For the Love of a Daughter

by Untherius

Summary

Following a raid, a man tracks his kidnapped daughter from northern California into Oregon, a quest which takes him on a journey of discovery through the shattered post-Change remains of the civilized West.

Notes

The Hunts are good friends of mine. So I decided to write this story about them. Sure, their fictional selves get beat up in the story, but believe me, Ben gets himself beat up in real life! Incidentally, Ben's a surgeon in real life, as well as in the story.
Ben Hunt breathed heavily. He roughly wrenched an arrow from a body at his feet. Growling angrily, he shoved it back into his quiver and kicked at the man on the ground. He'd have killed the son-of-a-motherless-goat if he weren't dead already. Normally mild-mannered, Ben was far too wound up in the aftermath of battle. Furthermore, several of his people, all children and including his own daughter, had been taken during the chaos. He gazed across Redwood Creek at the towering ruddy-barked conifers that gave the stream its name. He suppressed the desire to curse and let out a yell of anguish instead.

Motion out of the corner of his eye turned into his wife Ali. She trotted over to him. She always managed to look beautiful, even now when she was visibly exhausted, emotionally spent, and splattered with mud and blood. He smiled weakly in spite of himself.

“They're...they're gone!” she wailed.

“I know,” he growled.

Ali gasped. “Ben! You're hurt!”

“Huh?” He glanced down at himself, taking visual inventory. It was then that he noticed a slice through his brigandine, felt the sting of a cut on his face, another from a nick through his earlobe, another cut on his right arm, and more forthcoming bruises than he'd care to count. “Oh.” Then he pointed at Ali's leg.

She looked down at a rather nasty-looking gash right below her left kneecap. It was crusted with blood and drying mud. Then Ben pointed to her forehead. She reached up, touched it, winced, and then peered at her bloody fingers. Scalp wounds always bled a lot. “It's...not as bad as it looks,” she said. “We should see to the others.”

“But what about the children?”

Ali laughed, but it came out with undertones of the same bitterness Ben felt. “And you're usually the more practical one.”

Ben shrugged. “But...”

“We'll find them,” she interrupted, “but later.”

“What if there IS no later?”

“Ben,” she said, placing her hands gently on his arms, “if you take off after them right now, you'll just get yourself killed and you know it. I...I couldn't bear that.”

Ben knew his wife was right. She usually was. He nodded. Besides, his pre-Change surgical skills were needed at the moment and he knew that, too. He set to work on his wounded fellows, and on the wounded enemy from whom he hoped to extract information, temporally losing himself in his work.
Dark was falling as the Hunt clan sat around a small campfire. The toe of a ridge to the west mostly hid them from all but a small sliver of the Redwood Highway. The Hunts had made camp on a flat by a bend in the creek as they always had. The raid, though small as such things went, had taken a heavy toll.

The typical razor-clam gathering on the beach in conjunction with a winter steelhead survey had turned bad when they'd been attacked just outside of Orick. It had come and gone so fast. Even if they'd managed to send a rider the mile to town, it would have been futile. No one would have had time to respond and there wasn't really even much of a town left after the Change anyway.

In the early years, they'd always come out well against raiders. That was due in part to the relative ineffectiveness of banditry while people were still re-learning how to do things the low-tech ways, and in part to the combined effects of the Hunts' formidable wilderness skills they'd acquired well before the Change, and Ben's left eye, which had been magically rebuilt and enhanced by one Sophie Jenkins, a magic-wielder from another world. Ben hadn't had an opportunity to thank her properly for that and he was quite sure he never would, save for making sure it had been worth the pain and effort.

Ben's left eye was full half again as large as it had been before he'd accidentally poked it out on a pine branch during a backpacking trip the summer before the Change. At the time, he and his family had been hiking with another group they'd met at Wolf Creek Lake near Sonora Pass in the High Sierra. That group had turned out to be the most unexpected assortment of individuals, a few of them capable of wielding magic, something he hadn't previously known actually existed.

Sophie had at first tried to simply repair Ben's eye, but for unknown reasons that hadn't worked. So she'd rebuilt it from scratch, making alterations and upgrades. The process had involved the use of powerful magic and had been unspeakably painful, but worth it. His lens apparatus gave him magnification up to one hundred times, letting him see things both very small and very far away. Learning to use that had been disorienting. He also had additional retinal receptors that allowed him to see infrared, which effectively gave him night vision. Both of those had proven incredibly useful in the Changed world.

They'd planned on running an MRI on him at some point to look at the new physiology and to try to find out why and how he was able to turn the infrared vision on and off at will. But then the Change had happened and all bets had been off, as it were. He, Ali, his brother Luke, Luke's wife Heather and son Jacob had been visiting his parents Larry and Ginny up in Dorrington in the mid-elevation Sierra when the Change had come.

When it had become apparent that the lights wouldn't be coming back on for some time, they'd buttoned down into survival mode. At first, they'd also tried to help their neighbors. But when the violence had started, the family had left and migrated up toward the High Country where they'd spent the summer eating fish, squirrels, and bulbs like onion, calochortus and lomatium. Ben's daughter Hemiona had been born up there in late May inside one of several snow caves they'd dug. His nephew Giles had come into the world during a violent thunderstorm in late July.

With the approach of autumn, they'd migrated back “down the hill.” They'd learned that things had gone from bad to quite a bit worse. While they'd missed the worst of the chaos, there had still been Eaters here and there and they'd almost been conscripted by a warlord in Murphys. They'd managed to escape thanks to a ruse involving poison oak, a distraction by several rattlesnakes, and a timely interruption from a competing group based in Sheep Ranch.

They'd made a break for it, and had found Ben's friends Charlie and Dominic Mantei in Angels Camp. After spending several days forging weapons in the Manteis' modified machine shop, they'd
struck out under cover of darkness to make their way across the Sierra foothills, across the Sacramento Valley, and to the northern Coast Ranges.

That journey had been wrought with all sorts of difficulties. Food hadn't been much of a problem if one knew where to look for it. Live-oak acorn flour, coffeeberry, bulbs, snakes, fish, squirrels, small lizards, and various weeds comprised their menu most days. Keeping all the children quiet, especially during their midnight exodus from Angels Camp—which had become anything but angelic in the wake of the Change—had been a persistent challenge. Staying away from the highways had been easy and navigation not hard either.

Water, however, had been an issue and they had all been thankful for the mild weather as autumn gave way to winter, which was thankfully un-wintery in the California Central Valley. On the other hand, the further they traveled from the Sierra, the more problematic water became. While sources, mainly larger rivers like the Mokelumne and Sacramento Rivers were more reliable, they had to go farther between them. They also had to be very careful about treating it as more and more of it was downriver from disease areas and they were still finding freshly-dead bodies. Furthermore, most bridges over those rivers were tightly controlled by warlords. The heart of the Valley, however, was generally one big Death Zone, and while it remained uncontrolled by anyone, it had been crawling with Eaters and they'd had to hack and shoot their way out of several situations before reaching the inner Coast Ranges on the western side of the Valley.

Sickness, injury, and violence had taken their toll and had claimed the lives of Ben's mother Ginny, Dominic, and Charlie's youngest daughter Susan. They'd gathered more people on their way, some of whom they'd rescued from Eaters. A few of them had been subsequently killed in combat, and a couple of others lost to more sickness and injury. In short, what had been a day's drive before the Change had turned into an arduous three-month journey that would have nearly put the Fellowship of the Ring to shame.

What followed had turned into another eight years of a predictable migratory route. Winters were spent on the northern California coast following herds of elk, working the winter steelhead runs, and harvesting clams and kelp. As the weather warmed, spring took them up the Klamath River first to what had been the Lower Klamath and Tule Lake and Clear Lake National Wildlife Refuges for waterfowl and then to the plains east of Mt. Shasta for antelope. As summer progressed, they headed west into the Klamath Mountains where the weather was cooler. Fall took them back to the middle Klamath River for the fall coho salmon run, and thence back to the coast.

As Ben stared into the flickering flames of a fire kept just large enough to cook their food and warm themselves, they took stock of their losses. Their enemy had met them in numbers, but had horses. Six of them had been killed and three wounded mildly enough not to warrant being given the mercy stroke.

The enemy dead had been dragged by mule to the mouth of Redwood Creek and unceremoniously dumped into the Pacific Ocean. That decision had been made ostensibly to reduce the disease potential always associated with any corpse, human or not. Otherwise, Ben had to admit, even if only to himself, that it gave him a certain amount of visceral satisfaction.

Their own number had suffered greater losses. Ten were dead, a dozen wounded, and four children—twelve-year-old Jacob, eight-year-old Hemiona, six-year-old Juan Martinez, and thirteen-year-old Jennifer Mantei—abducted. There was nothing to be done about the dead, but the usual: the bodies were taken to the top of the nearest ridge and burned on a funeral pyre, something Ben had learned from a small family of newcomers who'd studied the ancient Norse ways. The ashes were then scattered to the winds. The first time they'd done that, it had been mid-summer halfway across the Valley that first year and had been very hard on everybody, the fire danger notwithstanding, and they
had, in fact, succeeded in setting the grasslands aflame.

The dead were currently lined up above the high-water line awaiting the ritual to be performed the following day. Two of their own wounded had to be given the mercy stroke and they, too, were lined up. Half the other wounded suffered mostly cuts and bruises. In addition, there were four people with embedded arrowheads, several severed fingers, a couple of broken bones, and a concussion.

“I have to go,” said Ben after a long pause in the conversation, “before the trail literally goes cold.”

“Go in the morning,” said Charlie.

“But...”

“He’s right,” said Larry. “We’re all exhausted. You’ll just get yourself and the children killed if you dash off now. You need rest, food, arrows and dry clothes, and you know it.”

Ben sighed. His dad was right. He usually was. “Okay,” was all he could say. Truth be told, he was emotionally numb, which bothered him.

One by one, everyone silently wandered off to their respective tents. Ben lay awake for a while until a dreamless sleep finally took him.
Ben Hunt sat beneath the shade of a live oak, the setting sun more or less at his back. He and two others, Phil Crowe and Karan Pine, had ascended a small wash to the south, hydrating in its seasonal trickle. Phil and Karan crouched behind Ben. From a small, flattish knoll at the end of an old jeep track, they had an excellent view of what used to be called the Randolf Collier Safety Roadside Rest Area, but now just called Randolf. It lay below them and across the Klamath River. It was still a layover spot, though its nature had been altered dramatically since the Change.

The warlord in Yreka used it as a staging area for the work parties that kept the Cascade Wonderland Highway—one designated as Interstate Five—and parts of the Klamath River Highway—one designated CA-96—clear of landslide debris that tended to accumulate each winter.

The former Interstate Five, from the Canadian border to Mexico, was a special sort of headache for those whose responsibility it was to ensure unobstructed trade routes through their territories. Most places with multiple freeways were still in ruins, little more than supersized ghost towns—Sacramento, the Bay Area, Los Angeles, Seattle, Reno, and so on. In most other places, though, the roadway had two lanes going each direction and both had to be maintained to some extent, which usually meant clearing landslides and blow-downs, though wash-outs continued to be a problem in many places. In some areas, travelers could use either set of lanes, as it was a simple matter to drive, walk, or ride across the median to the other side if some obstruction blocked the way. In others, the northbound lanes were separated from the southbound ones by some distance and/or unnavigable topography. Along stretches such as the one between Hornbrook to the north of the Randolf and Yreka to the south, only one set of lanes was generally kept open. There just wasn't nearly enough traffic between Yreka and Ashland to justify anything more.

A few entrepreneurs had set up shop at Randolf to serve, and in many cases exploit, everyone who passed through it. In short, it had been turned into a seasonal small town.

Ben and his companions had been trailing the children and their kidnappers for the last one hundred sixty miles spread out over nine days. Most of the time, they'd remained well out of sight. If anything, they wanted their quarry to think they were just three travelers on foot. However, people on foot tended to move at different speeds than people on horse or wagon. While horses were faster, even at a walk, those on foot could be up and on the move far earlier each day, so their travel patterns tended not to match those with pack animals, who had to tend to their stock each morning and evening. Ben didn't want their pursuit to be obvious. While people could certainly be stupid, they usually weren't across-the-board stupid. It was best to assume an adversary could actually think and theirs had shown that they could.

Maintaining visual contact with their quarry hadn't been strictly necessary. There weren't that many places one could deviate from the highway. Few of the minor roads, and especially the logging and former US Forest Service roads, were maintained at all. They tended to be choked with nine seasons of uncleared blow-downs, landslides, and wash-outs. No one had much reason to take anything wheeled up such roads anymore anyway. Even if they did, it was easy enough for anyone with even moderate tracking skills to see any signs of passage early in the season. It wouldn't have made much sense anyway.

Otherwise, they'd been relying on Ben's unique infrared vision. It had been easy enough to follow the bandits. Two wagons and two dozen horses left a conspicuous thermal signature on the asphalt
that was otherwise still quite cold in the wake of winter. More than once, they'd come close to losing the trail of their quarry, always when passing through settled areas that had their own traffic. Once they'd established that the bandits had taken to the eastbound Klamath Highway, they'd been much easier to follow. Between covert visuals and asking questions of the locals, they'd kept up.

