head as he turned to leave. Maybe Dad was right. Why did he care so much about a man he didn't even know? Surely, the family's safety was more important? But then he chided himself for those thoughts. How could he not care? His hand closed on the cool metal of the doorknob. Wait, he was forgetting something. Idiot, he told himself. He dug the necklace out of his pocket and turned back to face his father. "I still don't think he's a militia fighter. Either way, it's wrong not to help him."

"Yes, it is wrong. But it's too big a risk." There was a hint of uncertainty in Dad's voice, as though he just needed an excuse to mount a rescue.

Travis turned on the overhead lights. "I found this in his pocket." He handed the necklace to his father. Travis watched his father's eyes closely as he reached out to take the necklace. His blue eyes widened with surprised recognition. He held the necklace in his open right palm, its silver chain falling away between his ring and middle fingers. His left hand shook as he fingered the fragment of clear crystal that was attached to the chain by four prongs of silvery metal. The crystal's sharp edges and many facets danced with reflected light. His father suddenly made a fist around the necklace and sat back on the bed. Travis looked back up at his eyes and realized with a start that he was crying. His Dad was crying. He never cried.

Dad shook his head as a tear ran down his cheek and dripped down onto his lap. He clasped the fist holding the necklace tight to his chest. "I never dared to hope. Not after so many years. I knew they were looking for an escaped prisoner. But him?"

Travis was too shocked to speak, let alone ask what in the world he was talking about.

"You were right, Travis, we do have to help him. Let me see what time it is." Dad picked up the alarm clock on a bedside stand. "Okay, in two hours we go." Travis just blinked. What was going on?

"Why? Why two hours? Why not now? He might be dead all ready."

"I know." His father's voice had become hard and grim. "There's nothing I can do about that. In two hours, a guard rotation will take place. I have some pull with the guards that will be coming on duty. If we go any earlier, we won't be allowed to leave. In the meantime, though, I'll need your help."

#

Travis spent the next two hours running feverishly throughout the house, list in hand, gathering up all sorts of medicines, herbs, bandages and tools. He had no idea what most of them were or what they did, or even how much to get, but Dad had said they would need them, so he grabbed as much as he could and carried them back to the front room. Dad, in the meantime, had brought into the house several of the wooden supports that had once held up the tomato and cucumber vines in the garden, but now, with the draught, had fallen and lay in the dust. As Travis dropped off each armful of supplies, he got another glimpse of the emerging stretcher. First, the wooden supports were put in position. Then there was a pile of old bed sheets

next to the supports. Then Dad was busy wrapping the sheets tight about the supports, securing them with cord. By the time Travis arrived with the final bottle of antibacterial ointment, the stretcher was complete and Dad was pacing the length of the front room with overly loud steps. Travis placed the bottle next to the mound of supplies he had gathered and threw himself onto the couch. Travis watched as his dad paced for several minutes before he realized his dad was holding the necklace. The crystal fragment was held tight in his fist, the silver chain swinging loose, sparkling in the light.

"Why won't you tell me who the man is?" Travis asked.

Dad stuffed the necklace into his pocket and continued pacing. "I don't want to put you in danger. If we get caught bringing this man in, I'll certainly be killed. But if you can show you didn't know and were just obeying your father, they might let you live."

Travis sat up on the couch. "Dad, please. Don't talk like that. Why would they kill you? They wouldn't kill you." But even as Travis said the words, he knew that, given the chance, they would. He remembered the guns that were pointed at him only a couple of hours ago. The soldiers could have killed him, and might have had that third soldier not saved him.

"I'm just telling you the truth. The Brotherhood would kill-"

"Dad! I know. I don't care. I want to help. Tell me who he is .

Dad stopped pacing, turned to face Travis, and then did something he didn't expect in the least. Dad hugged him. He had never done that before. Always it was the firm handshake, or the light pat on the head. Travis didn't squirm from this hug. He returned it and rested his head on his dad's chest. "I will tell you on the way. Right now, we have ten minutes before the guard rotation takes place. Fifteen minutes before the new guards will be settled. I will have to contact the guards and let them know we're coming. Go get some flashlights and put on some warmer clothes. It's gotten pretty cold out there.

"How are you going to contact the guards?"

"Just do it, Travis."

"Yes, Dad." Travis ran to his room to get his coat.

The night was a lot colder than when Travis was last outside, but at least this time he had his coat and a pair of nice thick pants. Laurie must be freezing. They hadn't planned to be out nearly so long and so had not taken anything especially warm. Travis found it embarrassing that this was the first time he had thought about his sister since he had left her to run back to West Jordan. There was no point in worrying about her, he told himself, she was a smart girl. And at least she

didn't have to deal with the Brotherhood. Still, he did worry about her and he fervently hoped she was all right and that it didn't take Dad and him too much longer to get to her.

Travis and his father walked swiftly through the silent streets toward the secondary gate on the settlement's far side. It would take them a little longer going this way, Dad had said, but the soldiers guarding this gate were fewer and were the ones he had dealings with in the past. What sort of dealings, Travis didn't know, but he guessed they were uncertain even risky dealings, given the nervousness in his father's voice when he told him what he was planning. Travis glanced over at his father, he was staring straight ahead carrying the rolled up stretcher against his shoulder like a rifle. He wished they could talk, about anything, it didn't matter, he just wanted to hear his voice, the silence was becoming unnerving, but Dad had said no talking until they were outside the walls. Travis shook his head and returned to staring at the ground. Who would have thought that it would be more dangerous inside the walls than out? Nothing made sense tonight. He took the flashlight out of his coat pocket. The solid heft of the flashlight in his hand felt comforting. He clicked it on and let the light dance at their feet.

"Not yet, Travis. Keep it off until we are outside."

Travis sighed and did as he was told.

Five soldiers guarded the secondary gate. Two sat around a campfire warming their hands while another two stood at either side of the gate, their backs to the wall. Travis couldn't see the fifth one.

"Stop where you are. This settlement has been sealed. You cannot go out." It was the fifth soldier who had called out, Travis realized with a start that he was standing on top of the wall and had been in plain sight the whole time.

"Stay here, Travis." Dad whispered as he slowly placed the stretcher on the ground, and then advanced towards the soldiers with his hands raised. Travis gratefully did as he was told; he was not relishing the prospect of having to face more soldiers tonight. Once was scary enough. Travis watched from a distance as the two campfire guards rose and approached his father, but even so, his heart was beating faster and he could feel the beginnings of a cold sweat breaking out in his armpits.

"I am John McKenzie. I have what you want." Keeping one hand in the air, Dad drew a small bundle out of his coat. One of the campfire soldiers took the bundle, unwrapped it and examined it. Travis's eyes widened. The bundle was a wad of money. He had never seen so much. Where had Dad gotten it? He was always complaining about money being so tight. The soldier fanned out the bills, riffled through them and then tucked them away in a pouch. He turned back to the other campfire soldier. They were

talking to each other, but Travis couldn't tell what they were saying. His father lowered his hand and seemed to shift from foot to foot as though nervous. One of the soldiers said something to his father, who nodded once and then came back to Travis. "Come on, it's all right." He picked up the stretcher and hurried back to the gate. The soldier standing on top of the wall toggled a switch and the gate opened, the iron toothed grating, similar to but smaller than the main gate's retreating up into the wall above it. Travis followed his father out of West Jordan, accompanied, to his surprise and fear, by the two campfire soldiers.

#

"We can talk now, Travis, if you want." Dad said, as they trudged along the worn path that led to the well. The settlement's walls had long since disappeared into the night and even the sky-glow of the settlement's lights was beginning to fade.

Travis glanced nervously at the two soldiers flanking his father and him on either side and leaned in close to his dad.

"Is it safe to talk with them listening?"

"It's safe enough for most things. They are, shall we say, not overly loyal to the Brotherhood, it just happens to suit their needs."

"The soldier who let me back in said something similar. Dad, who are the Loyalists? The soldier said they were the Brotherhood's enemy." Travis noticed that the two soldiers stiffened slightly when he asked this, but neither of them said anything.

Dad was quiet a moment before he spoke. "The Loyalists were once a very powerful militia. Many years ago, they fought with the Brotherhood for control of the entire Crescent. They lost. The Brotherhood killed most of them and sent the rest into exile."

"Are there Loyalists in West Jordan, is that why the Brotherhood is here?"

"There were some here, we live on the very edge of the Crescent, so we were a natural place to flee to, but the Brotherhood managed to root them out and kill them." There was sadness in his father's voice, and though Travis could tell his father was still keeping a lot from him, he didn't press. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that his dad's hand, the one not carrying the stretcher, was closed around something in his pocket.

"What does the necklace I found mean?" Travis asked, guessing that was what his father was holding.

"It is a religious symbol. The Loyalists weren't just another militia. They were a spiritual group. They believed in a dead God.'"

Travis frowned. "What point is there in a dead God?"

"Their God wasn't always dead. They believed that when God created the universe he did so out of a desire for companionship. It hoped there would ultimately arise beings like itself."

"Why didn't God just create a friend?"

"Because that would just be a reflection of God. God wanted something separate from itself. It set the universe up so that what ever it produced would be something unique. But when humans first evolved, they lacked a certain spark. God saw that they would never be its equal like it wanted, so it interfered. It broke itself apart into Shards. Each human from then on carried within him a Shard of God. It is what supposedly sets us off from the rest of Earthly life. The crystal fragment of the necklace is supposed to represent the Shard."

"How do you know all this?"

"We're all most there. Hurry now." Dad and the three soldiers hasted down the path, forcing Travis to run to keep up.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter 3

Laurie shivered and squeezed herself tighter into a ball. She was huddled up against the hurt man, tucked into the crook of his arm, her head on his chest. It wasn't the most pleasant or comfortable of things, but at least it was a little warmer than if she sat by herself and at least this way she could make sure the man was still breathing. Which he was, though it now seemed he was breathing a little shallower and more irregularly. Where was Travis? Why did he have to leave her out here? Her head and arms felt heavy with exhaustion but she was too cold and too hungry to sleep. She hadn't eaten since lunchtime. The stars were still bright overhead, but she thought it had to be getting close to morning. If she ever got back home, she'd be sure to thank Travis for this. She'd thank the man too, since it was his fault as well.