Ben's two main concerns were avoiding detection, and determining if any of the children had been sold or abandoned anywhere. Staying out of sight wasn't too difficult, as the road generally followed the curves of the river. There were only a few places between the junction of Martin's Ferry Road—once designated CA-169—and the Cascade Wonderland Highway where the bandits could have unloaded the children. In fact, Ben could easily count them on one hand: Orleans; Salmon River Outpost; Marble Mountain Ranch; Happy Camp; and Seiad Valley.

Liberating the children was proving to be a persistent logistical problem. Ben and his companions could have picked off the enemy sentries easily enough. But that would have betrayed their existence, if not their positions. For all Ben knew, the kidnappers would mistake them for part of another bandit group, or an Indian raiding party. But if the enemy caught an inkling of who they were or why they were there, things would likely deteriorate in very short order. That wasn't something Ben was willing to risk. Any and all violence would have to be done very quietly, at very close quarters, and in such a way that it would look like an accident. The idea made Ben twitch—violence always had and it made him very sad that such was so often the way of things in the Changed world. In any event, a direct confrontation was out of the question.

Karan had wondered if any of the children would be sold along the way. That would actually have been fortuitous. Everyone along the Klamath River was on a first-name basis with at least one member of the Hunt Band, which was in turn as a group on friendly terms with everyone. The children were sure to be recognized, especially Hemiona with her oversized eyeballs. Ben had hoped that someone would “relieve” the kidnappers of at least one child, then hold onto them until later in the spring during the Hunts' usual upriver migration. That would at least keep them reasonably safe until such time as appropriate compensation could be made. Ben's questions had been somewhat spurious and usually to the tune of “I don't suppose you've seen...?” His primary concern was to make sure none of the children wound up too far away. The rest of the Hunt Band would be along upriver in a month anyway and they’d have the time to ply more people with more questions.

So far, though, that line of pursuit had mostly come up empty. One of the people Ben had asked just downriver from Orleans reported a bit of a scuffle between the bandit party and the Orleaners. Two bandits had been killed and at least one wounded, but there was no mention of the children. It was probable that they were bound and gagged in the wagons. That wouldn't have surprised Ben. While Jacob and Hemiona were mild-mannered, the other two weren't. That there'd been no word on the children meant the kidnappers had probably just blown through most of the inhabited areas and had camped between them while one or more of their outriders took care of the in-town provisioning.

If the children were still with their kidnappers, there weren't many other places they could be taken. In fact, Ben could think of only two: Yreka; and Portland. While Yreka was run by a warlord and while that man was a prick, he had several small children of his own and so took a very dim view of child exploitation of any kind. Sure, any time something was prohibited, someone would find a way to create a black market for it. But Yreka's general population still had a small-town mentality, as it had before the Change.

To the south of Yreka, there wasn't much, especially south of what remained of Shasta Dam. To the north, there was the Rogue Valley. Everything Ben knew about anything north of Siskiyou Summit since the Change was entirely rumor. Rumors were hard to trust, but they were the next best thing to CNN and one learned well enough how to separate fact from fiction. Much of the Rogue Valley had imploded in the wake of the Change. Medford was mostly resettled by people who'd managed to get
out and hunker down for a while, then returned to take up ranching. Ashland was inhabited by those who'd stayed and built fortifications and such. Ben gathered the region was a lot like it had been in the nineteenth century, with sheep and cattle pastures surrounding the ruins of Medford, but with some conspicuous Medieval influence in Ashland thanks largely in part to the students at Southern Oregon University and members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

North of Medford, only a few scattered communities existed south of the central Willamette Valley. News on that front was highly sketchy, though. There was conflicting information on which communities had survived and to what extent. Most accounts said Grants Pass had burned the summer following the Change and had been neither resettled nor rebuilt. Roseburg had apparently died, too. Eugene/Springfield and Salem were ghost towns. Corvallis had become a sort of odd version of the ancient Greek Polis. Portland was run by an evil warlord who would have put Yreka to shame. That seemed to Ben to be the likeliest place for a child slave trade. Ben shuddered. It seemed an awfully long way to go for that and an awful lot of trouble. But bandits were opportunists and as such, were unpredictable, which also made them highly dangerous.

And so Ben watched from beneath the cover of shade. The bandits were camped halfway down Randolf and up against a steep embankment on its eastern side. Above that lay the Cascade Wonderland Highway roadbed. Ben knew the area well. He'd driven that way many times before the Change. Since then, his people always stopped there during their migration and, despite the unsavory characters that frequented the place, they'd seldom had much trouble. Still, it was another place Ben and company would be recognized. They could have camped on the western bank, as there was certainly enough room and his people had done so a few times. But they needed to remain undetected.

“What do you think?” said Phil quietly. He stood behind the oak's trunk, careful to make his own profile blend in with the tree's.

“More of the same,” said Ben.

“I was afraid of that,” said Karan, who sat behind a rock and peered around it.

Phil grunted an assent. “More of the same” meant staying put until nightfall, then retrieving their bedrolls from the packs they'd lain beneath the clump of trees behind them, then arising before first light to pack up again. It also meant camping dry and eating cold. They'd been fortunate not to need any fires so far. They'd found plenty of food at the usual roadside establishments along the river, so most of their foodstuffs remained untouched. That was good, for they were likely to need them later.

So they stayed put and watched, not moving any more than was necessary for things like checking their six and slinking off to “use the first tree.” Any unneeded movement could still be noticed. It wasn't that anyone would really have been looking for them, but people were paranoid...and bored...two things that made for a dangerous and unpredictable combination.

Nothing much happened across the way, even as darkness fell, which wasn't surprising. Now and then, someone got up to relieve the watch, or put another bit of fuel on a small fire, or fetch water from the river. No one was likely to do anything more until dawn anyway, at which point Ben and company would watch which way the bandits would go and plot a delayed pursuit course. Hardly anyone, the bandits included, bothered to travel at night.

“So,” said Karan quietly after they'd laid out their bedrolls, “do you think they're crazy enough to go all the way to Ashland in one day? All thirty miles of it?”

“You really think they're going north?” said Phil.
“Yeah. I do. It's a hell of a long way to Portland, though.”

“You think they're going that far north, too?”

“Well...I think they're nuts, but, yeah. And no, I don't think they'll make Ashland in one day. Still might be snow on Siskiyou Summit.”

“I think,” said Ben, “that they're nuts for camping down there.” He gestured in the general direction of Randolf. “Too many people. Too much risk. Too much...” He broke off and blew some air between his lips.

“I think,” said Phil, “that you just want to go down there and...um...”

“Boot some head,” said Karan.


“I guess that's why you have us,” said Phil.

Ben gave an affirmative grunt.

“Look,” said Karan, “I know you're concerned about them. I know I don't have any myself, so I don't have much room to talk, but my little sister's almost like the daughter I don't have.”

“So you've said,” said Ben.

“Yet I still feel like we have to keep saying it.”

“Guys,” said Phil, “we can keep going around in circles, or we can get some sleep. I think we're going to need it and we're on each others' last nerves as it is.”

“Yeah,” said Ben, “good idea. And for the record, you're both right.”

“Night, guys,” said Karan.

“Night,” said Phil.

“Night,” said Ben.
Ben Hunt gnawed pensively on a morsel of elk pemmican. The soft soil of the roadbank was still cold from winter's grip. Spring tended to be uncomfortably indecisive at the edge of the Modoc Plateau. The air was warm enough now, but Ben knew from years of experience, as well as from the night before, that the setting sun would take the day's warmth along with it. He intended to soak up as much of it as he could for as long as he could. In the meantime, he still had work to do, even while on break.

A slight rise about a mile south of Hilt Road gave Ben an excellent view of the Shastan border checkpoint beneath the overpass that was part of the interchange. He was ever so glad to have his own internal spyglass.

“What do you see?” said Phil.

“So far,” said Ben, “just a bunch of talking. Too much shadow to read their lips, though.”

“They’d better hurry up and do something. Someone's going to notice us and we can't take lunch forever.”

“Great,” said Karen. “Forty-hour work-week died years ago and we still can't milk our breaks. So now what?”


“That's good, right?” said Phil.

“Depends on your point of view,” said Karan.

“Time to move,” said Ben tensely.

Each of them finished whatever they were eating and washed it down with a few swallows of water. Then they slung their packs back onto their shoulders and put arrows to the string. Fortunately, everyone did that, so it wouldn't be out of place and was unlikely to be taken as a posture of aggression. Phil put two arrows to his string, something that few could do effectively and which might not help things. They were still woefully outnumbered, so neither of his companions said anything.

They covered half the distance in ten minutes.

“Keep your distance,” said Ben, “just don't make it look like you're trying to keep your distance.”

“What?” said Karan.

“I don't know,” said Ben, “fly casual.”

Phil chuckled. “Still with the Star Wars, eh?”

“Can't beat a classic.”

“Seriously, though,” said Karan. “He has a point. We still have to look like just another group of
travelers.”

“So who’s going to do the talking?” said Phil.

“Not me,” said Ben.

“But you're so good at it...disarming and all.”

“I hate it.”

“Alright, you two,” said Karan. “You know the drill.”

Ben and Phil sighed, then turned to each other and took their hands from their bow strings. They shook their fists at each other three times before holding out a sign.

“Paper disproves Spock!” said Phil. “I win!”

“Dangit,” said Ben.

“You know,” said Karan, “it might mix things up a bit if you'd stop putting up Spock.”

“Hrmph,” said Ben.

They could see the bandits' caravan pulling ahead up the grade.

“They'll keep her safe, right?” said Ben.

Karan exhaled. “Ben, you're a smart guy. And you know your optimism...and your brother's and your dad's...has kept us all sane, don't get me wrong. But sometimes you're clueless.”

“Huh?” said Ben.

“Don't you get it?” said Karan. “The girl was hush money!”

Ben looked at her and kept walking.

“She might be right,” said Phil.

“Of course I'm right,” said Karan. “We have to get her back...at all costs...and I mean all.”

“Don't worry,” said Ben casually, “we will.”

“I don't think,” said Karan, “you realize just how much trouble she's in.”

“Um...” said Ben.

“What are the two things in Hilt these days? Exactly. And do I need to remind either of you of what it was I did before the Change? Didn't think so. So you know I know what I'm talking about.”

“You think you can talk them into giving her up?” said Phil.

“No,” said Karan, “not really.”

“Then what...?”

“You can't be serious,” said Phil.

“Dead serious. Which is what she'll be from the moment they start in on her. That girl's thirteen years old! She hasn't even had her first period. It'll kill her, body and soul. And if they put her in the brothel to learn first, which I doubt, her soul's just as dead, believe me. No, boys, I am not going to stand before the Throne and explain to Almighty God why I didn't do everything in my power to save that little girl! Trust me, I can take it. She can't.”

“There has to be another way,” said Ben.

“If you can think of one,” said Karan, “be my guest. 'Cause I'm not thrilled about it either. I know what I left and I never want to go back. But there's no way I'm letting that girl go there...no way in hell.”

Ben growled under his breath and scowled furiously. He knew Karan was right and that she was throwing herself on the wire. He sighed. “Greater love has no one than this, to lay down their life for their brother...sister.”

“Damned straight,” said Karan.

Ben didn't know if Karan would actually survive what she was implying would happen. But he knew Jayne wouldn't and he knew they all agreed that she could not, under any circumstances, be allowed to endure that.

“Whatever happens,” said Karan, “the moment...and I mean that...the instant you have her, you get the hell out, you hear me? Do not, under any circumstances, let them keep her! Her safety and that of the other children is our only concern. If you don't find me on the usual route during migration, come break me out later if you can.”

“Who died and put you in charge?” said Phil.

“Shut up, Phil,” growled Karan.

“I...you...” stammered Phil. “Karan, I love you!”

All three of them faltered slightly in their steps before regaining their strides.

“Excuse me?” said Karan.

“I love you. Please don’t do this.”

“Now you tell me. Phil, this isn't negotiable. And you both have a quarter mile to come up with something better.”

The Hunt trio had to restrain themselves as they covered the last quarter mile. Jayne could easily be halfway to Hilt already. They were met by a man wearing the standard Shastan kit that closely resembled Roman armor, but with furs and woolens that made them look like Visigoths after the sacking of Rome.

Ben had always found it odd that the Baron of Yreka had chosen that, considering that the Shastan army's fighting style was almost as far from Roman tactics as it could be. Though he supposed it wasn't as though Shasta had ever fought a real army anyway. Skirmishes with Klamath Falls and random bandits didn't exactly count. Rumor had it, however, that open war between Shasta and coastal Allyshia was inevitable, so it would only be a matter of time before function began to follow form a lot more closely.
“Busy today, eh?” said the man. Ben recognized the mark of a Lieutenant on the man's forehead—commissioned officers were in it for life.

Ben shrugged. “I suppose.”

“In a hurry?”

“Nah.” That wasn't entirely true, nor was it really a lie. “Through-hiking speed.”

The man laughed. “Man, there ain't been through-hikers fer ten years!” The Lieutenant had clearly been the redneck type before the Change and apparently still was.

“No, the usual kind, no,” said Ben.

“Where y'all headed?”

“North.”

“North where?” The guy was persistent.

“As far as...”

“Ben? BEN!” It was Jayne. One of the soldiers held her up against the far side of one of the overpass pylons.

Hunt bows and Yreka cross-bows all went up. Phil held his horizontally, each of his arrows trained on a different soldier.

“I'd move along if I was you,” said the Lieutenant.

“Let her go,” said Phil.

“I think not.”

“So it would seem.”

“Either you let her go,” said Karan, pointing her arrow straight at the Lieutenant's head, “or you die.”

For a couple of minutes, no one moved except for Jayne, who struggled persistently. “I can't hold this forever and at this range, I don't miss.”

“Now, that could be a problem for all of us,” said the Lieutenant. “That girl there's compensation.”

“She's a human being,” said Ben. “She's not property...yours or anyone else's.”

“Oh, I disagree. She's property, alright. And we're all gonna take a little piece, aren't we, boys?”

At that, Jayne started crying and screaming and making even more of a scene.

“I swear to God,” said Karan, “if you touch her I will end you.”

“This doesn't have to end in violence,” said Ben.

“And it won't,” said the Lieutenant, “if y'all just walk away.”

“Not an option, soldier,” said Karan. “She comes with us right now, or you die. End of story.”

“Ya know, I could just kill the lot of you and keep the girl anyway.”
“And at least four of you would die...you included. Or are you feeling lucky?”

The Lieutenant tipped his head back and laughed. “You've got guts, I'll give ya that. I like you. So what'd ya say to...a prisoner exchange? The girl...for you?”

A pregnant pause ensued.

“Fine,” said Karan at length. “The moment she's here with us, we'll stand down and you can take me...but not a moment before.”

The Lieutenant turned and whistled. The man who'd been restraining Jayne, albeit barely, brought her forward. Ben had always thought it interesting how closely a wriggling child resembled a greased piglet. He nodded toward the man, who in turn shoved the girl roughly forward. Ben caught her. The Lieutenant cocked an expectant eyebrow.

Karan stepped backward and lowered her bow. Phil nudged one of his arrows to train it on the Lieutenant. Karan handed her bow to Jayne, who took it wide-eyed, but wasted no time drawing it. It wasn't a full draw, but it would still be effective at point-blank range. Without another word, Karan shrugged off her pack and stepped forward. Ben, Phil, and Jayne slowly retreated.

They didn't wait to see what was happening to Karan, though the sounds told them more than they wanted to know. Ben kept glancing nervously over his shoulder the whole first quarter mile.

“Think they'll honor it?” said Phil.

“Not really,” said Ben.


“You don't want to know, sweetie,” said Phil.

“She sacrificed herself, didn't she? To save me.”

“Yeah,” said Ben, “something like that.”

“She...she...”

“I'd think about something else,” said Phil. “Are they following us yet?”

“No,” said Ben. “I think they're...distracted.”

“Dammit,” said Phil.

“Don't say that,” said Jayne. “Dad says it's bad manners.”

“Well, yeah, but he's not here.”

“He's right, though,” said Ben.

They spent the next half-mile in silence.

“What are we gonna do now?” said Jayne.

“Phil,” said Ben, “when we reach the Lemos Road junction, we'll take it east. Once we cross the tracks, I want you and Jayne to head off cross-country. Make for the Jorgensens. Jayne, you'll be safe there 'till the others arrive.”
“And you?” said Phil.

“I’ll continue up Lemos and then follow the drainage up to the crest. Then the quest continues. Phil, come after me when you can. Jayne, we need you to tell us everything you know about those guys. Who are they? Where are they going? What are their habits? Everything.”

Jayne took a deep breath, let it back out, then spilled her guts. Most of what she said was unsurprising.

The men made up a band of opportunists. They acted as raiders, armed escorts, mercenaries, and so forth. They went wherever the winds took them, “land pirates,” she called them. They’d apparently started somewhere far to the south, along the way attracting people tired of the grind and eager for gold and glory.

Ben sighed. It was the same story as always, just told in a different way. It was the way things had been even before the Industrial Revolution. After that, the pursuit of gold and glory had taken on other forms, and then again with the coming of the Digital Age. When that had abruptly died nearly ten years before, the survivors had been left shaken to their cores.

He’d heard it said many times, both before the Change and since, that what does not kill you makes you stronger. He suspected it could also just as easily drive one mad. In any case, it apparently drove people to restlessness. He didn’t think he could blame such people for that. How many bankers-turned-hunter-gatherers or managers-turned-fishermen or teachers-turned-farmers, who’d led fairly comfortable middle- or upper-class American lives could say they were happier after the Change? There were sure to be a few--mostly those who’d hated their jobs, had otherwise felt trapped in the rat-race, or had realized they’d allowed their trappings to blind them to what was truly important in life--but Ben knew from personal experience that many of them were still deeply resentful that their lives had been so rudely and irrevocably torn from them.

The bandits had a strong enough hierarchy, but most of the men were rather loose-lipped. It apparently hadn’t occurred to them that the children they’d captured had been listening. The four Hunt children weren’t the only ones, either. There’d been three others at the time of the raid and two more had been quietly abducted during the trip up the Klamath River. They’d sold Juan at Randolf and planned to go all the way to Portland. Jayne didn’t know if they intended to take all the remaining children that far. Their plans were otherwise too loose. Ben thought it likely that they’d sell them if, when, and where it was advantageous to do so. He was reassured to hear that Jacob was being fiercely protective of Hemiona and that nothing had happened to either of them, save for a slap or two and being bound and gagged. He was also amused that they were apparently afraid of Hemiona, which had something to do with the way she tended to look at certain people with those huge eyes of hers. He feared that might not last long enough.

Ben glanced over his shoulder again as they reached the same rise where they’d rested earlier. “Uh-oh,” he said.

“What?” said Phil.

“High ground,” said Ben. “Now!”

The trio scrambled up the slope rising from the east side of the road. They reached the railroad tracks and looked back northward. Several horses galloped in their direction.

“You think they’re after us?” said Phil.

“You think they aren’t?” said Ben.
“I’m scared,” said Jayne. “Again.”

“Follow me,” said Ben. He took off along the railroad, bounding from tie to tie and taking two of them at a time. Phil and Jayne struggled to keep up.

The tracks curved up a wash, crossed it, then curved back southward. They’d lost sight of parts of the highway. The horses suddenly appeared, having bounded up from the road. They reined in briefly, then lit out along the tracks.

“Up!” said Ben and they scrambled up the slope toward a thicket of western juniper and still-leafless black oak. They each found a large tree and crouched behind its trunk. It was difficult to both remain completely hidden, yet also maintain a visual on their pursuers. A knot of Ceanothus would have been much better. It wouldn’t have provided much, if any, shielding from projectiles, but it would have made covert surveillance much easier.

It wasn’t long before the first of the horses had caught up. A bolt buried itself in the tree bark near Ben’s head. He flinched slightly. An arrow answered from behind him. Ben heard a gurgling scream. He peeked out as one of the horsemen scrabbled at his neck, blood spraying out around his fingers, then toppled from his horse.

More horses arrived and more bolts flew. Most of them came perilously close to hitting him, Phil, or Jayne, the thock-buzz of bolts hitting trees hanging menacingly in the air.

Ben drew, stepped out, and loosed. He waited only long enough for his follow-through before stepping back behind the tree. He heard the scream of a horse, then another, and then a muffled cry of pain, followed by some yelling. As that faded, the ratcheting noise of a cross-bow being spanned reached Ben’s ears. Then...nothing.

The silence stretched on for what felt like five minutes. Ben almost didn’t dare to so much as breathe. At least it wasn’t like an old Western movie. It took some time to reload a cross-bow. Suddenly, he heard the distinctive tuunng of the cross-bow, followed almost immediately by Jayne's high-pitched scream. Ben stepped out, drew, and planted an arrow in the soldier's face. Then he turned toward Jayne.

Phil was already with her. Ben raced to join them, taking the several yards in just a few large bounds.

There was a lot of blood, all of it on one side of Jayne's head. She held her hand against it, the spaces between her fingers bloody. She was screaming and crying.

Ben looked at Phil and then jerked his head back toward the tracks. Phil looked in that direction for a few moments, then shook his head. Ben reached up, gently grasped Jayne's hand, then pulled on it. She cried some more, refusing to relax.

“Jayney?” said Ben. She kept crying. “Jayne! Look at me!” She did, tears streaming down her face, her eyes wide with terror. “I need you to move your hand.” She shook her head. “Jayney,” he said gently, yet firmly, “that’s the only way I can see how bad it is and it’s the only way I can help. Okay?”

Jayne paused, but then nodded slightly and relaxed her hand. Ben gently moved it away, turned her head, and surveyed the damage.

“Am I dying?” she asked tearfully.

“Not today, sweetie,” said Ben.
“It hurts.”

“It sliced your ear in half.” Jayne began to hyperventilate. “Jayne? Look at me. It's not fatal...not even remotely. You'll be fine.”

“But...” she said.

“Don't worry,” said Phil, “you'll have a really nice battle scar.” Jayne furrowed her brow. Phil smiled. “Boys love that sort of thing.” Jayne smiled weakly.

Ben shrugged out of his pack and brought out his water bladder. “This will hurt a little more,” he said, “but I have to wash it off.”

Jayne nodded and braced herself. She winced and more tears trickled down her face as Ben dribbled some of the water over her ear. “The good news is that it's a nice, clean slice. Ears are all cartilage and blood vessels. It'll heal nicely.”

“Except for the scar?”

“Yeh,” said Ben, “except for that. It probably won't even knit together, though.”

“What's the bad news? Except that now I'll be ugly.”

“Nonsense,” said Ben. “Are lightning scars on trees ugly?”

“No. They're...kind of artistic.”

“Same thing here,” said Ben.

“Oh.”

“The bad news is that this water isn't exactly sterile. I took it from the top inch of slackwater, so the sun's UV should have done the trick, but there's still a chance of infection. It'll probably bleed some more, but that's good.”

“Because bleeding helps clean it out, right?”

“That's right. Phil will keep an eye on it. If it isn't infected by the time you reach the Jorgensens' place, it probably won't be at all.”

Ben turned to Phil. “Once you've dropped her off...”

“Yeah,” he interrupted, “go after Juan.”

Ben nodded, then turned to Jayne. “Good shooting, by the way.” A groan from somewhere toward the tracks caught their attention. “Time to go.”

A couple of hours later, they stood on the rough bed of Lemos Rd. where it crossed the creek. Ben gave them both hugs. “How's the ear?”

“Still burns.”

Ben peered at it. It had bled some more, but was now caked over with dried, but clean-looking blood. It seemed to be scabbing over quite nicely. Ben resisted the urge to prod at it, which would have been unnecessary anyway. He smiled. “She'll be a beaut,” he said.
Jayne smiled weakly.

Ben hugged them both. He looked at Phil. “Keep her secret, keep her safe.” At that, he turned and took off up the valley toward Pilot Rock.
Ashland, Oregon
March 5, CY 9, 2021 AD

Ben sat on one end of the concrete apron retaining wall that held the railroad embankment as it crossed Pacific Highway, formerly Interstate-5, munching on a pemmican cake. His eyes and mind played over the ways things had changed since he'd last driven that road nearly a decade before.

Between the junction of Highway 99 and Siskiyou Summit, all the concrete median barriers had been removed. Many of the steel guard rails had also been unbolted from their posts and hauled off. Along the few places where the road cut into the soil and rock, only what looked like a few seasons' worth of landslide debris rested on the verge. Vegetation had been cut back well away from the road, even further than it had been before the Change, probably to make it harder for enemies to slink along it unnoticed. Last but not least, the Hwy. 99 overpass had been demolished, rusting and bent rebar remaining at each end of where it had once spanned I-5.

A small flock of sheep grazed on the sward between railroad and asphalt. Beyond that and to the east, farmland filled the Neil and Emigrant Creek valleys. Emigrant Lake's cold, slate-blue waters still sat behind an earthen dam that hadn't yet failed.

Dozens of concrete median blocks had been stacked at the south-bound on-ramp from Hwy. 99. They were clearly meant to be a barrier to casual wheeled conveyances. They wouldn't pose much impediment to foot or horse traffic, but that probably wasn't the point. A well-built, hand-painted sign bearing the words, “NO ASHLAND ACCESS” said it all.

Gazing northward under the railroad bridge, Ben could see all the way to the junction with Hwy. 66. It looked a little more built-up than he remembered. He washed down the last of his meal, shouldered his pack, picked up his bow, and trudged onward.

He passed more sheep grazing along the median, all oblivious to his presence. He nodded to a woman on horseback and another youth, also on horseback. They were probably the shepherds. They nodded back.

A tall stone tower, easily three stories high and built out of an assortment of concrete and stone, stood on the north side of Tolman Creek. A flag, green with something white on it, fluttered from its crenelated battlements. The glint of sunlight off of helm and spear-point, and a pale plume of fire smoke told him all he needed to know.

He kept his eye on it, relying more on his peripheral vision than on a more obvious direct gaze, a useful skill in the Changed world. Naturally, everyone knew he'd be watching, which made such things into a life-and-death game of chess.

He fondly recalled how much he'd loved the game before the Change. Since then, it had been a tool to develop and hone long-term strategic thinking skills.

The creek itself had been cleared of all vegetation, its course bound on both banks by stone and concrete debris. On the north side, and merging with the tower, rose a two-story curtain wall of pieced-together rubble. That had probably been where all the rockfall from further south had gone.

The road bed rose to pass over Crowson Rd., then dipped back down into a canyon formed by high walls on either side. In some places, those were the pre-Change concrete noise barriers, probably
reinforced. In others, the walls were built of dressed stone, no doubt locally quarried.