She was again trying hard to dose off when she thought she heard the dim murmur of voices. Great, she thought, was she going to go crazy too? Or was it just the cold and hunger? She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to block the voices out. All she wanted to do was sleep. Was that so much to ask?

"Laurie?" A voice called.

"No, go away../' she muttered weakly.

"Laurie?"

"Let me sleep."

"She's over here." Running footsteps. The crunching crash of something moving through the dry brush. A hand on her shoulder. Was she dreaming? Laurie felt arms encircle her and lift her upwards. Something warm and soft wrapped around her and she finally found sleep.

Laurie stood at the front room window, looking out, hands fidgeting behind her back, heart beating fast as she watched the two soldiers bring the hurt man into the house. She had no idea where the soldiers had come from and did not recognize their all red uniforms. The trip back from the well was all foggy. Travis said they were friendly and had gone with Dad and him to get her and the man. She accepted that for the most part, though she was still a little uncomfortable about armed strangers coming into her house. She wished there was something she could do to help, but she was still in the process of warming up. Mom had draped her with several thick blankets as soon as Dad had brought her in the door. At least her hunger was gone now, driven away by the excitement of the moment, which made it easier to concentrate on what was going on.

Mom and Dad would heal the hurt man and she'd finally get to find out who he was. If he was still alive. She could have

sworn he was when she fell asleep, but now the man was all limp, one arm hanging off the stretcher, swaying with each step the soldiers to, and the awful smell had returned. Laurie's mind buzzed with questions: who was he? Who had done this to him? How could anybody? If he died, she'd never find out, so he better not. She hated unsolved mysteries. Besides, the hurt man was the most exciting thing that had happened in West Jordan since, well, ever as far as she was concerned, if he died, she'd have to go back to the dull days of school and hanging out with Travis and Michael during lunch.

The soldiers carried the man through the front room and into the kitchen, laying him gently on the wooden table, which creaked slightly under the man's weight. The two soldiers then turned and walked back into the front room accompanied by Dad. They were talking in low voices as Dad handed them something. But Laurie didn't have time to wonder about it. All of her attention was focused on the man. Mom brought in two extra lamps and set them up on either end of the table, until the man seemed to glow with a silver light. This was the first time Laurie was able to get a good look at him.

The man had long thick black hair, most of it matted, tangled, and encrusted with blood and dirt. His face was smeared with more blood, but was relatively clean where Laurie had wiped it with her hands. Her cleaning had revealed a jagged white scar

ran from his left temple to the left corner of his mouth. His lips were cracked and bloody and his large hooked-nose looked like it had been broken more than once. A thick, wiry beard covered the lower half of his face and extended down to his chest. He was thin and boney, with pale paper-thin skin, through which, in the bright light, she could see the blue spider webbing of veins. He was dressed in filthy, bloody clothes that were so ragged they left wide swaths of skin uncovered, though in many places his skin was so dirt encrusted it might as well have been clothed. In spots, fresh blood glistened on the exposed skin. The skin of his hands was ashen-grey and he had yellowish purple bruises around each wrist.

Dad returned carrying a rather full armload of bottles, towels and cloth bandages. Travis followed, carrying what looked like a box of tools, Laurie had never seen it before. They then placed all of the stuff gingerly onto the kitchen countertop around the sink. Then Laurie and Travis both simply stood back and watched Mom and Dad went to work on him.

Dad took out a hooked knife from the box of tools and began to cut away the man's ragged clothes, as though skinning an animal, tossing each piece into the trash, while Mom poured the last of the family's water into a shallow basin. Laurie was shocked at that. Both Mom and Dad had chided her for wasting water many times; they had said that in this drought, water was

the most precious thing, and here they were using it all up on a stranger. If only she and Travis had brought back the water jugs. Mom took one of the towels from the counter, soaked it in the water and began wiping away the grime on the man's right shoulder and then his stomach. Laurie gasped and covered her mouth as the towel revealed two circular holes, one in each place, both surrounded with scabby clotted blood. She had a feeling of what was about to happen, but she couldn't look away. Mom dropped the blood and dirt stained towel into the trash and moved to the toolbox. She took out a small, almost needle thin knife, with a slightly broader tip and a pair of tweezers. Dad poured a clear liquid from one of the bottles onto a new, clean, towel and rubbed both of the holes with it. Mom then returned to the man's side and bent close over him. The needle knife pressed into the hole and Laurie felt a sudden surge of nausea and then almost screamed in surprise as Travis grabbed her hand. But she quickly recovered and gave Travis's hand a little squeeze. It felt good to not be alone with so much going on. Mom and Dad might as well have been on another planet for all the attention they were paying to anything outside the man and their tools. Laurie winced and her stomach churned as Mom dug into the hole with knife and tweezers and extracted from his shoulder a squished piece of gold colored metal, was that a bullet? Mom then moved down to the man's stomach and extracted a

second metal object, dropping both into the sink with a hollow clink, while Dad applied ointment soaked bandages to each hole as soon as the metal was out. Mom and Dad then set about cleaning the man.

Laurie sat in one of the kitchen chairs that had been moved away from the table up against the wall and watched for hours as the man went through a startling transformation. Finally, the blood and the grime were gone. His wounds were all bandaged. His beard was gone and his hair, which they had tried and failed to detangle and wash, was cut short. He looked so peaceful lying there, but then she thought, being all neat and clean and with the white sheet draped over his waist and legs, he looked like a corpse in the settlement's funeral home. She shivered and got up out of the chair to touch him, to make sure he was still alive and to get the corpse-image out of her mind.

"Laurie, don't." Dad said stiffly. Laurie froze, her heart thumping. It was the first time anyone had spoken since the man had been brought in. "Don't touch him. Let him rest." Laurie nodded slowly and returned to the chair. Mom and Dad exchanged glances.

"Here, Laurie," Mom spoke softly, "come with me. You too, Travis." Mom took Laurie's hand, led her into the front room and sat with her on the couch. Travis followed and sat cross-legged on the floor. Laurie drummed her fingers against her legs,

waiting for Mom to finally explain all that was going on. But Mom didn't seem inclined to explain anything. She just sat and stared out the window. The sun was rising outside; Laurie could see the gold morning light reflected in her Mom's eyes. Her mother blinked several times and the bottoms of her eyes became watery. A single tear ran along the outline of her nose and dispersed over her lips.

"Mom?" Laurie asked tentatively, "Are you okay?" Mom nodded, sending a second tear splashing down her face. She wiped away the tear's wet trail with the back of her hand. For a while, no one said anything. Laurie sat on the couch staring at the wall, the featureless white swimming with the grey swirls of exhaustion. Something was bugging her about all that had just happened. Her parents were kind people, but this? Why didn't they take the man to the hospital, or even to Doctor Kalheed? Neither Mom nor Dad spoke as she took care of the man except to keep her from touching him. And Mom seemed to know a lot more about medicine than she had ever let known before, and Laurie had certainly not seen the little needle knife before, that was something she would have remembered. Who was this man that her family did so much for, even revealed secrets for? Then a second, unbidden question popped into her mind. Should she be afraid of him? The way Mom was acting...

Travis uncrossed his legs and bounced up onto the couch on the other side of Mom. "Is the man we found a Loyalist?"

Mom stared at Travis a moment before answering as though it took her a moment to piece together the words. "No-No he's not a Loyalist. Who told you about the Loyalists?"

"Dad did. While we were going to get Laurie."

"Ah," Mom said in a tone that suggested Dad was going to get a talking to later on.

"Why won't you tell us who he is?" Laurie asked.

"Dad said it's because you're trying to protect us. He's in our house now, isn't it a little late now?"

"He's just a man. Probably a militia fighter."

"You're lying, Mom! You know damn well who he is." Travis yelled. He got up off the couch and started pacing taking large overly heavy steps. Laurie's mouth fell open. "Dad recognized the necklace I found," he continued, "and he said he wouldn't have bothered saving him if he was just a fighter."

Dad came into the front room at that moment, and Laurie saw Mom glance up at him as though asking for help.

"What's the yelling?" Dad asked. "Maybe it's time for bed."

Travis glared angrily at his father. "You're both treating us like kids, we—"

"We are kids, Travis."

"--yes, but, but we live here. We don't want to be protected, we want--"

"Why are you speaking for both of us?"

"--Laurie, let me finish. We want to know truth. Who is he?"

"Sit down. Be quiet." Dad's voice boomed. Travis and Laurie both immediately ceased their bickering, Laurie clapping a hand over her mouth while Travis sat on the floor, head bowed. "Now," Dad stalked across the room to the old easy chair in the far corner of the room and pulled it over to where Laurie, Travis and Mom were. Then he sat heavily on the chair and took a deep breath. "What I tell you, you will not repeat to anyone else, understand?" Dad's gaze swept from Laurie's to Travis's face. Laurie and Travis both nodded. "Good. What I told you before about the Loyalists is true. They worship the God fragments that exist in each one of us. What I didn't tell you is that there is a man, a real man, who founded the Loyalist Movement and who, it is said, will at the end of time reunite all the God fragments back into a living God, a God that will incorporate all of humanity in its essence. The man you found is that man. His name is Solomon Rashi. Until tonight, we all believed he was dead. We thought the Brotherhood had killed him." Dad paused to clear his throat.

"Why would the Brotherhood want to kill him?" Laurie asked.

"Solomon and his Movement led the people living in the settlements of the Crescent, like West Jordan, in an uprising against the Brotherhood and the whole of Earth Gov. They lost. Solomon became a fugitive, but he was eventually captured, and we thought killed."

"So we're Loyalists then." Travis said.

Dad nodded. "All of our futures rest in his hands, that is why we had to help him."

"Travis?" Laurie rolled over on the couch to face her brother, who was curled up on the floor in a sleeping bag. "You awake?"

Travis stirred and stretched, his head poking out from the sleeping bag like a blond moth emerging from a blue cocoon.

"Yeah," he yawned, "I can't sleep. The floor's uncomfortable."

Laurie lifted herself onto her elbows, hands tucked under her chin. "What do you think about what Dad said?"

Travis sighed and squirmed back into his sleeping bag.

"Come on," she prodded, "do you believe we all have a God fragment?"

"Laurie... I'm trying to sleep."

"Yes or no?"

"Can't you wait? Go to sleep. I'll let you know when I've had time to think." Travis whined when he was annoyed. Normally,

Laurie found his whining irritating and liked to tease him about it, but now it made her want to hit him; so she did, with her pillow, right in the back of his head.

Travis pushed out of his sleeping bag, grabbed the thrown pillow and, glaring at Laurie, tossed it back. The pillow hit the couch back and rolled down onto her. Laurie giggled and flung it back at him. Travis made a mock snarl, then grabbed Laurie's pillow in one hand, his own in the other and leapt at her, swinging both down at her head. Laurie shrieked and tried to roll away, but Travis's pillow connected, knocking her off the couch. She seized Travis's arm as she fell and he toppled over with her. Laurie laughed so hard her chest hurt. Travis had tears in his eyes.

It felt good to forget for a moment all that had happened. And after she had climbed back onto the couch, still laughing a little and breathing heavily, sleep came easily.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter Four

Travis was studying in the front room when the front door was thrown open. There was no knock, no warning, the dull crash of the wooden door against wood siding was the only announcement for the two men standing in the doorway. At first, Travis saw only their uniforms and recognized them as belonging to the Brotherhood. He thought maybe these were the same two soldiers who had been so helpful last night, and was about to greet them, but as they stepped into the house, he saw the gun in each one's hand and the grenades on each one's belt and he froze. They were only a few feet away when he finally looked at their faces. They were unfamiliar and were staring at him in such an accusatory and uncomfortable way that he was sure they were about to haul him away for stealing some valuable treasure. He had stolen things before of course, on several occasions, but hadn't for a long time, and certainly never anything worth making a fuss over. When the two soldiers didn't immediately confront him about the theft, Travis took a deep breath, stood as tall as he could and summoned up his best Dad voice. "What do you think your doing coming into my house?" Dad would be proud of his bravery.

The man on the right gave an odd half-smile, more of a facial twitch than anything friendly, and then made a quick gesture at the open doorway without turning around. Three more men entered the house. The first Travis recognized from church.

Preacher Klayborne was dressed in his usual black collared shirt and black pants and wore his usual wrinkled grumpy face. His brown eyes glared coldly at Travis from under his black hat. Travis thought it would be scary if he ever laughed. The other two men he didn't know, but he recognized their white and grey uniforms as belonging to the Christian Militia. Brotherhood and Christians? All he had heard about the militias told him that these two shouldn't be working side by side with one another. Of course, if that man, Solomon, really was what Dad said he was, it made sense that everyone should be involved.

"Is your father here boy?" Klayborne demanded.

"Uh-no, he's uh, off at the Garrets'. I'm not sure when he'll be back. Didn't say." That was awful, Travis chided himself. He was normally a good liar. Klayborne pushed past Travis and marched through the front room and into the hall, the four militiamen following close behind.

"Hey! You've cant just-I told you Dad's not here." Travis ran after them. Klayborne and the four men reached his parent's room, and Travis, lunged at Klayborne, grabbing his left arm. "You can't go in-" One of the militiaman lashed out and hit

Travis full in the chest. His head hit the wall hard and he slid to his knees, head spinning, vision blurry, barely able to breath. He tried to get up and the darkness rushed over him.

#

Laurie emerged into the hall from her and Travis's bedroom just as one of the Brotherhood uniformed men kicked open the door to her parent's room and before she could say or do anything all five men stormed into the room.

"What the hell? Who do you think you are?" Dad roared angrily from the bedroom as the splintered door swung back on its hinges with a hollow clap.

As soon as the hall was clear, Laurie darted over to where Travis lay. "Are you okay, Travis?" She shifted him off his stomach. Travis groaned and rubbed the back of his head.

"Up against the wall." One of the militiamen commanded. Laurie left Travis and crawled as quiet as she could to the now open doorway of her parent's room. She saw Mom and Dad, their hands in the air, backing slowly away from the bed where Solomon lay. Dad wasn't fast enough. A Christian militiaman struck him in the stomach, doubling him over. Laurie's own stomach felt like it had suddenly dropped and she had to fight back tears.

Preacher Klayborne leaned over the bed. "It's him all right. I'd never have guessed he was still alive. Your kids found him." It wasn't a question.

"Last night.⁷" Dad gasped. "He had been shot and beaten."

Klayborne gave a raspy chuckle. "You and Cynthia did a good job cleaning him up, though I for one would have left him there." On any day before this, this would have shocked Laurie. But after seeing Klayborne's eyes and the men who accompanied him, it didn't surprise her at all. "Do your kids know who he is?" Klayborne asked.

"No. We haven't told them anything, and they're too young to remember. Besides, where would we begin?" Laurie and Travis exchanged glances. It was surprising how easily it seemed Dad was able to lie to them.

"Good," said a voice Travis didn't recognize, probably one of the uniformed men.

"Where do you think he's been all this time?" Mom asked, "any idea who did this to him?"

"Back when all this happened, the story was some of his own followers rose up and killed him," Klayborne said. "Obviously, this was not the case, seeing as how he is still alive. I'm sure you Brotherhood people would have executed him on the spot if you had got your hands on him, so either his followers kept him in prison somewhere, or they handed him over to the Spaceborn."

Laurie crept closer. She had heard people talk about the Spaceborn before, but always in hushed tones. People were scared of them, said they were inhuman.

"It doesn't make sense," Dad puzzled, "why keep such a dangerous man alive?"

"Well, whatever the reason, he's here now. We have to help him." Mom said.

"There's a good chance, if he recovers, that he will attempt to finish what he started. He must be turned over to us immediately."

Mom's voice rose. "We took him in, he's our responsibility. And this is supposed to be a neutral settlement, neither of you have jurisdiction here."

"Your responsibility, Cynthia, is to this community," Klayborne's voice remained unchanged, but to Laurie it now seemed to carry growing anger. "Do you want a repeat of ten years ago?"

Dad broke in. "He wasn't the one who started the killing. It was your friends here. And I don't need you to tell me what my responsibilities are. Mine, first and forever, are to my wife and kids. Any future they might have lies with this man."

Now Klayborne's voice changed. "This man," he snapped, "is a godless heathen who led an assault against ours and everyone else's religions."

"He's a hero who believes very much in God, if you'd actually listen instead of preach for once. I'd be happy if he pulled your church down on your head for all the good it's done

us. Get out. And take your lackeys with you," Mom shouted back at Klayborne.

Laurie was stunned and happy at the same time. She wished she were in the room to give Mom a high five. She had always known how angry she could get, usually at either her or Travis, but she had never seen her as angry with an adult as she was now.

Klayborne stomped out of the bedroom, glared at Laurie, stepped over Travis, and at the doorway leading into the front room spun around. "I'll be back." He snarled. "I'm going to report his existence to the council, and I assure you they will give me all the authority I need. He is a criminal and I will see him punished accordingly. Oh, and by the way, since both my group and the Brotherhood claim the right to punish the man, all four of my associates here will be keeping an eye on him while I'm gone. Please see to their needs."

"What?" Dad looked like he might hit Klayborne. "You can't force us to house them. The charter says—"

"I know what it says." Klayborne interrupted. "But you must understand, my friend that the Brotherhood and the other militias have only chosen to tolerate your neutrality. They could overrun this settlement when ever they wanted to, and to be honest, they have the authority, under Earth Gov. to not only do so, but to kill this right now. They've agreed to respect our

laws to avoid certain inconveniences. However, we can't have him running off--"

"Have you seen him?" cried Mom. "He's in a comma! He might not ever recover, let alone run anywhere. I have to dribble water down his throat."

"You will house them and meet their needs or I will have you and your family arrested for obstruction. Of course," he continued, as Mom looked like she was about to obstruct him then and there. "I could always give the order for the Brotherhood to destroy this house right now and kill ever one in it." Mom paled at that and nodding slowly, turned away. Klayborne marched out the front door and into the night.

###

This is where my latest revision ends; because I have made some major changes in content, there will be some discontinuity

###

Dad walked into the front room and shut the front door, while Mom sank onto the couch there. Travis took a quick peek in their bedroom before joining them. The uniformed men were standing in the far corners of the room, motionless, seemingly staring into space. It made Travis shiver. He hurried to the front room. Jamie emerged from his bedroom as he past. "What did I miss?" Jamie yawned.

"Man, you can sleep through anything can't you?" Travis shook his head.

"How did he find out?" Dad asked as Travis and Jamie entered the room. Travis shrugged, and then realized Dad wasn't talking to him. He looked over at Laurie, who was curled up on a far chair. She didn't answer. Mom was sitting on the couch, looking a little paler than usual and shaking slightly, but otherwise she seemed calm and in control. Only in her eyes, could Travis see Mom's anger.

Dad crouched down next to Mom. He took her hand in his and held it tightly. For a moment, they all sat there. Travis watched the muscles of Dad's jaw clench and unclench. "How much did you hear?" Dad asked. It took Travis a second to realize Dad was talking to him this time.

"Most of it." Laurie spoke first. Travis had forgotten she was there. "Why does Klayborne think the man's so bad?" she asked. "If he really was," she paused, "what Klayborne said he was, you wouldn't have taken him in, right?"

"Of course not. We'd never do anything that would endanger you. Any of you."

Travis scowled. It certainly sounded like Mom and Dad were endangering them. "Then why haven't you told us who he is?"

Travis protested. "We still don't even know his name."

"Many like Klayborne want to see him dead. It's for your own protection, better you don't know."

"He's a Spaceborn isn't he?" Laurie asked.

"No, he's certainly not that." Dad smiled, but Travis could tell there was no happiness in it. "It's late. Get some sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow will be an interesting day."