As Ben approached the junction with Hwy. 66, he stopped, then let out a low whistle. He remembered there being a standard interchange, with the lesser road crossing above the freeway and on and off ramps controlling the traffic. What stood before him looked like it had jumped out of an Errol Flynn movie.

The ramps were still there and looking very much like they always had. The chain link fencing that had bounded the road above had been replaced with corrugated sheet metal mounted vertically. Gaps showed between the sheets, just wide enough for arrow fire. Through the gaps, he could see occasional motion from soldiers or traffic.

At the top of each ramp, a massive block house stood. Ben could make out the darkened charcoal-grey of basalt, lighter grey of limestone, greasy-looking serpentinite, and orange peridotite dressed stones that composed the fortifications. In each tower, the teeth of steel portcullis jutted out from above.

From each tower hung a banner, green with a bust of William Shakespeare in white. It figured, though whose idea that had been was likely to be a matter of opinion and he didn't doubt that any inquiry would lead to a fist-fight.

There were only two options. Either his quarry had stopped in Ashland, or they'd just passed through along the road. Given the amount of other traffic, he was reasonably sure their thermal signature would be obscured, at least until somewhere north of the city. There was really only one thing to do.

Ben relaxed the tension on his bow, then instinctively walked up the right-hand ramp. He noticed a distinct warming as he left the cooler, heavier air below. A pair of guards in hauberks, boiled leather plate, and conical steel helms stepped up to him. Both eyed him with open suspicion.

He decided to play the not-too-bright wanderer. “Uh...hey,” he said.

“Straw,” said one of the men.

“What?” said Ben, ignoring the obvious play on words.

The other elbowed the first in the side with a dull clank. The second cleared his throat. “Who goest there?” he said.

Ben shrugged. “No one in particular. Just headed north.”

“Whither thou goest within?”

Ben blinked. Elizabethan English? Seriously? “Um...well, I'm not sure yet.” That much was true, if the wagon carrying the children was only an hour ahead of him. If they hadn't entered the gates, he'd be wasting his time looking for them in Ashland.

“Wherefore?”

“Pretty much just exploring. You, uh, don't get many travelers this way this time of year, do you?”

One guard shook his head. “Nay. Thou art the first to approach these gates since the snows cleared.”

That was interesting. “Oh,” said Ben. He turned to leave.

“Hold!” said one soldier.
Ben froze, then looked over his shoulder. “Sorry,” he said, “I'm not much of a city guy. I prefer the open road. That okay?”

The soldiers looked at each other, then one made a sweeping motion that Ben took to mean he was free to go. He slid down the embankment and back to the road bed. There was a little standing water beneath the overpass and the air was chilly. He picked up his pace a little, more to warm up again than anything.

The man-made canyon continued until the road cleared the Main St. overpass, itself retrofitted just like Hwy. 66. Then the fortifications ended at Hamilton Creek with another three-story tower. Only when he'd passed out of bow-shot did he pause to look behind him.

A dirigible sank toward the air field off to the southeast. Smoke from cooking fires drifted up in a hundred places both from within Ashland's walls and about the valley. As he trudged along, he could see the city wall trailing along the far side of Bear Creek.

He passed an abandoned weigh station, then another interchange. Those were going to be a persistent problem. A limited-access main thoroughfare like I-5 was likely to be heavily traveled between Ashland and points north. That meant multiple opportunities to lose his quarry.

The asphalt leading northward was noticeably warmer than the offramp, so he kept going, picking up his pace a little. After a while, he crested a low rise and caught sight of the distinct off-white canvas of a covered wagon. He grinned. It had to be them. Medford was still ahead, but he'd deal with that later.
Chapter 5

Medford ruins, Oregon
March 6, CY 9, 2021 AD

Ben Hunt lurked beneath the low-hanging boughs of a ponderosa pine a stone's throw from the South Medford offramp, chewing on a stout dandelion root. He took a swallow of water and shuddered. He'd forgotten how much abandoned cities gave him the creeps.

The people of Ashland had left their fingerprints all over Medford just as much as the Change itself had. About a mile behind him, goats grazed on what appeared to have been a golf course. Those same goats were probably responsible for controlling the blackberries that tended to spring up along any road's verge. Just to the north of that, a large housing development lay in charred ruins.

There'd been a time when Ben would have called the freeway eerily empty. If not for the tufts of grass and other weeds clinging tenaciously to cracks, the road might have been laid just that morning. But in the Changed world, a clear road was a sign of civilization, that someone had gone to the effort of hauling away dead vehicles. A several-car pileup beneath the overpass marked the spot where Ashland had stopped clearing the road. Heavy soot marred the concrete.

Ben shoved his water back into his pack, then picked up his bow and trudged up the offramp to what a green sign still identified as Highland Drive.

Nearly every building within Ben's field of view showed evidence of fire. In some places, entire blocks or neighborhoods had been reduced to charred and blackened rubble. In others, the noncombustible portions of a structure still stood, but scorched and soot-marked. A few small islands of green remained unburnt.

The causes of those fires were probably the usual ones. Some had probably started the night of the Change as burning fuel from cars and planes had caught other things on fire. Others had likely been caused by careless people trying to heat their homes or cook over open flames in their kitchens, or even by careful people unused to lighting by candle power.

To the west of the freeway, only broken concrete rectangles marked where commercial buildings had been. Gone were the dead vehicles that should have littered the streets. Gone were the bones of people killed in collisions or Year-One violence. Gone were power lines and poles. Gone were most of the buildings that had once stood as islands in the midst of asphalt parking lots.

Thinking back to the day before, it wasn't difficult to deduce where those buildings had gone. Clearly, Ashland had been hard at work mining Medford.

Beyond that, maybe a half mile off, the familiar wagon and several riders made their way slowly along what Ben guessed to be Hwy. 99. That road paralleled I-5. He briefly wondered if anyone would remember that 99 had once been the Pacific Highway before the Interstate had been built.

Ben sighed, then strolled over to the northbound onramp and back into what felt like one of those post-apocalyptic movies some of his friends had liked back in his high school and college days. Little had he known then that he'd one day be living in a post-apocalyptic world.

He cast an eye at the snarl of twisted, scorched metal beneath Highland Drive. The boxy end of a tractor-trailer protruded from the shadow, its back doors hanging open. Ben didn't bother to look inside. Anything of value had most certainly been plundered long ago. A cargo van lay on its side,
the nose of an SUV snug up against it. A sports car, two sedans, a station wagon, and another SUV sat nose-to-tail right behind the first SUV, all their hoods crumpled up and windows broken. Some of the other vehicles in the south-bound lanes had managed to brake to a stop, their doors still standing open.

At the foot of the north-bound onramp, a pair of SUV's sat jammed together, a FedEx delivery truck wedged against them. All three vehicles were heavily charred. Ben hopped the concrete barriers and onto the north-bound lanes.

What followed were several miles of brutal deja-vu. The Change had happened on the tail end of Rush Hour. Traffic had thinned out enough to allow near-normal freeway speeds, but there had still been enough lingering congestion that stalling vehicles had resulted in chain-reaction collisions. He'd seen it multiple times while crossing the Valley and almost always along the fringes where traffic congestion had been halfway between open-road and city conditions or where a highway had encountered a city's outermost set of traffic lights.

Most of the dead vehicles were empty, their doors hanging open where occupants had abandoned their cars, and glass broken where impatient looters had later searched for anything valuable. A few, however, held pale white skeletons, still restrained by their seat belts, but long ago picked clean by scavengers, clothing and hair still clinging in rags and patches. Ben prayed that their deaths had been swift.

Ben wove back and forth around vehicles, some by themselves, and others bound together in multi-car collisions, sometimes having to climb over them. Tires had long ago deflated, wind-blown soil gathering around them and held there by tenacious grasses and weeds. In some places, old oil still stained the road.

Through the smashed window of a BMW, a field mouse peeked out over the lower teeth of a slack-jawed skull. Robins and juncos flitted about the bare branches of scorched conifers hanging over charred concrete barriers, completely oblivious to the de facto human graveyard.

After a half mile or so, the highway climbed up to an elevated section. From there, Ben had an even better view of the carnage. To the west lay the older part of town, not yet mined for concrete, rebar, and wire, though Ben suspected salvage teams had combed the city thoroughly. To the east, and beyond Old Town's commercial buildings, stretched burned-out residential areas.

Hwy. 99 was much closer. It was so close, in fact, that Ben could easily hear the steady clop-clop-clop of hooves. Which meant that he'd have to be more cautious. He stopped behind an SUV and centered himself. He was running a marathon and so long as he kept his quarry within sight or sound, that would have to be good enough for the time being.

Keeping low and using smooth, economical motions, Ben ghosted from one stalled vehicle to another, using each one as cover. In a couple of places, all four lanes were blocked, forcing him to hop up onto the concrete median. In another, a bus had broken through the outer concrete barrier and hung partway out in space, its paint peeled, blistered, and scorched, a few white skulls visible through broken windows.

A block from what a sign still identified as a Red Lion Inn and Suites, a section of road had collapsed. That had no doubt been why Ashland had abandoned I-5 as a route through Medford. Though why the mess between the break and Highland Drive remained untouched was unclear. Perhaps some outspoken philosopher at SOU had made a case for leaving it as a sort of monument to the Change. Ben wouldn't have put it past them. He knelt down next to a burned pickup truck and surveyed the damage.
Between the Interstate and Hwy. 99, the remains of the motel in question still stood, the clear evidence of rampant fire still obvious. The buildings had burned down to charred rubble, dozens of charred cars and trucks sat in their parking spaces, and a few skeletons sprawled here and there among the wreckage, some still whole, others dismembered.

Young black locust and cottonwood saplings grew up among dead trees at the edge of a creek. Its waters roiled over and around chunks of concrete and metal where the flow backed up into a pond. Directly below him, more concrete and asphalt clung to the twisted rebar reinforcement as two yards of it bent downward before giving way to open space. Across the break, a great slab tilted downward at what looked like a forty-five degree angle.

Beneath that, blocks of concrete leaned against one another. On that rested the rusted hulks of several vehicles, including a tractor-trailer and a cement truck. On top of that sat the twisted mass of a Leer jet. Everything was scorched. Even the asphalt showed frozen blisters from where it had been melted. Ben was sure the road had been designed to take a beating, but a falling aircraft was basically a bomb. While jet fuel no longer exploded, it still burned hot and the resulting fire, coupled with the force of the impact and years of weathering, had simply been too much.

Ben snorted, then scanned the wreckage for potential climbing routes. Dropping straight down was out of the question. The road bed was at least two stories high. Even if he were to try using the pond to break his fall, the water was unlikely to be deep enough and there was certain to be some unseen piece of submerged debris waiting to sever an artery or break a bone or three.

None of the rubble from the road had piled up more than a couple of yards. The long box of a semi-truck's trailer leaned against the concrete pylon beneath his feet. That still left him with a one-story drop onto a small, nearly-vertical target set back by at least a yard. At best, he'd hit the trailer about a quarter of the way back and then slide more or less straight down onto rocks and twisted metal, leaving him with a sprained ankle or worse.

Ben took the arrow from his string and returned it to its quiver. Then he pulled out a piece of pemmican, sat down beside the broken concrete median, and ate while waiting for the wagon and horses to retreat to what he hoped would be out of earshot.

When he'd finished his food and felt satisfied, he pulled on a pair of cowhide gloves and slung his bow around his body. He disliked doing that, but it was the only way to carry it and leave both hands free. He inched out toward the very edge of the break, his footing swaying slightly with every step. All of the protruding rebar was thankfully bent downward. All he needed to do was execute a standing long-jump of just over three yards, enough to clear the space and land at least at the edge of the wing, if not near the center of the bent tip section. He didn't want to think about what grabbing it on his way down was likely to do to his shoulders.

He took a few deep breaths, then flexed his knees, recalling his track and field days back in high
school and hoping that some things just weren't easily forgotten. He swung his arms a couple of
times, then, letting their weight pull him forward he leaned and shoved off with his legs. The surface
swayed and cracked slightly. Then he was out in empty space, falling and flying.

He hit the wing tip square on center, his feet slamming into the hollow metal with a dull boom that
seemed far louder than it probably was. He let his legs and knees absorb whatever force wasn't
transferred into the springy metal. The whole thing sagged slightly downward.

Instead of springing back upright, it kept going. The dull screech of bending and rending aluminum
filled his ears. He threw himself forward, grabbing for the edge of the larger portion of wing. The tip
fell away, leaving him hanging in mid-air. He cringed. That was bound to have been audible for over
a mile.

Ben craned his head around to look below him. He could probably attempt a drop, but the footing
looked incredibly uncertain. Instead, he turned his attention to the wing itself. He'd have to either pull
himself up over the jagged break, or swing around leading edge.

The pull-up option might have given him more traction, but those edges were dangerous. He could
already feel them pressing painfully into his gloves. He swung his body gently to one side, then used
the pendulum momentum to swing his leg around the wing's edge. He quickly shifted one hand to
the upper side of the break and heaved. Slowly, the rest of his body slid around and onto the steep
upper incline.

He hung there for a few moments, catching his breath before glancing downward. The wing met the
plane's fuselage a yard from an engine's intake. Taking note of the various protrusions from the
wing's surface, he twisted himself around and slid on his left hip, praying his pack wouldn't snag
anything on the way down.

His boots met the plane's outer hull with a dull thud that reminded him of nothing so much as landing
on a hollow log. He lay back against the wing for several moments, catching his breath and plotting
his route.