Dad was asking the impossible, of course. Having to sleep on the couch was bad enough, but trying to sleep with armed strangers in the house? This was ridiculous. It was almost three AM now. Laurie stifled a yawn and drew her knees up under her chin. Her butt was getting sore and her legs stiff, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Travis sat cross-legged on the floor nearby, staring at the bundle of crumbled blankets next to him, not looking at all happy at the idea of sleeping on the floor, while Jamie, the only active one, paced up and down the length of the front room, the floorboards creaking weakly underneath his bare feet. Mom and Dad were up too. They were back in the bedroom with the man and the two new strangers. Laurie could hear the murmur of their voices, but lacked the energy or the will to go listen.

"We have to do something," Travis finally broke the over long silence. "I mean this isn't fair. They can't just come in here and—"

"They can do whatever they want," Jamie interrupted. "Those guys aren't from any of the militias, in case you didn't notice, they don't have to follow our rules."

"Then why didn't they just take him away?" Travis asked.

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know. It doesn't make sense."

Laurie thought for a moment. What was it Klayborne had said? They didn't want to kill the man because his death would cause trouble... "I know why!" Laurie jumped up from her chair. "They won't take him away because they don't want everyone to get mad again." Laurie proudly stuck up her chin, but Travis and Jamie just looked puzzled. Laurie sighed and continued.

"Remember what Dad said. This was a local matter. Whatever happened ten years ago happened here and was caused by this man. They don't want everyone to find out he's here, or as Klayborne said, it would happen all over again."

Jamie grinned and shook his head. "You're smarter than you look, Laurie." Laurie beamed, then gasped. But he went on before she could protest. "So we need to spread the word that he's here. But what do we tell them? That we have an unconscious man whom we think is important or something? We don't even know his name. They'd laugh at us."

"Mom and Dad know," Travis said, "we could tell them what we're planning and—"

"No," Jamie interrupted again. "We can't tell them. Those soldiers or whatever they are would find out, Mom and Dad would get in trouble."

"We should go ask Michael," Laurie suggested.

"Huh? Why?" Travis and Jamie said in unison.

"Well," Laurie's voice fell, "I told him about the man."

"You told Klayborne's son about him? Idiot! What were you thinking?" Jamie scolded her.

"You sound like Dad, Jamie," Travis laughed.

"Really?" Jamie asked. "No, look, why did you tell him?"

Laurie felt sheepish. "I don't know. I was just excited. Nothing ever happens around here. I can't believe none of us have died from boredom yet. Or are you happy learning to look backwards and dig around in the dirt?"

Jamie harrumphed. "I should think it would be an honor to follow in Dad's footsteps. And we shouldn't leave now, Mom and Dad might need us."

"I think you're right, Laurie," Travis said, "We should talk to Michael. If Klayborne is so upset over this man, he had to have said something to Michael, let something slip when he found out."

"Thanks Travis. That's two to one, Jamie, let's go." Laurie grabbed her coat from the rack and ran to door.

"Fine," Jamie sighed.

#

"Michael, wake up. "Laurie whispered, shaking him gently. Michael was curled up in a ball, blankets wrapped tight about him, face burrowed into his pillow. He was snoring softly. "Come on," she shook him a second time, trying not to fall off the bunk bed's ladder. Why he had a bunk bed when he was an only child, and why he just had to sleep on its top bunk was beyond her.

A sharp crack and a yell from the open window made Laurie jump and almost fall off the ladder, steadying herself by instinctively grabbing a handful of Michael's hair.

"Ouch." Michael protested, then asked, half yawning, "Laurie? What're you-"

"Sh..." Laurie pressed a hand over his mouth. "Quiet."

"Oh man..." Travis's face appeared in the window. "Sorry. Stupid branch broke." Travis grunted as he dragged himself through the open window, with Jamie following noisily shortly afterwards. Laurie glared at them. Why had she brought her brothers along again?"

"Don't worry," Michael said, now sitting up in bed and untangling himself from the blankets. "My Dad's a heavy sleeper. So what can I do for you guys?"

Laurie climbed up the rest of the ladder and sat on the edge of Michael's bed. "Do you remember what I told you at school yesterday?"⁷

"Yeah," Michael yawned. "Dad asked me how my day went and I told him what you told me."

"We know," Jamie said. "But did your Dad say anything when you told him?"

"Well," Michael hesitated, "not at first, "but when I told him where you found the man and that he wasn't from one of the settlements, he seemed to realize something. His eyes got all wide and he asked me if there was anything else..." His voice trailed off.

"And?" Laurie prompted.

"I told him your parents seemed to think the man was really important."

"Why did you tell him that?"

"You said you're parents used the last of their water on him, they wouldn't do that except for someone very important, right? Anyway, as soon as I said that Dad stormed out of the house, mumbling "not again", and something about a shard. That was it. Why do you need to know all this?"

"Your Dad showed up at our house yelling and with armed men. He hasn't said anything more about this?"

Michael looked shocked. "No, no, nothing." He shook his head. "What's going on?"

"We don't know," Jamie said. "Something very serious. The armed men are still at our house. We're going to go tell everyone what's going on, see if they'll help."

Laurie laughed. "Now who's spilling the beans?"

Michael looked thoughtful a Moment. "We should start by talking to the council members. I know where they live, Dad's always having meetings and such with them."

"Great. Uh, welcome aboard, I guess." Laurie hugged Michael while Jamie and Travis snickered.

#

It was mid-morning when Laurie, Jamie and Travis finally returned home. But they weren't alone. They had spent the predawn hours roaming the dark empty streets of West Jordan, going house to house, Michael leading the way, waking as many people as they could and telling them all they knew. It was hard work, Laurie did all the talking, the boys had decided adults would be more inclined to believe her and have a harder time saying no to her. Laurie felt like a zombie by the end of it, staggering up and down the front steps of the houses, limping down the street, unable to focus on anything, but their efforts had paid off, and word of what was happening at the McKenzie household began spreading on its own. And as the people of West

Jordan began to converge on the house, Laurie felt her strength return.

Laurie bounded up the porch steps and leaved out over its wooden railing, trying to see the full size of the growing crowd. There must be several hundred people at least. The entire West Jordan militia was all ready assembled, nearly one hundred men and women, most in uniform, some still in their pajamas, all armed, though their guns were holstered. They stood in a rough semi-circle in the front yard with the rest of the crowd forming a secondary ring around them.

Laurie smiled and bobbed her head as she recognized some of the people she had talked to. Mom and Dad would never make her become a Reconstructionist now, not when she could do all this. Though, unfortunately, she hadn't done it all by herself, she glanced over at the boys, Michael, Travis and Jamie, who had all piled onto the porch Moments before and were now standing up against the wooden siding of the house looking proud. The captain of the Militia, Micah Alexander, stepped up onto the porch. Laurie smiled at him. He was their first stop this morning. Somehow, in his uniform, he looked even older and grayer than when he had answered the door. He turned to Laurie. "You need to get clear of the house."

Laurie stopped smiling. "What? But I—"

"Now," he motioned at the boys, "All of you."

Typical. Just typical. Laurie hung her head as she walked off the porch. Stupid grownups. If it wasn't for us... She was pouting, but she didn't care. The ring of soldiers parted as she stomped past, then reformed after the boys had passed. As soon as they were clear of the house, Micah and three other soldiers entered the house, weapons drawn, but pointed at the ground.

Laurie struggled against the crowd, pushing her way back to the ring of soldiers.

"What's going on?" Travis called from behind her.

"I don't know. Can't see." Laurie stood on her tiptoes, trying to see over a soldier's shoulder.

"Here, let me, I'm taller." Jamie pushed in front of her.

"What do you see?"

"Nothing... wait, the door is opening. It's Mom."

"Great," Laurie rolled her eyes.

"She's coming this way, escorted by a soldier. I don't see Dad."

"Laurie, Jamie, Travis! Where have you three been?" Laurie cringed. She didn't have to see Mom to know when she was angry. The ring of soldiers parted again, this time to let Mom through.

"What's going on, Mom?" Jamie asked.

Mom's anger seemed to recede. "They're negotiating with the Spaceborn."

Laurie gasped. "Is that what those two men are?"

'Yes.

"But what are they doing here?"

Mom didn't answer the question. "We were worried sick. I'm glad you three are safe, but when all this is cleared up, you three are grounded."

"What? Mom!"

The negotiations lasted several hours. Laurie and the boys left the crowd for the shade and relative coolness of a near by tree, one of the few still alive, though it didn't look particularly happy. There they sat and fanned themselves as the day grew hotter. Mom and Dad both came and went, relaying the latest results of the talks. It seems they were taking so long because an hour into it, several representatives of the Brotherhood Militia showed up and started making their own demands.

It was late afternoon when Mom called Laurie and the boys back to the house. The crowd was much smaller now, making it easier to get back to the house, but all the soldiers were still there. This time the soldiers parted enough to let Laurie see what was going on. Micah and Dad emerged from the house, followed by the two Spaceborn, the Brotherhood Militia representatives and several more West Jordan soldiers. The faces of the Spaceborn were just as unreadable and strange as when

Laurie first saw them. With their odd uniforms and even odder weapons. The five Brotherhood Militia members were dressed in their usual jet-black uniforms with a red crescent sown over the left breast. Four men and a woman, all black haired and olive-skinned. They had rifles slung over their shoulders and pistols tucked into their belts. Dad broke off from the procession as they passed and walked over to Laurie and the boys.

"So?" Travis asked.

"*It* went all right, not good, but all right." Dad said, mainly to Mom. "The three sides have all agreed to leave him in our care while he recovers, but from now on, he is to be under a form of house arrest, he cannot leave the Settlement, if he does, the Brotherhood will kill him and destroy the Settlement." Dad said it matter-of-factly as if he were talking about what the morning's dig had produced. "They cannot risk his leading rebellion again, so they want to make sure we can't risk it either."