The fuselage had broken in several places. The nose and flight deck were nowhere to be seen. Other
fragments lay littered about. Even the section on which his feet rested had shorn away. He winced,
suddenly aware that he was sitting on what amounted to a mass grave.

Ben shimmied along to the wing's edge, then picked his way between the engine exhaust and a
broken tail section, the fire-scorched stabilizer resting at a sickening angle. Reaching the hinged
section of road, he scrambled up it, using the broken concrete edge barrier as hand holds and
thankful for the rough road surface. Jumping the yard-wide gap at the top was almost a simple
matter. Then he sat down heavily beside an overturned minivan and sucked down some more water,
listening to the gentle rushing of the creek below and the melodious call of a redwing blackbird.

Hours later, he sat at the foot of an unnamed hill north of Central Point with his back against a
gnarled madrone and gnawing on a piece of elk jerky. He shuddered, then took another draught of
creek water.

He recalled something about how cattle and sheep had once outnumbered people in the Rogue
Valley. That had been shortly before gold and the railroad had sparked a population boom. In the
aftermath of the Change, that had again become true as fields of bovines and sheep stretched out
between Pacific Highway and the mountains that bounded the valley.

Ben hadn't seen any signs of human habitation from the freeway, though it had to be there
somewhere. On the other hand, if the entire north end of the valley were only grazing land, there was
really no reason for maintaining permanent settlements. Still, he doubted the meager fields near Ashland could grow enough food to feed that city's population. No, there was plenty of other land between the hill at his back and Ashland that was likely planted with wheat, barley, oats, and the like. There always was.

Ben let his eyes slide over the dead vehicles resting on the road's verge. He'd been spoiled, he supposed, and he'd have to once again grow accustomed to that particular sight. In the meantime, he had a job to do.
Chapter 6

Valley of the Rogue State Park
March 7, CY 9, 2021 AD

Not much had changed overnight. Two small campfires in the depths of what had once been the Valley of the Rogue State Park had burned down to dull embers. For that, Ben was grateful. Few things killed one's night vision like gazing into a flame, something that was doubly true with him.

He glanced at the sky, barely beginning its transition from night black to the navy of pre-dawn twilight. If he was going to do anything other than more watching, he had an hour at most in which to do it.

Ben toggled on his infrared vision. A lone patrolman walked slowly along the road that ran beneath the span of Pacific Highway—once designated Interstate 5--on the opposite bank of the Rogue River, apparently oblivious to Ben's presence.

That was a relief, though not entirely unexpected. The man was probably patrolling that bit of road more on principle. It was the route to and from the north-bound freeway, at least for those traveling by vehicle, then continued across a set of railroad tracks to a minor road that ran along the base of the hills rising sharply to the east.

No, anyone who might cause the bandits trouble would approach along the freeway, then hop the guard rails and charge straight into the park.

The park itself had been divided into two sections. One had been the State Park. The other had been a rest area for motorists traveling along I-5. That distinction had become thoroughly moot in the wake of the Change.

The bandits had set up camp in the middle of a large grove of trees in the rest area portion. And why not? There was little need to go any further and there was plenty of space.

That in itself was a minor miracle. While Ben's field of view was partially obscured by vegetation, it was still obvious that no one had bothered to clear the site since the night of the Change. At least, it didn't look like it. Even as he had crept up to his hiding place beneath the bridge the evening before, he'd seen dozens of vehicles sitting where they'd apparently died a decade before. He shuddered at the thought of the children having endured a night in a graveyard.

Still, the right lanes of the freeway in both directions had been cleared. That alone meant someone had used the road as a travel route some time in the past decade. Which meant it was possible they'd also used the rest area as, well, a rest area. If they did, then maybe they'd done something with whatever dead bodies they'd found. Ben could only hope.

In the meantime, he had some decisions to make. It had occurred to him that he probably couldn't simply trail his quarry indefinitely. His goal was to retrieve the children and their captors weren't just going to hand them over if he were to walk up and ask them nicely. He'd have to force their hands. But how?

There weren't many options. In fact, there were essentially two. One was to acquire the children back from customers. The trouble with that was that such people were likely to be just as unscrupulous as their kidnappers. Not to mention that Ben had little he could use as trade. Oh, and there was the matter of buying his own children back, to which he strenuously objected on principle.
The other was to reduce the number of the enemy. That had its own problems. He could rely on the age-old strategy of letting someone else weaken his enemy before moving in and finishing the job with much reduced risk. Or he could systematically prune them himself. Or a little of both.

Ben sighed, his breath a bright plume in his infrared vision. He hated killing people in cold blood. In a sense, though, he was already at war with the men across the river.

In fluid motions, he rose from his crouching position and padded softly out from beneath the bridge. He paused before crossing the gravel verge and hopping over the rusted guard rail and onto cracked asphalt. He crouched there for several moments, watching. The sentry sitting on the concrete median at the far side gave no indication he'd seen or heard anything.

Ben continued, relying on the rushing of the water below to mask his footfalls. He moved carefully from one vehicle to the next, eyes always on both the ground and on the other end of the span, ears open for nearby sounds.

He paused again two car-lengths from where the pavement transitioned back to asphalt, three from the man on sentry. Ben had left his unstrung bow with his pack beneath the bridge where he’d slept. He could easily have shot every single one of them in the dark. The thought had crossed his mind more than once and he still maintained it as an option.

But the element of surprise wouldn't last long, no matter what. He rested a hand on his knife, then thought better of it. Instead, he reached for a tranquilizer dart he'd prepared with several rather nasty poisons, and held it ready.

Sneaking around the remaining two vehicles, he paused again as the sentry pivoted off the barrier, looked southward, and yawned. Again, there'd been no sign he'd been seen.

Ben searched his opponent for weak points. Sturdy leather boots, or possibly moccasins, came up over his knees to stop mid-thigh. Hard leather armor protected legs, arms, and torso. Another leather flange hung from a steel helm and guarded the back of the neck. But there were always vulnerable spots. The face, front of the neck, under the arm, inside of the elbow, the back of the knee, and the leg between the top of boot and bottom of leather skirting were all potential targets. Ben's goal was to stick the man someplace that wouldn't be obvious, which ruled out the face and neck.

Ben took another slow breath, held it, then slowly let it out again, letting the water vapor dissipate before continuing. The man turned toward the camp and Ben sprang. Two strides, and he nearly collided. He reached around and clamped a gloved hand across nose and mouth. In the same motion, he reached down and jammed the needle into the back of the man's knee. He held it for two seconds, before pulling it back out.

The struggling stopped ten seconds later and Ben carefully lowered the body to the ground. He wiped saliva off his glove onto the man's clothing, then stowed the dart. He remained motionless for a few moments before fading back into the darkness.

Ben waited until the bandits had rounded the bend in the highway before rising from his hiding place among the trees growing in the median. He walked back across the bridge, stopping near its northern end.

The man he'd poisoned in the morning twilight still lay on the ground. He'd been stripped of his armor and most of his clothing and left lying on his face. Apparently his companions had concluded that he'd simply DFO'd—Done Fell Over—and had salvaged everything usable before moving on.
That they hadn't bothered with anything resembling funeral rites, instead leaving the body like so much discarded refuse, bothered Ben. He supposed there was little honor among thieves. Still, he briefly wondered who that man had been and why he'd taken up with his companions.

Ben sighed, then turned his attention to the rest area between the roadway and the river. He decided he had the time to satisfy his curiosity. He hopped the center median and then the south-bound guardrail.

He remembered a veritable hedgerow of trees, mostly black locust, between the south-bound shoulder and base of the slope down to the rest area. Those had been felled, the saplings kept cut back, probably to provide a clear view of the highway. There was no sign of them. They'd probably been used either as fuel, or hauled off for woodworking projects somewhere.

Most of the trees, ponderosa pines and white oaks, still stood. Ben guessed the people who regularly used the site valued their shade more than their firewood. Marks on their trunks also suggested they'd been used as anchor points for whatever needed a rope.

Much of the asphalt was clear of vehicles. Someone had towed most of them to the parking area nearer the river. A few of those had clearly burned at some point. None of them had visible human remains still in them. Nor were there any scattered about the park like Ben had expected.

He examined the campsite. A wisp of white smoke curled up from still-warm embers coated in white ash. A pile of downed wood lay nearby, the ends of several stout branches bearing fresh axe cuts. Newly churned earth and horse droppings marked where a picket line had been. There were no wheel marks that he could see, so the wagon had probably been parked on the asphalt.

Back on the freeway, a flurry of motion off to his right caught his eye. A pair of crows was already at work on the body. There was sure to be an opossum or two that night. Despite the still chilly weather, Ben doubted there would be much left on the bones by the end of the week.

Around the next curve, a sheep appeared, grazing in the median and in the field between the highway and the river. There were also fewer vehicles littering the road, and before long, there were none, leaving an open stretch a half-mile long between him and the exit to the small town of Rogue River.

It was clear the town had survived the aftermath of the Change. The arched suspension bridge spanning the river was clear save for a lone donkey cart, a couple of bicycles, and a few pedestrians. Smoke from scores of cooking fires drifted up from a town that, save for the absence of motor vehicles, looked pretty much as it always had. A pile of fresh horse droppings just north of the off-ramp told Ben his quarry had not pulled off into town. That was just as well.

A few miles later, Ben gazed out at the ruins of Grants Pass from where Pacific Highway crested a rise near the junction with the Redwood Hwy 199. He immediately recognized the signs of a town that had imploded in the wake of the Change. The entire city looked like it had burned to the ground. Every building in sight was heavily charred, those that still stood. A few scattered wisps of smoke at the town's edges marked cooking fires. The freeway and all the visible roads were choked with vehicles, some charred. It was a miracle nearby Rogue River had survived.

The Interstate itself was half clear. Dead vehicles had been moved onto the shoulder, often shoved right up against one another, leaving the left-hand lane in each direction clear. Rocks and other debris from the road cut had spilled onto some of them. In a few places, the concrete median barriers had been removed. Ben gazed northward at the retreating wagon and wondered how long it would be until I-5 was impassable and all traffic returned to the smaller, pre-Interstate routes like the Rogue River Hwy across the way and the old Pacific Highway 99 that pre-dated the I-5 roadbed.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Heaven on Earth, Azalea, Oregon
March 9, CY 9, 2021 AD

The sun had long slipped below the western hills by the time Ben stepped onto Quines Creek Rd. Even with normal vision, Ben could still read the white-on-green road sign in the twilight. It had been a very long day.

The road out of the ruins of Grant's Pass had been long, straight, and open, forcing Ben to hang back to avoid being seen. Which meant he'd spent that night beneath madrone trees back from the verge at the base of the grade climbing north from Jumpoff Joe Creek Rd. That had turned out to have been fortuitous.

The night's rest had made him fresh for the climb up to Sexton Mt. Pass where he'd found two fresh bodies. Jagged-edged wounds consistent with stone or obsidian arrowheads had been the apparent cause of death. Both bodies had been stripped of anything valuable, evidenced by empty blade sheaths. It had been less clear who the men had been.

But there had been no sign of anyone else by the time Ben had arrived. Still, he'd proceeded with extreme caution the rest of the sinuous, descending way to Sunny Valley. As in Grant's Pass, the center lanes of the freeway had been cleared the whole way. Blow-downs showed fresh axe cuts, their tops missing, presumably hauled off by Sunny Valley folk for fuel or building material.

Fresh horse dung had again told Ben that his quarry had not stopped for long. He'd pried apart a piece with a stick, noting the subtle signs that distinguished different diets. He'd wondered how long that was going to last.

That had repeated itself over Smith Hill Summit. Passing Wolf Creek, it had been apparent that the locals had made little effort to clear the Interstate and that it wouldn't be too many more years before rock fall from the cut would close it, forcing all traffic to go through Wolf Creek itself. But there had been fresh scrape marks on the asphalt, presumably made by Ben's quarry.

At Stage Rd. Pass, he'd found more bodies, more rockfall, and more freshly-cut blow-downs. At the Glendale exit, he'd decided to continue the several miles to Heaven on Earth by the Quines Creek exit.

The small gas station off to the right was dark and Ben wondered if it had been converted into anything, or simply abandoned. To the left, as he'd hoped, Heaven on Earth was still there. Unsurprisingly, some things had changed. A timber palisade wall encircled the property, a pair of what looked like tiki torches burning lazily on each side of a sturdy gate. Beyond that, candle and lamp light shone in a few upper-floor windows and in those of another building off to the right. Ben could easily make out the gleam of steel on a pair of sentinels at the gate.

Ben walked casually toward the gate, careful to keep his arrow facing toward the ground and his draw relaxed. The extent of the wall was difficult to gauge. He thought he remembered the road swinging to the left between the establishment and the freeway. Instead, it ran straight into the fort. Another gravel road, maybe a lane and a half wide, cut across a field toward the south, presumably rejoining the road proper on the other side of the fort. A second gravel drive led directly across the
shoulder to the freeway, bypassing its ramps completely.

One of the guards stepped in front of him in a way that was probably supposed to be casual, but seemed more threatening. “Evening,” he said, his voice edgier than Ben might have expected, and with more than a hint of something Celtic.

Ben nodded. “Evening.”

“What's your purpose here?” the guard demanded. The other guard shifted a bit and Ben thought he heard a stifled groan.

“A meal and a bed, hopefully,” said Ben. And information, of course, but he rarely mentioned that. It was almost a given most of the time, even when he wasn't tracking down kidnapped children. “Do you take services in trade?” he added.

“Depends. What're ye offerin’?”

“I'm a doctor. Surgeon. Trained before the Change.” He often added that last bit.

Most medical professionals generally fell into one of three categories: nurses and EMT's who had learned the rest after the Change; veterinarians who had by necessity branched out into human medicine; and those who had learned it all as they went. Far too many MD's of all disciplines had perished during the Dying Time.

The guards looked at each other. The second turned toward the gate. “Eh, Maggie!” His accent sounded...Cockney, was it? “There's a bloke here says he's a pre-Change doctor!”

“Well, send 'im in, dammit!” Maggie sounded exactly like a female Montgomery Scott from Star Trek. Or maybe Mel Gibson in “Braveheart.” Of course, no one growing up in the Changed world would have any idea what those were. Ben wondered what, then, explained the accents. Maybe he'd have an opportunity to satisfy his curiosity later.

Ben stepped toward the gate.

“Erm,” said the second guard, “ye'll hafta unstring yer bow. No offense, but rules is rules.”

“Oh. Right.” Ben placed his arrow back into its quiver and unstrung his bow. It left him without a missile, but he knew that weapons security rules were quite common everywhere.

He followed Maggie to the right, between the Heaven on Earth Restaurant building on the left and a row of pergolas on the right. Those had once been covered parking spaces, but had been converted into stables.

Past the stables, a low wall of mortared stone flanked a high timber arch. Through that and up a slight slope to the left sat one of the other buildings Ben had seen from outside the palisade. A pillar candle burned within a glass enclosure mounted to the outer wall beside the front door. A wraparound sun porch appeared to have been a recent addition, its boards and timbers still largely unweathered. Ben followed Maggie through the door and into the building.

The interior was spacious, the floor plan what had once been called open. It wasn't obvious if it had been originally built that way, or remodeled some time after the Change. Much of the ground floor was one large communal room blending into what was, from the glint of stainless steel, a kitchen at the rear of the house. Hefty, well-finished beams supported the ceiling at six-foot intervals. In the center, a set of stairs climbed into darkness. The floor between the door and the stair was covered in slate tile and Ben could make out a set of tatami mats in the rear left corner.
“You can put yer things over there,” said Maggie, gesturing to the corner of the room off to the left. Ben shrugged out of his pack and sat it against the wall, then lay his bow and arrows on the floor beside it.

“Yer shoes, too.”

Ben pulled off his moccasins, undoing the rawhide lacing just below the knee, then progressively loosening all the way down before easing the deerskin and elk hide leather off his heel. He'd long ago become an expert, though it still often felt like a five-minute job. He also removed his parka and thicker wool flannel and draped them over his pack before following Maggie up the stairs.

Small candles burned inside glass sconces set into the walls of a short hallway, casting just enough of a glow for safety. Maggie opened one of the side doors, then motioned Ben into a small bedroom. From a small table, a lone pillar candle cut the darkness. Against the far wall sat an occupied bed. A second person sat on a stool beside it and looked up as Ben walked into the room. He frowned.

“Maggie, who's this?”

She seemed to ignore the question. “How is he?” she asked instead.

“Not good. But you didn't...”

“This man says he's a pre-Change surgeon.”

The man in the chair stared for a moment, then made a beckoning motion to Ben.

“Where's your usual doctor?” Ben asked over his shoulder. He assumed there was one. Most settlements of any appreciable size had someone with basic medical skills.

“Died last month.”

Ben grimaced. “My condolences.” He stepped up to the other side of the bed. “Um...what seems to be the trouble?”

“Stomachache,” grunted the man in bed.

Ben suppressed a frown. A mere stomachache did not normally drive one to bed, especially in the Changed world where a person worked unless they literally couldn't stand up. The list of abdominal ailments that could knock a person off their feet was short, but varied.

“Can you be more specific?” Ben asked.

The man went on to describe nausea, vomiting, high fever, and intense pain in his lower right-hand side. The first three symptoms could have been indicative of a whole host of things. The lower abdominal pain, however, meant something.

“Can you be more specific?” Ben asked.

The man gently pulled away the bedclothes and pushed on the man's abdomen right of the navel and a little above the pelvis. The man grunted. When Ben removed his fingers, the man conspicuously swallowed a yelp. Rebound tenderness.

“You have acute appendicitis,” Ben declared.

The silence was palpable. The man in bed went so pale it was noticeable even in the candlelight.
“You need surgery,” Ben added.

“But...” Maggie began.

Ben shot her a glance. He was familiar with all the usual protestations whenever he'd suggested surgery, even before the Change.

“Ma'am,” he continued, “this man's appendix is inflamed. If it isn't removed, it will rupture, spreading bacteria into his peritoneal cavity and he'll die. Very painfully.”

The fear on Maggie's face didn't wane. It was a look Ben had seen more times than he cared to count. Even before the Change, major surgery was a big deal and patients were usually and understandably afraid in the face of it. In the Changed world, however, surgery also carried a very high probability of death, usually from infection. Even though Ben practiced sterile technique, the tools for it were just not nearly as good as they'd once been, nor was there usually much in the way of antibiotics, to say nothing of anesthetic.

“Wh...when?” asked the patient.

“That depends. I'd prefer first thing in the morning, as soon as it's light enough to see. But you might not have that long.” Ben immediately launched into his usual string of pre-surgery questions. When he was satisfied, he turned to Maggie.

“I'm going to need a few things.”

He rattled off a list of relevant equipment. Some of it he had in his pack, but some of it he didn't. Surgery post-Change was different than the way he'd been trained, and had become a sort of amalgam of late-nineteenth century and WW-II era techniques and early twenty-first-century knowledge.

When he'd finished, Maggie looked at him for several seconds, her own eyes filled with fear. Then she said, “Pat...Mister...um...?”

“Hunt,” said Ben.

“Hunt. Come with me.” She whirled around and scurried out the door and back down the stairs.

No sooner had they reached the bottom, then Maggie whirled around. “Pat, fetch Owain, Mairead, and...and that new boy. And be quick about it!”

Pat stalked quickly out the door. Once he'd gone, Maggie lowered her voice. “One problem, Doctor Hunt.”

“Only one?”

“We don't have half of what you need.”

“Then we'll have to improvise. Which half don't you have?”

Maggie enumerated each item one by one. Most of it wasn't going to be that big of a problem. But when she came to the anesthetic, Ben gave her a sharp look. “The general or the topical?”

Maggie thought for a moment, probably dredging up her pre-Change memories. “Both. I think we can use something like cloves for the topical, but Dubhessa is not going to like that.”

Ben cocked an eyebrow.
“She uses that for the spice rolls...used to be cinnamon rolls, but that's been hard to find for a while...and even cloves...”

Ben nodded. Many of the most popular pre-Change spices, including cloves and cinnamon, had been imported from the tropics and subtropics. In the wake of the Change, there hadn't been much initial use for them. Even so, on the occasions when he and his band had scoured supermarkets for anything left, there'd been signs that someone had tried to eat spices, probably out of starvation. But, as they had little to no food value, and because most spices had long shelf lives, salvage expeditions continued to find them in out of the way warehouses where the hordes of starving people had not thought to look during that first year.

“But ether? I don't think we have that.” She paused. “We could get him liquored up, I suppose.”

Ben shook his head. “Bad idea. Alcohol is a blood thinner and a diuretic. In larger amounts, it produces vomiting.” He swallowed. “We might have to have him bite on a stout stick while someone holds him down.”

Maggie's eyes widened. “Ye canna do that!” She almost shrieked it.

“I'd rather not, either. I had to do it once last year. The patient was a young mother. She said childbirth was worse. He...what's his name?”

“David.”

“David won't like it, but it's actually less disruptive than a cesarean section.”

Maggie nodded. “I'd better fire up the stove, get that boilin' water ye asked for.” She walked toward the back of the house and began fumbling with what Ben figured was a wood stove.

He went to his pack and pulled out his medical kit, going through it to double-check that everything was where it should be. It was. He carried it all toward the rear of the building.

“We should do this outside,” he said to Maggie.

She nodded wordlessly.

He stepped out onto the back deck. The air was chilly in contrast to the bit of warmth inside. His patient was not going to like that. On the other hand, the cold was going to be the least of his concerns. In fact, Ben was going to have to make sure his own fingers didn't cramp up. The faster he could operate, the better.

He set his tools down on a bench and began to rearrange everything. He turned a wooden picnic table around, moved a hodgepodge of wooden, metal, and plastic chairs out of the way, then pulled a small wooden patio table over next to the picnic table and moved his tools to it, thankful he always carried them in ready condition. To them he would add the alcohol, cloves, vinegar, and hot water he'd requested.

The contrast between pre-Change and post-Change operating spaces always struck him as, well, maybe not ironic, but it was always dramatic. Perhaps pre-Change EMT's were able to adapt better, since their training involved doing what amounted to limited surgery literally anywhere, often in the middle of roadways after traffic accidents.

Voices inside the house caught Ben's attention. He walked back in. He recognized Pat from before. The man with him must have been Owain, the woman Mairead, the boy.
“Jake!” Ben exclaimed.

Jacob's eyes widened. “Ben!” He launched himself at Ben.

Ben caught the boy in a firm hug, forcing back the tears.

Pat cleared his throat.

Ben looked up. “My nephew,” he said, “and my surgical assistant.” He looked at Jacob. “Scrub in,” he said, “we're performing an appendectomy.”

The entire procedure took two hours, including prep and cleanup. It might have gone faster in a pre-Change operating room and mainly because he would have been able to see better. Fortunately, his altered eye gave him a decided advantage, even over pre-Change illumination. It wasn't quite as good as a fiber-optic camera, but he wasn't about to complain, given the circumstances.

To distract everyone from the pain David was enduring, Ben asked about the post-Change history of the area. The words were not always easy to understand behind the bandannas Ben insisted everyone wore in lieu of actual surgical masks, but he managed. And Ben had to repeatedly and abruptly interrupt in order to communicate with Jacob.

The first part of the story was a familiar one. The Change had caught everyone off-guard at the tail end of a work day. Responses were mixed. Some stayed put and waited for help. Others got out on foot, their backpacks and bicycles loaded down with camping and survival gear and whatever food they could carry. Many were somewhere in between, trying to take whatever action they could, be it good or ill.

Ben was most interested in the local variations. Medford had imploded within the first week. Most of the early deaths had been from Change-related accidents, or from violence as people fought each other over dwindling supplies of food and medicine, both within Medford itself, and between its people and neighboring communities. Many tried to travel south. Initially, they were escorted over Siskiyou Summit by Ashlanders armed with Medieval weapons, but were later simply turned away when it became obvious that things in California weren't any better. A few had gone east over Hwy. 66 toward Klamath Falls. Over the ensuing months, untreatable medical conditions and diseases took their toll, killing tens of thousands.

In Grants Pass, thousands had fled down Hwy. 199 toward the coast. Many of them didn't make it. Collapse from hunger and fatigue and violent clashes between other people fleeing Crescent City had taken their toll. The surrounding communities had been able to absorb some of the population of Grants Pass. Though some had tried fleeing south or north along I-5.

The small town of Rogue River had been caught in the middle, between Medfordians walking north, and Grants Passers heading south. The ensuing violence had been stomach-churning. It was still unclear just what had sparked the first blows. Most people still shrugged, citing the propensity for people to just break under stress. The Rogue River itself had run red. Iron stains from spilled blood still darkened the asphalt. For three years, no one had dared approach the stretches of road along which most of the violence had happened.

Roseburg to the north had fared a little better. As elsewhere, people had tried to flee north or south mostly, but also toward the coast or over the mountains. The town itself had been somewhat organized. Its distance from the Medford and Grants Pass migrations to the south and the Willamette Valley to the north had spared it the crush of refugees that had been a plague the first months after the Change.
One Collin McClintock had been an organic homesteader at the time. His place had been a bit southwest of Roseburg. His word-fame had been wide-spread, although at the time it had been because of his and his family's knowledge of sustainable agriculture and low-impact living practices, which had been somewhat of a novelty in the years before the Change and mostly because of concerns over things like climate change, pesticide use, chemical fertilizers, and so on. But his family's knowledge had made him a leader beginning the first year, as people all over began to look to him for help getting back on their feet.

People had begun to emulate him, and not only when it came to practical matters. Or, more accurately, they began to emulate his much more charismatic son Collin McCollin McClintock, often to the embarrassment of the father. By the end of the First Change Year, most communities from just north of Roseburg south to Rogue River and from the Cascade crest to the coast had begun to identify themselves as members of Clan McClintock, usually without having asked for permission.

Along with that identity followed certain nascent cultural practices that different people had dredged up as something they had thought the Celts had done before the English had arrived to assert their will way back in the early part of the second millennium. Hence things like the kilts and the Old Religion.

Some of those things had been slow to catch on. Those who had latched onto them the earliest had generally been those in most desperate need of help learning how to survive. There were a few, however, who still hadn’t. Most of them had lived in small communities that had barely had ZIP codes and had been cattle ranchers or lumbermen before the Change. They’d managed to figure it out mostly on their own.

The first year had been troublesome in other ways. Some of the most desperate people, mostly Medfordians and Grants Passers, had turned Eater, setting up dens in hard-to-access spots. In some places, Eaters had been actively hunted and exterminated. In others, they had burned themselves out. It was widely whispered that a few former Eaters had integrated with the rest of the general population, though it was not something anyone wanted to know.