Great, thought Laurie. They would kill us all over a single man? "Who is he?" She asked Dad. But Dad just shook his head and walked back to the house. Mom followed, and after a series of exchanged glances, so did Laurie and the three boys.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter 5

For fifteen days, after the negotiations, Laurie's life revolved around the unconscious man lying in her parents' bed. For fifteen days, she only left the man's side to eat, to use the bathroom and to sleep. She knew Mom and Dad worried about her, and her brothers thought she was crazy, but that didn't matter. School was on recess until the crisis was resolved, whatever that meant, so she didn't have much to do anyway, and besides which, she couldn't find the words to tell them why she was doing what she was even if she wanted to. This man represented a whole world outside her own outside the farmlands of the Crescent, outside playing with the other kids in West Jordan, the occasional trips to see Dad's work, restoring the site in outside old Jerusalem where Jesus died. She thought of looking up at the sky, watching as some Spaceborn Lord of Lady's shuttle arched up from the ground and shot upwards into space. She wanted to be on that shuttle, to see the wonders she knew lurked just outside her reach. Dad kept telling her that her role was to follow in his footsteps, to do the holy work of restoring what was lost. But that would be going backwards. She'd die. Mom would tell her she was young yet, that maybe one day she would get to see all that stuff. But she was impatient. Always dreaming... and perhaps now the dream was within reach. At

the same time, a part of Laurie worried her life might never be the same.

Klayborne returned several times over the first week, though without his strange men. These visits were the only times Laurie left the house. Jamie and Travis went too. They had all had enough yelling to last the rest of the year. She ran into Michael and some of his friends on one of those forced trips outside, but she couldn't talk to him. Too much had happened. She felt old, grownup compared to him.

Finally, Klayborne stopped coming. Everyone, Mom and Dad included, figured that the man just wasn't going to wake up. It was simpler, Dad had argued, to let him die, that way he said, the man's blood wouldn't be on anyone's hands. Klayborne agreed to this and left instructions for Mom and Dad to contact the Council if he did wake up, but Laurie had a feeling her parents wouldn't.

Two weeks had passed. Now Laurie was the man's primary caretaker. Mom still came in once every day to check on the man's drip bag, to make sure it still had green liquid food in it. She wondered what it tasted like. Her main job was just to sit and watch, and to change his bedpan when it needed it, something she was not fond of. At least she was getting some reading done.

The morning of the fifteenth day was bright and sunny. Laurie

sat next to the wide bedroom window, across from the bed, on a wooden chair she had dragged in from the kitchen. It was wooden and uncomfortable and gave her a stiff back. But it allowed her to enjoy the sun's warmth and to keep an eye on the man, neither of which she could do from the floor, though she would have been more comfortable there. She was reading Haven, a book about a magical land far from the Crescent, as she had done each of the fifteen mornings. And each morning, just as she was about to doze off in the sun's warmth, Jamie would come to bug her. Why wasn't she outside? What about Michael? He's your sweetheart right? It was still true, but Michael wasn't going anywhere. The man could wake any minute. She was just finishing chapter twelve, now that she was awake again-thanks to Jamie's pestering-when the man woke.

One Moment he was perfectly still, the next he was thrashing about as though wrestling with a monster. Was he having a nightmare? If he was, it had to be a dreadful one. "Alyssia!" The man's cry startled Laurie so much she dropped the book. It thudded to the floor and immediately the man sat bolt upright. For a Moment, his dark eyes met hers. They burned with anger and fear. She froze under his stare. Then he fainted. Eyes rolling back in his head, body going limp. He fell back onto the bed and Laurie could move again, as though a spell had been lifted. She ran to get Mom and Dad.

Laurie couldn't sleep. She lay on the couch, staring up at the blank ceiling, listening to the wind clacking the branches of the orange tree against the living room window. Maybe the tree was impatient too. What a day! After two weeks of Mom and Dad pretending that the man no longer existed, they spent the entire day taking care of him just as frantically as when Jamie and Dad first brought him into the house. The man was awake some of the time, though it was clear that he wasn't all returned yet. He babbled a lot. Someone named Alyssia, a voice, something burning. Something about a shard. Of glass? Laurie had asked Dad what the man was talking about, but he had no idea either. Mom and Dad tied him to the bed so he'd stop struggling and breaking open the scabs on his chest and stomach. After that, Mom sent Laurie, Jamie, and Travis out to fetch more water. This time, Jamie and Travis both stayed on the path the whole time. Laurie was happy about that, maybe the man was making them grow up too. When they came back, at about dinnertime, the man was asleep again. Mom and Dad were sitting at the kitchen table-both looked exhausted.

Laurie caught her breath and broke off remembering. Someone was moving in the hall toward the kitchen. At least, she hoped it was someone, and not another lion. She slipped off the couch and then shook Travis awake, who was sleeping on the floor

nearby.

Travis looked sleepily up at her. "Wha...?"

Laurie held a finger up to her lips. Noises were coming from the kitchen; the wooden rasp of drawers and cabinets being opened, the rattle of cans and dishes. Travis yawned then glared at her. "Just Dad having the munchies again. Go back to sleep." She was about to protest when she saw Travis's eyes widen. She turned around slowly, heartbeat spiking, waiting for the lion to pounce. The man stood in the doorway to the living room; just visible in the dim circle of light cast by the nightlight next to the couch. He wore a pair of Dad's pants, a little baggy on him, an unbuttoned shirt revealing the bandages that covered most of his chest. He had Jamie's backpack around his shoulders. Then Laurie saw the knife stuck into a belt loop and she backed away from him, raising her hands.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "The knife is not for you. That would be a poor way to repay you and your family's kindness." The man smiled at her and her fear vanished.

"Why are you taking our stuff?" Laurie asked, bolder now.

The man raised a finger to his lips, then walked past Laurie's couch and headed down the hall, towards the front door. Laurie and Travis followed.

"Just borrowing it for awhile."

"You're leaving," Travis said. It was a statement.

"Wait!" Laurie hissed, trying not to be too loud. The man paused. "What's your name?"

"Sol." the man smiled at her.

Laurie felt a rush and blushed. "I'm Laurie" she curtsied, then immediately felt like slapping herself.

"I'm Travis," her brother added.

"Good to meet you both," Sol bowed slightly; chin to chest, shoulders forwards a little. "But I'm afraid I can't stay to talk." Sol then walked across the porch, down the front steps and quickly headed around back to the shed. Without thinking, Laurie ran out after him.

"What? Where are you going?" Travis shouted after her.

"Don't you want to know where he's going?" She shouted back.

"Yes, but..." Travis looked back inside. "Shouldn't we tell Mom and Dad?"

"We'll only be gone a little while, how far could he be going? Besides, I thought you wanted to get away from here."

"I do... Can I get my shoes and stuff?"

Sol was walking down the drive now, the muzzle of the shotgun protruding from Jamie's backpack.

"Come on," she pleaded. That did it. Footfalls behind her told her Travis had given in. She never was one to let a mystery go unsolved. At least now, she had someone to solve it with.

Laurie and her brother chased after Sol.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter 6

"Ouch," Laurie stepped on something sharp and did a little hop-skip. Why couldn't she have taken a moment and put on some shoes before rushing off who-knew-where? Her bare feet were all cut and bloody from the gravel, large rocks and the occasional sharp splinters of glass that made up the path they were following. Her legs hurt almost as much as her feet. And Travis, judging from his huffing and puffing and the frown on his face, wasn't doing much better. They had to have been walking for hours now. She had no real way of telling time; she always took her watch off at bedtime, but the night sky was beginning to turn a navy blue with a tinge of lighter blue at the horizon. Sunrise was normally her favorite time of day. She would wake up while it was still dark, climb up to the barn loft, and watch the sunrise. Sometimes Michael would come with her, but he usually slept too late. Of course, that was before Sol. Now, the only pleasure she got from the coming sunrise was that it meant it was soon going to get warm. She didn't even think to put on a jacket or some heavier clothes when she left. But she supposed she should be thankful she had slept in her clothes and not a nightgown.

They were long passed the well now, and long passed the farthest point of Laurie's own explorations, but Sol continued on, never slowing. Laurie thought for sure he'd stop at the well to rest. She knew he was trying to put as much distance between him and the Brotherhood Militia and the Settlement as he could, but wasn't this enough already? It was all she could do just to keep him at the very edge of her sight, thought the lightening sky helped with that. So far, the land wasn't much different from the scrubby fields around West Jordan. The ground wasn't quite so flat here, and here and there, poking out of the fields of brown-grey grass were dead, scabby looking trees. They passed a dead crow and Travis, thankfully, didn't stop to mess with it. Instead, he gave it only the briefest glance as he walked by. Laurie was proud of him.

"He has to know we're following him," Travis panted and gasped.

"He doesn't seem to have noticed. Why can't he take a break? My legs hurt and I have to go to the bathroom." Laurie frowned; she was whining, she never whined. She must be overtired.

"I have to pee too," Travis agreed. "I feel like I'm going to pop."

"Don't be gross Travis!"

"Sorry," Travis snorted. "I've never gone past the well before. I wish I knew where he was going."

More time passed, with Laurie and Travis marching as fast as they could. Laurie felt ready to collapse and was beginning to regret ever leaving home.

"I have to stop." It was getting difficult for her to speak.

As if he heard her, Sol moved a few steps off the path to a large egg-shaped boulder. There, he took off Jamie's pack and sat down, all the while keeping his back to them.

Breathing heavily, but smiling, she stopped to catch her breath. Travis did too. He was wheezing and rubbing the right side of his stomach. "Cramp," he grunted, and smiled weakly. Once they had both caught their breath again, Laurie walked the rest of the way to where Sol sat, as fast as her sore legs would let her, while Travis shuffled along slowly behind her.

Laurie made sure to puff out her chest and hold her head high as she walked up to Sol. She was going to get some answers. But Sol didn't turn around as she approached and the closer she came to him, the more nervous she got. So, instead of confronting him, she walked around him and then sat cross-legged on the ground by his feet. Travis did the same. Sol didn't say anything, but he didn't look angry either. Laurie sat there and watched silently as he bent down, unzipped the backpack and took

out a water bottle. He offered it to Laurie, again without a word. Laurie grabbed the bottle happily, unscrewed the cap and took several huge gulps. Cool water spilled over her lips, dribbled down her chin, and soaked into her shirt. If it were just her out here, she would have dumped the whole bottle over her head, not because she was hot but because she was that thirsty. Back when it rained, she'd stand out in it, arms outstretched, and pretend she was a plant, absorbing the water through her skin as it soaked through her clothes. Instead, she handed the bottle to Travis.