All along the old Interstate and US highways, banditry had sprung up, initially by those seeking to simply take from others when they themselves had not thought to prepare. It had waned a little, then grew up a little alongside emerging trade between communities as the law of comparative advantage had begun to settle things out. It remained a persistent problem.

The trouble was, raiders routinely changed their ambush sites such that not only was it unclear just where a traveler might be attacked, no one knew for sure how many raider bands there were in McClintock territory. It reminded Ben of the Old Wild West from the nineteenth century.

Once things had stabilized to a point the summer after the Change, the leaders of all the scattered communities had begun establishing communication with their neighbors. Information flowed slowly and it had taken nearly until the fall harvests to sort out all the details of what had transpired where after the Change.

They’d learned fairly early all about the things Ben knew concerning Medford, Ashland, and Crescent City. Some time the following summer, they’d begun to hear, by way of travelers from the north bearing as a sigil black with a silver tree and stars, about things that had transpired in northern Oregon.

Eugene and Salem had imploded about as badly as Medford and Grants Pass. Corvallis had turned out a lot like Ashland. A loose confederation calling themselves the Clan McKenzie, and much like the McClintocks, claimed territory east of Albany that stretched from south of the Salem Hills nearly to Eugene and from I-5 up into the Cascades. In the hills west of Salem, a militant group calling
themselves the Bearkillers had heeled in. In Portland, a despot named Norman Arminger had set up a fourteenth century Anglo-Norman feudal system controlling most of northwestern Oregon. East of the Cascades, the Central Oregon Ranchers Association covered most of Deschutes, Crook, and Jefferson Counties, and a few areas adjacent to them. From Olympia to Vancouver BC was a Death Zone.

When they were finished, they asked Ben about his story. Which he told, interrupting himself with intermittent surgical business.

David endured the operation about as well as could be expected. Ben had taken the precaution of asking to have him strapped to the table, which had turned out to be a good idea. Even then, there had been several times when Ben had barely missed slicing something unintentionally because of sudden movements. By the time they had finished closing the incision and wiping off all the excess blood, David had tears streaming down his face.

“Sorry about all that,” said Ben, “but it's better than death.”

“Aye, sure,” the man grunted once Pat had removed the stick.

Ben gave him the usual post-surgery instructions, making sure the others in attendance also understood. They moved David into the main room not far from the stove where he was more likely to be warm and where it would be easier for people to check up on him. Ben set Jacob to work doing some of the cleanup on the back deck while Ben cleaned his instruments and set them to boil.

“How long can ye stay?” Maggie asked.

Ben looked at her. “I should leave first thing in the morning.”

Maggie furrowed her brow. “But what if there are...complications?”

Ben didn't answer.

“Why is it ye're so anxious to leave?”

Ben exhaled deeply. Then he told Maggie the short version of the kidnappings, which he had omitted from his earlier story.

“Oh, merciful Goddess!” she said.

“That's why I need to stay on their trail,” said Ben. “In fact, once Jake's done, I need to talk to him about some of that.”

Maggie nodded. “I canna thank ye enough for savin' my David.”

“Don't thank me yet. Remember what I told you?”

“About complications, sure.” She paused. “Does that boy...Jacob...know all of this?”

“He does.”

“Then I have an idea. Stay the night, on us of course. As much as ye can eat and drink, too, and more to see ye on yer way. Jacob stays here and tends David. You pick him up on yer way back when ye get those...creatures.”

Ben considered that. It was actually a very good idea. The trouble was, he didn't know if he could trust Maggie or her people. But she did owe him. “I'll discuss it with Jake,” he said at length. “If he's
okay with it, I guess I'll be okay with it.”

“Oh, thank ye, Doctor, thank ye.”

Another half hour later, Maggie led him and Jacob into the restaurant that had once been the main attraction just off the highway. Ben had long suspected that the little cluster of wooden buildings had once been much more, perhaps a stop before the automobile and the road trip had become big things in the 1950’s, before so many small towns in America had either dried up or been turned into tourist destinations full of wine tasting rooms, espresso bars, local art, and some historic something-or-other.

It was almost the way he remembered it. To the right, an iron stove larger than an oil drum pumped heat into the room. A stack of split firewood sat beside it against the outer wall. Large, square timbers supported open rafters. Near the stove and between the entry area and the restaurant beyond stood a counter faced with mortared flagstone. A counter sat along the opposite wall, behind which was probably the kitchen. The similarities ended there.

Several brass hurricane lanterns hung from sturdy nails pounded into upright beams. The espresso machine was gone. Most of the tables that had held scores of baked goods, such as the establishment’s famous cinnamon rolls, were gone. To the left, several racks and peg-boards had been mounted to the wall from which hung a variety of coats—some of which were pre-Change Thinsulate and Gore-Tex parkas or PolarFleece jackets, some post-Change long duster-style oilskin or heavy wool—and weaponry. Dozens of pairs of muddy footwear sat along the wall near the door. The restaurant beyond was far more crowded than Ben remembered having seen it. But he’d only stopped a couple of times before, during his travels up and down I-5 well before the Change, and at odd hours, so perhaps it had always been busy at dinnertime.

A girl, maybe twelve years old, walked up to him. Her dress reminded Ben of something Irish or Scottish, though he wasn’t sure which, or even if it was authentic. It probably didn’t matter.

“Good evening, sir,” she said, her accent matching her attire. “Welcome to Heaven on Earth. Would you care for some...some horse duvers?”

Ben blinked. She probably meant hors d’oeuvres. “Good evening,” he said.

“Molly,” said Maggie, “This is Doctor Ben Hunt. He just helped David with his illness. Turns out he’s Jacob’s uncle. Their meals, and the ones in the mornin’, they’re on us. They’re from out of town, so don’t be too ornery with ’em.”

“Oh.” She looked at him for a long moment. “Are you from up north, then?”

Ben shook his head. “South.”

“Ashland?”

“Further.”

Molly frowned. “Yreka, then?”

“Uh-uh. My people are nomads. We make a loop from the coast, up the Klamath River, loop around Mount Shasta, through the Klamath Mountains, then back to the coast.”

“All the time?”

“Every year.”
“Good. Because we don't like Yrekans.”

“You get many by here?”

She shrugged. “Enough to know we don't like them.”

That was strange. Azalea was over a hundred miles from Yreka proper. That kind of travel was rare in the Changed world. That probably meant she'd mistaken the kidnappers for Yrekans. Add that to the rumors they'd heard up this way.

Ben shrugged. “They're not so bad. Just people. Now, the guys in charge...” He shook his head. “...not our favorites either.”

Maggie cleared her throat.

“Right,” said Molly. “Sorry. Follow me.” She whirled around, her single brown braid briefly flying out behind her.

Ben and Jacob followed her into the other room. Ben didn't remember having been in there, but it didn't look like much had changed. It still had the green padded bench seats and wooden tables, all looking none the worse for wear. Molly seated them at one of the tables. She lifted the small candle that sat on the table up to one of the lamps and lit it before returning it to its place.

Ben half-expected to be handed a menu, possibly run on a refurbished nineteenth-century printing press, or maybe even hand-written using oak-gall ink from a fountain pen or a goose quill.

“Right,” she said instead. “Our specials tonight are seasonal vegetables, seasonal stew, and seasonal bread. For dessert, we have seasonal fruit crisp. What sounds good?”

Ben smiled. “Everything?” he said hopefully.

Molly batted her eyelashes. “I'll see what I can do.” She whirled around and trotted out of the room. Moments later, she returned with two glasses filled with an off-clear liquid. “Compliments of the house,” she said.

Ben took one and sniffed it, trying not to be obtrusive about it. He'd expected a whiff of alcohol. But instead, the distinctive scent of citrus greeted his nose. He took a small sip. Sure enough, it was lemonade. It was a bit on the weak side, but it was the real thing. He cocked an eyebrow.

“How...where...did you find lemons?”

Molly smiled. “Our secret,” she said, then turned and left Ben and Jacob to themselves.

“Warehouse stash?” Jacob asked.

“Probably,” said Ben. Bottled lemon juice had a very long shelf life. “Or someone scrounged from some SoCal source and traded up the coast for something really valuable.”

“Like what?”

Ben shrugged. “Could be lots of things.” He took another sip. “Now, Jake, this is really important.”

“You want me to tell you everything I know, right?”

Ben nodded. He recounted everything he'd heard from Janey, keeping his voice low.
“She's...she's okay?” said Jake.

“Yeah. We rescued her just in time.”

Jacob's shoulders relaxed visibly. “Good. Because those guys are pricks.”

Ben almost corrected the boy, but changed his mind. He didn't like casting aspersions on people, and disliked strong language just as much. But, under the circumstances, it was accurate. “Does that all sound about right to you?”

Jacob nodded, then added some more information. The kidnappers had several other children they had collected from other places. Since Janey's liberation, they had sold off two children and collected three more.

They had also lost five of their number and recruited two. Ben knew about the one he'd killed himself, of course. Another one had died of some sort of sickness. A third had been executed for something vague. The other two had been killed in an ambush north of what remained of Grants Pass.

They still planned to go all the way to Portland. It seemed an awfully long way. But Ben remembered the Middle Eastern caravans that had twined through Persia following the spice roads between India and the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages. But trafficking children? That was a new low as far as he was concerned.

“They won't touch Hemonia,” said Jacob. “Although I think they decided to get rid of me because I kept defending her. They beat me for it.” He pointed at the bruises around his left eye and the right side of his jaw. “But she's worth it.”

Ben smiled. “Good man,” he said.

“Not that she really needs it too much,” Jacob added. “I think she has some magic in her.”

“Oh?”

“You know how when she glares at you, you can almost feel it pushing at you?”

Ben nodded. He was all too familiar with his daughter's willfulness.

“Well, you should have seen the way she was glaring at those guys. It was almost like a wall. That, and I think they were intimidated by her eyes. Of course, she can always see them coming, even when they think they're being sneaky, especially in the dark.” He chuckled. “And...well, you know how she is.”

Ben nodded. His daughter had large eyes, at least half again the size of normal human eyes. It wasn't supposed to have happened, but she had inherited Ben's large eye in both of her own. In addition to the abilities afforded by those eyes, there had always been something else about her, something in the way she looked at people. Ben wasn't alone in having the feeling that Hemonia could bore into a person's soul with her gaze. She was a delightful girl most of the time, but Ben suspected she had hidden depths and potential that no one, not him, not his wife, not even Hemonia herself, would realize until she had passed through puberty to become a grown woman.


Jacob didn't say anything at first. “You want to know if you can kill them all without them hurting
Hemiona before you're done.”

Ben sighed, then nodded. “Jake, you know how much I hate killing. But...”

“That guys deserve it!”

“Yeah. Yeah, they do. But what have we always taught you about what we deserve?”

Jacob squirmed a little. “That the wages of sin is death and we all deserve that.”

Ben nodded. “I just want to get Hemiona and Juan back, preferably in one piece. But it isn't going to happen if I just barge in there and bash heads. That will get me killed.”

“And Hemiona...”

“Don't say it,” said Ben. He knew what the boy was thinking. He was thinking it too and he was pretty sure they both knew it. Jacob flinched. “Sorry,” said Ben. “I guess we both know what would happen after that, magic or not. And I'd rather not talk about it. It's hard enough not thinking about it when I have nothing else to do while I walk and watch.

“What I really need to know is, if I snipe at them in the dark, will they hold one of the kids hostage until I come out? Or will they even go looking for a guy if I slit his throat and dump his body into the river?”

Jacob's eyes went wide. “Would you...do that?”

“If it means an even fight later...yes. Of course, I'd rather get them back without a fight, but I think we both know that might not be an option.”

“So what's your plan?”

“Follow and watch for opportunities.”

“All the way to Portland?”

“If I have to.”

“How long will that take?”

Ben shrugged.

Molly walked up with a large platter and unloaded its contents onto the table with easy efficiency. There were two large stoneware bowls filled nearly to the brim with a thick, hearty stew. Ben recognized chopped root vegetables such as turnips and beets, chunks of fish which was probably trout or salmon, and other chunks of some meat which could have been anything, small onions, garlic, and some other root he didn't recognize.

The seasonal veggies were mostly leaves, possibly kale and cabbage, but probably also dandelion and California poppy, with a little redwood sorrel. There were also a few shoots of something that looked like false Solomon seal.

The bread was all in a single loaf about the size of a football. He tore a chunk off the heel. It was dark and dense on the inside and filled with all sorts of seeds. It smelled a lot like the breads his band made, using everything from oats and barley to acorns, cow parsnip seeds, and California buckeye.

“Thank you, ma'am,” said Ben.
Molly smiled, curtsied, and left.

Ben and Jacob ate in silence for several minutes. Then, “What do you think of the people here?” Ben asked.

Jacob shrugged in typical teenager outward indifference. “They're okay, I guess. No one's been mean to me...yet. But they have that weird Goddess and Horned Lord stuff.”

Ben nodded. He'd heard of that, even before the Change. It was some sort of revival of one of the old pre-Christian Celtic religions, or at least what someone thought it had been. Ben had never taken it too seriously, even though he'd met a few people who followed it, nearly all of them when he'd been doing his undergraduate and Master's work at Stanford University. Since the Change, it seemed to have caught on in a lot of places.