Laurie finally worked up the courage to speak. "'Where are we going?'"

Sol looked at her a long Moment. She wished she could know what was going on behind his dark eyes, wished she could find out what secrets were hidden there. But then, without a word he stood, picked up the backpack and started hiking again.

Laurie, too angry to feel the hurt of her feet, ran after him. "Why won't you talk to us? We've saved you twice. You owe us."

Sol didn't answer.

Laurie ran in front of Sol and spun to face him. "Damn you," Laurie shouted at him. "If it wasn't for us, you'd still be in that ditch. And if it wasn't for me, you'd have been

killed by the brotherhood. I want answers, now, or I will tell them where you've gone."

Travis looked stunned.

Sol tensed, his eyes burning into hers. For a second, Laurie thought he might hit her, and she stumbled backwards despite herself. But then Sol seemed to relax. He nodded once and moved slowly off the path, motioning for her and Travis to follow. A few paces off the path he stopped and sat cross-legged on the ground.

He cleared his throat. "I grew up around here you know. A little ways from your Settlement." Laurie was puzzled. What did this have to do with where they were going? But he was talking, so she decided to let him continue. "Some of the neighboring kids and I used to hike all over the hills and follow all the paths. Our parents didn't like it, but we wanted to see just how far we could go. One day we found an old complex buried deep in a hill so that only the tiniest parts were visible. It was a barrack left over from the Third World War." "What's a barrack?" Travis asked.

"It's a place used to house soldiers and their tools. We used it as our secret headquarters." Sol's voice seemed to turn sad. "Later, it became a prison. Several of my friends and I were imprisoned there for a long time. I escaped. Most of my friends are dead now, but some are still alive and are still being held

there. I'm going to rescue them, as I promised I'd do." "Preacher Klayborne said you were a criminal. What did you do? Did you kill anyone?" Travis sounded hopeful.

Sol didn't answer.

"He also said you were a godless heathen trying to destroy Christianity," Laurie added. Laurie watched Sol closely. It wasn't that she didn't trust him, from the moment she saw him she had a feeling he could be trusted above any one, except Mom and Dad of course. No, it was more something Dad had said, that if you watched someone close enough, looked deep into his or her eyes you could see what he was thinking, or was it you could see his soul? Either way, maybe she could learn something.

Sol looked thoughtful as he sat in silence, his black eyes staring down at the dirt somewhere around Laurie's feet. His left hand stroked his chin. Maybe he missed his beard. He seemed to be selecting just what he wanted to tell them and what he wanted to keep secret.

"Did he? I'm not surprised he'd call me that," Sol said at last. "But despite what Klayborne thinks, I am a man of God, just not of his God."

"What God do you believe in then?" Laurie asked.

"Laurie!" Travis hissed. "We're not supposed to talk to other people about that."

Sol waved Travis quiet. "It's alright Travis. I don't mind,

though I commend you for your defense of my privacy." Travis sat up a little straighter and smiled broadly at Laurie. Laurie wanted to poke Travis' eyes out.

Sol continued. "I believe in a dead God; one that is waiting to be reborn. You see..." his voice trailed off. He sighed, and then spoke again. "It's a long story, perhaps I'll explain it all sometime. Right now though, either of you hungry?"

Laurie nodded. She was starving. She would rather have found out how God could be dead, but she decided it was best now to wait. Sol wrestled two fruit bars from the backpack and handed one to Laurie and the other to Travis.

Travis wolfed down his bar, chewed it in one great mouthful then stuffed the wrapper into a pocket of his pants. Laurie was still munching on hers when Sol stood, lifted the backpack onto his shoulders and started walking again. Laurie quickly shoved the rest of the bar into her mouth, licked her fingers, dropped the wrapper and hurried after Sol and Travis.

"I understand you're curious," Sol said as they walked, "but it's not safe for you out here, and certainly not where I'm going. You need to go back. If the Brotherhood finds out you helped me to escape—" He paused. "You'd get in the way and I'd never forgive myself, nor would your parents forgive me if you two got hurt."

Laurie scoffed. If there were one thing more than adults babying her, it was the phrase ^A'you'd only be in the way'.

"We're going with you, and that's final. Back home is boring. Mom and Dad will understand.'" She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to look brave. Travis crossed his arms too and stuck out his chin.

Sol sighed. "You can come with me as far as the ruins, but then you must go back. I can't protect you and try to rescue others at the same time."

"We don't need protection, right Travis?"

"I think Sol's right. Okay, we'll walk with you to the ruins."

Laurie looked deflated.

More hours of hiking. The landscape was changing. They passed over an old, abandoned highway. The black road surface was cracked and broken, the gaps dotted with weeds. On the other side of the highway was a crumbling concrete wall, little more than waist-high, and beyond that, more empty grassland. The sun peaked up over the rounded grey humps of the distant hills. The sky was light now, a blazing blue. It was hot and getting hotter. Laurie tried fanning herself with her hand, but it didn't help. Sweat dripped from every part of her, large drops collected on and tickled her nose. How could Sol have come all this way, hurt as bad as he was? Her respect for him soared.

But, at the same time, it was nice to see that his clothes too were stained dark with sweat.

As they walked, Laurie peppered Sol with more questions. But try as she might, she only learned a few new tidbits. She found out that Sol was a preacher too. Like Klayborne? She asked. Sol said his congregation was much bigger and that he wasn't a preacher in the normal sense. No wonder Klayborne didn't like him. His full name was Solomon David Rashi. He got the scare on his left cheek fighting in an arena in the African Spoke City. Laurie had heard of that place before, but had never been there, Jerusalem was as far as her parents ever took her. But Mom told her how, when she was younger, she went to the Spoke City every month to sell her artwork. She said there was a giant tower there that reached up to the sky. She said the Spaceborn Lords and Ladies come down to Earth from the tower. Laurie had begged Mom to take her there, but she always shrugged and said some day. Of course, as soon as Sol mentioned the arena, Travis jumped into the questioning. Had Sol killed anyone? How many fights had he been in? Was he ever really injured? Sol just kept walking. Laurie asked one question about his time in the arena, why? Why did he fight? That Sol answered. Sort of. He said fighting in the arena was training. Training for what? She asked. But Sol didn't say any more. The dry dead fields were giving way to a crinkly sort of land.

Lots of small barren hills, all a gritty orange-brown. There were no plants and no sounds of animals. It was creepy and it was getting harder to walk. The hillsides were all loose gravel and dust. They kicked up an orange cloud as they walked. They came to one large hill and Laurie struggled up it. Her legs, which had been doing better after their brief rest, were now killing her. And her feet weren't happy at all about the gravel. She reached the top of the hill, shielded her eyes from the rising sun, and looked down at what awaited them. Her mouth fell open.

There were thousands of buildings down there. Well, no, more like thousands of half buildings. Crumbling walls and mounds of dirt and debris, turned the landscape that lay ahead into a ghastly maze. To Laurie it looked as if some great wind had come and blown off all the roofs, shattered the windows and even knocked over whole buildings. She couldn't imagine what sort of wind it would have taken to do all that. There were cars too, some were filled over, some were half buried in the rubble, and one she saw looked like it had been knocked inside a building. There was no sign of people.

"Old Jerusalem." Laurie jumped at Sol's voice. It had been awhile since anyone had said anything.

"What happened to it?" Travis asked.

"It was destroyed in the Third World War, two hundred years

ago."

"Then the Jerusalem we've been to?"

"They rebuilt the city after the war, fifty miles away."

"Your barracks were part of the old city weren't they?"

"Very shrewd Laurie."

Laurie beamed, then smiled at Travis. "How did you find it with all this stuff around?" Laurie asked.

"People used to live here,"

Laurie rolled her eyes, "well yeah."

Sol laughed. "I meant after the war. They hid in the ruins to escape the militias. A lot of my friends lived here, and so did I for a little while." Laurie shivered. It must have been scary living in these ruins. Scary and sad. "They told me about the barracks and some of the other places underground that survived the bomb."

"Do people still live here?"

Sol shook his head. "No. The militias finally came in and killed everyone living in the ruins they could find."

Laurie didn't know what to say after that, so she walked on in silence. They headed down the slope to the edge of the ruined city. Though she wished she couldn't, the closer she got the more details she could see. There were bones, lots of bones, sticking up out of the dust and crumbling stones, a shattered skull; a large rock protruding from what was once its forehead.

Laurie grabbed Sol's hand and pressed in close to him. Even Travis seemed scared.

Sol suddenly stopped and bent down so that he was looking into Laurie's eyes.

"This is it. This is as far as you can go. "

"But..." Laurie pouted.

"Laurie! Listen to me. You cannot go any farther. I had a hard enough time trying to get out of that place. And I'm going back in. I may not come out again, and if you came with me, you certainly wouldn't come back." Sol set the backpack on the ground and took out the shotgun, several extra rounds and two more knives. Watching the way Sol handled the knives as he tucked them one into each boot and the way he loaded the gun, Laurie suddenly knew the answer to Travis's question, had he ever killed anyone? The answer was yes. He had. But surely, he killed only when he had to. He didn't seem a bad person. But if he could fight and kill, why was he so scared about going into the barracks? For some reason, this made her want to follow him even more. Sol pumped the shotgun and then started down the hill towards the ruined city.

Laurie made to follow but Travis grabbed her wrist. "Where are you going? He told us not to follow."

Laurie tried to throw off his hand. "I'm going to follow him."

'What?'

"*He* might need help."

"Oh, come on, Laurie, didn't you see those knives, and the gun, he can take care of himself. Mom and Dad would kill us."

"Since when do you care about what Mom and Dad think?" She responded.

"Well," he stammered, "we might get hurt."

"Don't tell me you're scared."

"But what if Klayborne's right about him? That he's just a criminal? He killed after all." Travis let go of her and crossed his arms.

"Mom and Dad believe in him. Remember what they said, he's our best hope for the future. Mom and Dad can't be wrong."

"Yes they can. He could have fooled them too. And he took stuff that didn't belong to him."

"I'm going Travis. Mom and Dad are right. I'll prove it to you." She started down the hill. "Stay here if you're so scared, I'll be back with Sol."

"Laurie! Don't go!" But she didn't stop. She was not afraid. She ran towards the slope where Sol had vanished from view. Travis yelled her name one last time, and then she heard him come pounding after her. She ran fast as she could, smiling, knowing Travis was still with her. And then, just as the slope began to grow steep, she stumbled and fell hard against the

rocky ground. Tears flooded her eyes as the air was knocked out of her. She heard Travis's footsteps go running past her, begin to fade, and she knew he was gone.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter 7

Travis chased after Sol. He knew he shouldn't have left Laurie behind, but it wasn't his fault she tripped. It was too late now to go back. If he did, or if he stopped even to make sure she was okay, Sol would get away. She'd be all right. She was tough, for a dumb girl. Besides, if Sol got away, he'd have to go back and tell Laurie he'd lost him and then she'd cry and blame him for taking away her mystery. He couldn't have that. And, the longer he stayed after Sol, the longer it would be before they would have to go home and tell Mom and Dad where they had been. So, he ignored the nagging voice and kept running, even though his legs burned and he felt a kind of woozy nausea.

Travis was having a hard time trying to both keep an eye on Sol and make sure he didn't slip on the steep slope of rubble that lead down into the ruins. How did Sol get down it so fast? Every few steps Travis took, another loose rock would go clattering and rattling down the hillside and make another cloud of gritty white dust. He was covered in the dust. It itched like crazy. He wished he could stop and scratch at his arms and legs, or even better, take off his shirt and shake out what had to be buckets of the itchy stuff that had gotten between his shirt and

his skin. But he kept moving. What would Laurie think if he let Sol disappear because he had an itch?

Each time he kicked a rock down the hill, Travis worried someone would hear the noise and he'd be in trouble. Sol was probably too far away to hear, which was good. But what frightened him was that someone else, hiding in the ruins, maybe waiting for overly curious kids like him to come along, would hear. He felt like he was being watched. Maybe Dad was right, and evil men did hunt curious boys. He imagined pairs of evil red eyes staring at him from each of the thousands of smashed windows.

Travis slipped. He had taken his eyes off the ground. Loose rocks gave way and his right leg shot out from under him. He felt a sudden thrill, a surge of dizziness, as he nearly went tumbling down the rest of the hillside, but he caught himself, hands clawing into the rubble, plowing out ten little furrows. His heart began to hammer. Pay attention, dumbass, he scolded himself. And then, shaking the dust and gravel from his hair and clothes, he was off the slope and in among the ruins.

The broken half-buildings of Jerusalem rose up and towered over Travis's head as he marched into the city, but soon his march turned into a slow crawl. The farther he went, the more the dead buildings seemed to crowd around him, until he was sure he could reach out and touch their freezing stone walls. It's

just your imagination, he told himself, but that didn't help. It was hard to breathe. Even in the bright afternoon sun, the crumbling walls took on strange sinister shapes, clawed hands, jagged teeth, and the bleached bones of giants. He was a gnat in a tomb. It was going to swallow him. Something dry and brittle crunched beneath his left foot. He froze. He slowly glanced down. A human skull. Travis bit down hard on a scream and ran as fast as he could after Sol.

Travis only stopped running when the pain in his side became too great for him to breathe. Wheezing and clutching his right side, he threw himself down behind a pile of jumbled
• debris. Sol
was going to get away. Travis remembered the way Sol
looked when he had found him. If Sol had come all that way in
much worse shape, he could do this. Travis pushed himself up off
the ground with a painful grunt, and clambered over the pile of
wooden boards, metal pipes, pieces of glass, crumbling concrete
and bones.

Sol was just ahead now, creeping forward slowly, bent close to the ground, almost kneeling. His head kept darting left and right. Maybe he was scared, too, Travis thought. Sol stopped, glanced behind him, and Travis fell against the rubble-covered ground, wincing as something sharp bit into his chest. Sol

continued. Travis was stuck on the ground, his body refusing to listen to him.

He was letting Sol get away. He had to get up. Now. He knew it was silly, trying to order himself around like that, but it was the only thing he could think of to do. He was tired. And the dust was beginning to cake in his mouth and throat, keeping him from swallowing. "Get up." He whispered the order out loud. "You want Laurie to forgive you for leaving her, don't you?" He was crazy, talking to himself, but it seemed to work. A little strength returned and he was able to crawl forward on all fours. Then, at last, he was up and running.

Travis followed Sol through the maze of the ruined city to the barren hills beyond. The buildings grew farther apart and then were gone and the walk got easier, the ground was no longer covered in debris and loose rocks, but was solid. If only Dad were here. Travis knew he would be proud of the way he had stuck with Sol, even when he got scared in the city. He snorted. It was childish to be scared of an old city. And he wasn't scared, he was just being careful. That was all. He crouched behind a large boulder that stuck half-out of the sandy hillside. Sol stood at the top of the next hill, outlined black against the grey sky. Sol kneeled and got something out of his backpack. The shotgun. The prison must be close. Sol straightened up, walked a

few steps to the right, then crouched again, and then he was gone, as though the ground had simply swallowed him up.

Travis dropped any attempt at being sneaky and dashed to where Sol had stood. The backpack was still there, on the ground, unzipped, and flopped over—several brightly wrapped rations had spilled out into the sand and an empty water bottle had rolled away. Beside the backpack was a dark hole, like the well, only this one didn't have a wall around it and there was a ladder cut into the far side. Travis leaned over the edge. Black. He couldn't see the bottom. A steady flow of cool air blew up out of the hole with a faint raspy whisper, as though the hole were a living-breathing thing. Travis shivered. Why couldn't the jail be a bright open place? Would be nice, he thought to himself as he climbed down the ladder into the darkness.

The hole was much deeper than he had expected. By the time he finally stepped off the ladder, the mouth of the hole had shrunk to a little circle of brightness, about the size of his thumb, high above. His shoulders ached and his feet were half asleep with that annoying prickling feeling. There was just enough light at the bottom for Travis to see the hole was much wider here, he could stretch out as far as he could from the ladder and touch nothing. Across from him and sunk into the rock wall was a large metal hatch, open just a crack. A stiff breeze

blew from the opening, which glowed with a slightly brighter light than the gloom of the hole. Sol had warned him that where he was going was dangerous. This place certainly didn't look like a place he'd normally ever go, but Travis was set on proving himself to Laurie. Travis took a deep breath and yanked open the hatch just far enough so he could squeeze in.

The tunnel beyond ran for a long ways, most of it unlit, though here and there, a bare bulb blinked and flickered from random gaps in the rocky ceiling, each casting a feeble cone of light on the muddy floor. It was just enough for Travis to make his way down it without having to feel along the walls. As far as he could tell, the tunnel was empty, but every step he took with its accompanying loud echoes, he feared they would catch him, whoever *they* were. Having no idea what to expect, he jumped at the slightest sound, a drop of water dripping down from the ceiling, the clang of a door from somewhere far below.

The tunnel ended at a set of narrow double doors. Above the doors, a red light glowed at him evilly. Travis approached the doors slowly, eyes fixed on the red light. A small panel opened on the wall to the left of the doors and something that looked like the eyepiece to a microscope popped out. He paused, and then stepped up to the eyepiece. It was probably a bad idea, but he did it anyway. He pressed his right eye to the thing and was blinded by a flash of green light. He stumbled back, rubbing his

eye with a fist. The red light above the doors flashed and then buzzed like an angry bee. Now what? How did Sol get past the doors? It was then that he noticed the wall here was different than the rest of the tunnel. There was a large metal grating, and it looked loose. Sure enough, three of bolts had been cut so that it swung out of the way easily. Behind the grate was some sort of wide metal pipe. Travis smiled. There was plenty of room. He climbed into the pipe, pushed off the floor and went sliding down into the prison.

The pipe sloped gently downwards. Despite himself, Travis laughed. It was like the slide back home. The pipe slide suddenly dropped away, straight down, into pitch black. He tried to stop sliding, but the pipe was too slippery, there was nothing to hold onto. He was falling. He was going to die. Then his hands found the mouth of another pipe that joined the one he was in. He grabbed on to the new pipe as hard as he could, his arms were almost pulled from their sockets, and his chest was slammed against the side of the pipe with a rumbling thud like thunder, but he was no longer falling. He had to be more careful. He pulled himself up into the new pipe and started crawling.

This pipe, fortunately, stayed straight, and he soon found himself at another grate. This one was not loose. Great, he thought. Sol hadn't come this way. Should he go back, try the

pipe again, or try to get out here? He pressed up against the grating, trying to see what was behind it, but all he could see was a grey wall a few feet away. He didn't much care to fall again so he tried the grate. A few kicks and it gave way and clanged to the floor. He hoped no one was around. He squirmed out of the pipe and then frowned. He was in another tunnel, depressingly like the first, though this one was longer and stretched off into darkness. The silence was getting creepy. He sighed and walked hurriedly down the tunnel.

Before long, though, he came to a door set into the right hand wall, with several more like it beyond. It was metal and had an eyepiece like the first doors he had come to, though there was no angry light above it and this door had a normal metal knob. The door also had a small peephole in it. Travis was just tall enough to look in if he stood on his tiptoes. Past the door was a small square room, with a metal bunk, a toilet, and small square table; everything was cold and grey, dead. It was an empty cell. He moved to the next door and peeked in. Another empty cell. An awful thought struck him, what if Sol was wrong and there was no one here to rescue? The next door. Empty. Was there no one here? Where was Sol? Travis's heart beat fast and for the first time he noticed his breath coming in quick gasps. He was beginning to panic.

Footsteps. The sound of footsteps echoed out of the dark tunnel ahead. Shit. Have to hide. Where? His eyes darted about widely. It was too far to go back to the pipe. He twisted the closest door's knob. It was unlocked. He slipped through, shut the door as quietly as he could and pressed himself up against the wall next to the door. The footsteps grew louder. He could hear voices now. Men's voices. They were laughing about something. A shadow blocked the thread of light coming through the peephole. Keep moving, please. The shadow moved away and the footsteps continued down the hall, then faded altogether.

Travis began to breathe again—an awful putrid smell flooded his lungs. He shuddered and barely stopped the urge to gag. The cell wasn't empty. Now that his eyes had adjusted to the cold grey twilight of the cell, Travis could see that there was someone lying on the mattress in the far corner of the cell, bundled in ragged sheets so that not even his face was visible.

From the smell and lack of movement, Travis knew the person was dead. Though part of himself begged him not to, he had to see. He slowly walked over to the body, bent down, and pulled back the sheets. Lifeless, curdled eyes stared upwards, surrounded by swollen and sickly-yellowed flesh that drooped from the body's skull, like loose clothes. Strands of waxy black hair stuck to the sheet and fell over the body's face. Travis screamed, stumbled backwards till his back hit the far wall,

fell to his knees and vomited in great heaving convulsions. Then, still shaking, he rose and threw open the door. All thought of being quiet was gone. He had to get out. He ran down the tunnel back towards the grate.

A deafening boom roared up through the floor. Everything shook; the lights flickered and died, plunging Travis into true darkness. He couldn't even see his hands. He staggered around; flailing about for the walls, then began feeling along them for the grate. He couldn't remember which wall it was on.

"Sol? Where are you?" Travis yelled at the darkness. He realized he was crying. "Sol? Sol!" He repeated the name over and over until it became a prayer, a plea for forgiveness. "Sol!" The echoes of the explosion died and dreadful silence that followed seemed to swallow his voice. At that Moment, Travis was sure he would never see his Mom and Dad again. Or Jamie. Or Laurie. He gave up trying to find the grate and sank down onto the floor, back pressed up against the wall, tears sliding down his cheeks, chest heaving painfully, not caring about the slimy cold mud soaking through his pants.

An alarm's shrill wail rang up from below. Somewhere, out in the dark a door slammed. Running footsteps echoed down the tunnel, growing louder. People coming. Shit. Travis jumped to his feet and frantically felt along the wall, rubbing his hands raw on the rough rock. Shit shit shit. Something grabbed his

shoulder, spun him around and threw him painfully against the wall.

"Help! Sol!" Travis struggled and tried to shake off the hand, but he was only pressed harder against the wall.

"What the hell? Travis!" It was Sol's voice.

"Sol," Travis croaked weakly. "Thank..."

"No time." Sol barked. Travis felt Sol's arms wrap around him and he was lifted up. He could feel Sol's breath on his cheek, hot and bitter, the tightness of his arms and his heaving chest. They ran through a dark eternity. There were others around them, but he couldn't see who.

Someone yelled behind them, demanding them to stop. They kept running. A loud crack and something buzzed past Travis's right ear. He gasped and tried to squirm closer against Sol's chest. Sol put him down and shoved him down against the wall. Another crack from down the hall. Someone close by groaned and something warm and wet splashed Travis's face and arms. He screamed. A thundering boom and a brief flash of light from right next to him. Dad's shotgun. Sol was crouched against the side of the wall; his body shielding Travis, shotgun smoking, then it was dark again. The shotgun roared a second time. Travis was on the farmhouse roof, the lion snarling and snapping at his feet. Dad at the top of the hill, pumping, aiming... another roar. There were screams coming from down the tunnel.

"Stay down Travis! Josef, get the elevator doors open. Mai, Lucien help me hold them off." Travis, shaking, curled up in a ball, squeezed his eyes shut and stuck his fingers in his ears. It didn't do much to block out the gunshots, but at least he couldn't hear the screams. Then he was picked up again and they were moving. Only a few steps this time. A flashlight clicked on. They were in an elevator, Sol, himself and others he didn't recognize. These people looked much like Sol when Travis had first found him, and they smelled just about as bad. There were two women and three men. A black man with long matted hair grabbed a handle in the ceiling of the elevator and wrenched open the small circular hatch.

Sol boosted him up and Travis pulled himself up onto the roof of the elevator as quick as he could. There was a ladder on the far wall of the shaft and he began to climb. He could hear the others getting up onto the elevator's roof and beginning to climb the ladder but he didn't look back. It took all his concentration to simply climb. Grab pull step, grab pull step. Every part of him felt like it was on fire. It hurt to breathe. He was slowing.

"Come on Travis." Sol's voice was calm and steady. "Just a little farther. One more level."

Travis kept climbing, huffing and puffing. Grab pull step. He came to a landing for the elevator, its doors were open, a black

hole. He paused just a Moment. He didn't even hear the gunshot.
Just a bright flash. White-hot pain stabbed into his chest,
flooded into his brain. He was falling.

Section One: Earthbound

Chapter 8

Laurie stalked back and forth along the top of the hill where Travis had abandoned her for Sol. The tears were long gone. Instead, she shook with anger. How could he be so stupid? Leaving her alone in this dreadful place. She reached the rotten tree stump again, seventy-one, spun around and stomped back towards the boulder that marked the other end of her path, all the while keeping her eyes on the ruined city. She hoped he was all right.

For a long while after Travis left, she had sat on the boulder, kicked her heels against it and debated whether she should go tell Mom and Dad what had happened and where Travis had gone. They were sure to be upset; he'd probably be spanked when they found out. Of course, they'd probably spank her, too, since she left with Sol also. It wouldn't matter that she didn't go into the city, so rather than get herself in trouble, she sat there and watched the sun as it rose ever higher in the sky. Her impatience finally won just as the sun was almost straight over her head. She had begun to pace then. Now the sun was slowly growing larger and redder and moving down close over the ruins. Sunset would be coming soon. She reached the boulder again and turned back to the stump.

Though she told herself not to, she was beginning to worry. Maybe she should go into the city, see if she could find Travis. At this point, she'd even be willing to risk a spanking. Laurie stopped her pacing and shielded her eyes from the sun's glare. Something moved among the ruins. Then it was gone. Maybe she had imagined it. No wait, there it was again, movement. A small black shape weaved through the rubble filled streets. Then another appeared behind it, then three more, five people running down one of the city's main streets, coming straight towards her hill. As the five grew closer, another group followed them; this second group was much larger. Laurie wished she had brought Dad's binoculars.

They were close enough now for her to hear their shouts, though she couldn't tell which group was doing the shouting or what they were shouting. A dull crack, like a firecracker echoed off the hills and the first group scattered and disappeared among the buildings as quickly as they had first appeared. A second and a third crack sounded and Laurie realized with an awful feeling that the noises were gunshots. The second group split into smaller three-to-four person groups, each group following one of the first five runners.

Laurie had stood rooted to the spot since the first sign of movement in the city below, but now, as the gunshots finally registered in her mind, she realized with an awful nauseous

feeling, that Travis could be down there, right now, running and being shot at, and she was just standing and watching, mouth open, like Jamie had done at the arena. She should be doing something. What? Tell Mom and Dad? No, that would take too long. Go down there, fight them and make them leave Travis alone? She had no weapons, certainly not a gun, and she wasn't sure she could even use one if she did.

Eventually, she wound up just hunkering down behind the boulder, her back against the cold rock, knees drawn up to her chin, eyes tightly shut, listening despite herself to the shouting and the gunshots, hoping Travis would be okay.

Laurie yawned and stretched her stiff legs, then blinked groggily. Her back ached from leaning against the hard rock and her throat was all scratchy from the dust when she swallowed. It was dark, a half-full moon just above the horizon. She must have fallen asleep. Idiot, she scolded herself. How could she? Sleeping while Travis needed her help. She was going to do what, exactly? Not just sit around and nap, certainly. Disgusted at herself, she stood, brushed off her clothes, while cursing the dust, and then shrieked. Something moved in front of the moon. All she could see was a silvery outline, a head, shoulders. A person. The person carried something. He turned so he was no

longer blocking the moon. Oh God, she thought. Oh God. Sol carried Travis in his arms. She screamed.

"Shh... Laurie. Quiet. They're still out there." Sol spoke in a whisper, but something in his voice made her shiver. He sounded old, beaten; she didn't know how else to describe it.

"Sol? How?" Laurie could barely get the words out. She was shaking and her throat felt like it was caught in a clamp.

"He followed me Laurie. I told him not to. I tried to save him..." His voice faltered. "I tried. I did all I could. I'm sorry Laurie." He knelt down before her. Travis's head rested against Sol's shoulder, and his arms were folded up over his chest. His feet dangled over Sol's left arm. His shirt was soaked with blood, spilling out just below his heart.

Laurie shuddered, backed away, sat down again, and began rocking slowly back and forth. When she was little, Mom would take her on her lap and rock her on the rocking chair until she stopped crying. She imagined she was there, Mom running a hand through her hair, telling her gently, quietly, soothingly to hush, to be still and hush. But this time, there were no tears. Why couldn't she cry? It was her fault. She could have saved him. She had begged him to stop when she tripped. She should have gotten up and kept on after him. She could have been there.

Sol stood over her, cradling Travis. He brushed the hair out of Travis's eyes. "So many faces," he spoke so quietly at

first she thought she had imagined it. But then he repeated it. "So many faces." Again and again, the same words. Laurie realized with a start he was crying. Silver rivulets of tears ran down his cheeks and dripped onto Travis's chest. She got up and took one of Travis's hands in hers. It was cold and stiff. Then, for some reason she couldn't even begin to explain, she buried her face against Sol's shoulder and cried. The tears burned as they poured out.

She had no idea how long they stood there. Sol said nothing. There was no sound from the hills or the ruined city. At last the tears stopped. She looked up at Sol. "Let's go home," she let go of Travis's hand and turned away.

End of current progress