Most of his band, though, were some variation of Christian. Most of those were Protestant of one variety or another, though a few were Catholic. There was a family of Jews. And a couple that seemed to oscillate between Atheism and Agnosticism with apparent forays into Universalism.

“Just remember what we've always taught you,” said Ben, “and you'll be fine.”

Jacob chewed aggressively on a bite of bread. “Are you really going to leave me here while you go after the others?”

Ben took another mouth full of the soup. “That depends on you. The way I see it, two things need doing. Hemiona and the others need rescuing. David needs someone with medical training to make sure he recovers from his appendectomy. I can't do both, especially if it means a several-day stay here. That trail won't stay warm for more than a day.

“Then there's the matter of diplomacy. Regardless of what you or I or the people here think of slavery, the fact of the matter is that you were traded for foodstuffs. Yeah, it sucks, I know, and I don't like it any better than you do. And I really hope they'll call it even, once David recovers. They seem decent enough for that, anyway.”

Jacob nibbled down a spear of false Solomon's seal shoot, then chewed it for a time. “Okay,” he said, his mouth still half-full of fibrous plant matter, “I'll stay. But only so David doesn't die and only until you get back.”

Ben nodded. “I'll ask them to give you something to do that doesn't have you scrubbing toilets.”

Jacob stared at Ben. Ben might have face-palmed if he hadn't been holding bread at that moment. He still often forgot how many of the things of sedentary life the kids in his band had never seen and didn't know. The closest thing the boy had seen to a toilet was probably the occasional outhouse. At least, after the Change. Like most kids his age, he didn't remember much about the pre-Change world.

“Something that lets you use your skills,” Ben corrected.

Jacob nodded, and kept eating. They finished their meal in silence. Molly returned with two small bowls filled with a fruit crisp. Beneath a rolled-oat crust, large red fruits swam in some sort of syrup. Ben raised an eyebrow.

“Wintergreen berries in bigleaf maple syrup,” Molly declared.

Ben took a bite. His mouth exploded with a minty flavor, balanced by a lingering distinctive, if understated, maple flavor. “Mmmrf,” he said, then gave a thumbs-up.
Molly giggled, then flounced away.

“This is really interesting,” said Jacob. “Good, but interesting. What's wintergreen?”

“It's like salal,” said Ben between bites, “but from higher elevations. We're never quite near any of it when it's ripe. I guess someone's been cultivating it.”

“How do you make syrup from bigleaf maple?” Jacob asked.

Ben explained the process, adding, “Before the Change, hardly anyone bothered using anything but sugar maple, which is native back east. Other maples apparently don't have a high enough sugar content to make a profit on it.”

They went to work cleaning out their bowls. It was good to the last drop.

“We’d better go check on our patient,” said Ben. He scooted out of the booth. “So,” he said once they’d left the building, “did you see much on the way up here?”

“No,” said Jacob. “They had us in the wagon the whole time. Except when one of us had to pee and stuff. I tried to get a look around the times I had to go, but there wasn’t much to see except trees, the road, and sometimes cars and trucks. Even the first week when I should have known where we were, it was hard to tell. Except for Randolf.

“There were a couple of times I probably could have escaped. I could have lived in the woods. And I could have made it back.”

Ben held his tongue. He knew the young were prone to overestimating their own capacity. But he also knew that every kid in the band his age knew everything about living off the land. Which wasn't the same thing as actually doing it, but still. And the boy hadn't had any tools, not even his knife.

“But how would I have found you guys? And what if someone else just as bad caught me? And what would happen to Hemiona and the others? Yeah, I wanted to escape, but then I couldn't protect anyone.”

“You did the right thing,” said Ben. Not that the right thing was terribly clear, but Jacob at least had been level-headed enough not to try anything rash.

They walked up the steps and back into the house where David lay beside the stove. He looked like he was asleep.

Ben knelt down and watched the man's breathing. It was slow and rhythmic. He checked his pulse. Not too fast, not too slow. There was no excess perspiration on his forehead.

“How is he?”

Ben looked up into Maggie's face. “I was about to ask you the same question. But his breathing and pulse are fine and he isn't showing signs of fever, yet. But it's really too soon to tell if there are going to be complications.”

Maggie nodded. “You know, not long after I returned from taking you over there, he just fell asleep.”

“I'm not surprised,” said Ben. “That took a lot out of him.”

“Isn't he still in pain?”
"I expect so, yeah. But he's also exhausted. You'll need to make sure you always have some warm broth on hand. He's going to need it."

"Sure. Why don't you two follow me? And bring yer things."

Ben retrieved his belongings from the corner. Then he and Jacob followed Maggie upstairs. She led them down the hall to another room.

"This is...kind of a guest room. Or, it was. We haven't used it in a while. I had it made up right after David fell asleep. It's yours for the night, or as long as ye need it. Bathroom's down the hall. Lamp's lit in there, just blow it out when ye're done. Same with the one in here. Water's not terribly warm, but it should do. Any questions?"

Ben shook his head. "That's awfully generous of you."

"Think nothin' of it," she said. "Threefold Rule, ya know."

Ben nodded. He'd heard of it. Whatever you did, good or bad, it was bound to come back on you threefold.

She closed the door and left.

The room looked a lot like the one David had occupied, but a bit bigger. A double bed sat against one wall. A hide-a-bed, the kind that he remembered seeing in low-end motels before the Change, sat against the other wall. Both had sheets and woolen blankets on them. A towel and a wash cloth sat folded up on each.

"I'll take the hide-a-bed," said Ben.

"No, I'll take it," said Jacob.

"You've been through a lot," said Ben, "take the regular bed."

"I'll take it once you're off after Hemiona, Uncle Ben. You take the regular bed."

"It'll make me miss it too much."

Jacob looked at him like he was nuts. "Uncle Ben, you're nuts."

Ben chuckled. "Maybe."

Jacob walked over, sat on the edge of the hide-a-bed, and crossed his arms defiantly. "I'll fight you for it."

Ben just laughed. "Okay, okay, you win." He stripped off his clothes and wrapped the towel around his waist.

It was one of those rare times when he missed pre-Change underwear, which was another thing Jacob probably didn't remember. Since then, the closest thing anyone had was something that was part boxer shorts and part nineteenth-century drawers.

He walked down the hall, following the glow from the small lamp in the bathroom. Sure enough, the water, held in a large ewer, was barely tepid. Ben was fine with that. It was going to be a very long time until he again had anything that wasn't just plain cold. It still felt good.

After he'd scrubbed down, shaved, and used the facilities, he dried off and padded back to his room,
feeling much more human.

Jacob was already in bed. “I already bathed,” he said, answering Ben’s unasked question. “They cleaned me up first thing when I got here. Before they gave me the kilt.”

“I was wondering about that,” said Ben. He stepped back out into the hall.

“Where are you going?” Jacob asked.

“To put out the bathroom lamp.” He padded back down the hall and extinguished the lamp.

Back in his room he draped the towel over a wooden chair in the corner near his pack, then slid into bed. If he wasn’t mistaken, the sheets were actual cotton. It felt better than he remembered, and that was saying something. All his life, he’d loved going camping. The longer the trip, the better he’d liked it. But there had still never been any substitute for a nice, soft bed. After the Change, sleeping on the ground simply had become a way of life.

Azalea, Oregon
March 10, CY 9, 2021 AD

Ben awoke with a start. At first, he didn’t know where he was. He was in a room, dark save for a square of light grey on one wall. Then it all came back to him.

Jacob was still asleep. The strength of the sunlight outside told him that it was probably just after six. He groaned quietly. If there was one universal rule about life post-Change, it was that there was no such thing as sleeping in. Wherever he went, people were always up with the sun. Well, unless they’d been up late drinking, which always seemed to be someone else’s problem.

Ben slid out of bed and groped around for his clothes. They were missing. He snatched the towel off its chair and wrapped it around his middle, then stepped out into the hall, quietly closing the door behind him.

He met Maggie coming up the stairs.

“Mornin’, Missuz...?”

“Oh, just call me Maggie.”

Ben shrugged. “Maggie.”

“Mornin’ yerself,” she said cheerily.

“Um,” he said, “someone’s horked our clothes.”

“Horked?” she said.

“Yeah. You know, filched? Lifted?”

“Ah, borrowed without permission, eh?”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“They’re bein’ washed.”

“Oh. Slipped your mind last night?”
“Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “Would ye consider this, then?” She held out a bundle.

Ben took it, then let the folds fall. He raised an eyebrow.

“Ye might consider a, uh, permanent change in wardrobe,” she said, then winked.

“Um...”

“Most find the kilt more comfortable than trousers,” she continued. “Especially for travelin’ on foot.”

Ben groaned. “Thanks, though,” he said. He retreated back to his room and held out the garments in question. One was a loose, off-white shirt that pre-Change re-enactors had once called a pirate or peasant shirt. The other was, as near as he could tell, just several yards of wool plaid. He groaned again. The shirt was relatively straightforward. But the kilt? Maybe he could just tie it around his waist the way he used to do with his flannels. He tried. It didn't work, not even remotely.

Jacob snickered.

Ben cocked an eyebrow at the boy.

“Want me to show you how?”

“Uh...sure,” said Ben.

Jacob extracted himself from bed, took his own kilt, tossed it out onto the floor over a leather belt, pleated it, then rolled it around himself and stood up. He made it look easy.

“Show-off,” Ben teased.

Jacob just smirked.

Ben executed the same maneuvers he'd just watched his nephew perform. Surprisingly, it was actually easier than it looked. He supposed he could have figured it out himself if given enough time.


“Who are they?” said Jacob.

“Uh...historical guys. Figures in Scottish history during a couple of their rebellions. Wallace in the fourteenth century, Rob in the eighteenth.”

“Oh. You look good, though.”

“Come on,” said Ben, changing the subject, “let's check on our patient.”

“And then breakfast?”

“Hopefully.”

Ben led the way back downstairs, trying not to feel self-conscious in his unfamiliar attire. He was sure he heard his nephew snickering behind him, but he ignored it. Back on the ground floor, he stepped briskly over to where David still lay on his cot near the stove.

Maggie had just shut the door, its soft metallic clang followed shortly by the familiar sputtering and popping of burning conifer wood.
“Anything come up last night?”

“Not that I heard,” she said.

Ben turned his attention to David. He was still asleep. “He didn't wake up at all?”

Maggie shook her head. “An' I was tendin' the stove all night, too. Well, between snatches.”

“You should have someone help you with that. A good night's sleep's important.”

“I'll get plenty o' that when I get to the Summerlands, donna worry.”

Ben didn't bother to start a theology discussion. He knelt down and examined David instead. There was no visible change from before. Ben gently lifted the blanket to examine the wound.

David awoke suddenly, and yelped, then half-screamed.

Ben jumped back.


David nodded with a grunt.

Ben resumed his examination. The bandage was visibly red with blood, a little yellow showing around the edges. “I'm going to peel the bandage off,” he said. “This might hurt a little.”

He tugged at the tape securing the bandage. It resisted, but still detached from David's skin. The incision looked damp with blood and a little off-clear fluid. The skin around it was a dark pink color. It was swollen, but not more than he'd expected.

“Well,” said Ben, “looks good so far. I'd like to clean off the surface and put on a fresh bandage.”

David nodded.

“Maggie, would you boil some water and a rag with it?”

Maggie nodded and retreated to the kitchen. She returned shortly with a metal saucepan, which she set atop the iron stove.

Ben motioned to her. “The wound should continue to look like this,” he said. “If it the skin becomes dark red, the wound starts leaking thick, opaque yellow gunk, or if he develops a fever, the wound may need to be re-opened and flushed out with salt water.”

David let out a disappointed sound.

“Jacob knows how to do that.”

“Yeah,” said Jacob, “only every time you operate.”

“You're good at it. Why do you think Luke and I are apprenticing you?”

Jacob grinned.

“Why donna you two go over an' get some breakfast, aye?” said Maggie.
Jacob nodded enthusiastically.

“Sure,” said Ben.

Outside, a light mist hung over everything. Every surface had a light film of water clinging to it. The sun had not quite crested the mountains rising sharply up to the east. The damp air chilled his bare legs. It was more than enough to have him questioning the kilt.

The interior of Heaven on Earth was just as it had been the day before, except that the lamps and candles had all been extinguished. The smells were different, too. The air was filled with the scent of fresh-baked bread, but there was more of a sweetness in it.

Molly bounced up to them, clad more or less as she had been the evening before. “Mornin', gents,” she said amiably.

“Mornin', Molly,” said Ben.

“I suppose ye'll be here for breakfast, then?” It was more of a statement.

Ben nodded and Molly led them to the same table they'd occupied the evening before.

“Right,” she said, almost before they'd sat down, “for breakfast, we have oat porridge, French bannock, hash with stuff in it, an' spice rolls.”

“What,” said Ben, “no SPAM?”

Molly furrowed her brow. “What's that?”

“Never mind. So...French bannock. That's a bannock dipped in egg, then cooked on a griddle?”

She nodded. Basically French toast, Ben mentally translated.

“What's the stuff in the hash?” Jacob asked.

“Eggs, potatoes, meat of the day, onions, and goat cheese.”

Ben smiled at the thought of eggs. It had been some time since he'd had any, and always at one of the many stops the band made on its migration route. “What's the meat of the day?” he asked.

Molly shrugged. “They donna tell me.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Okay, I have to ask. It isn't, uh, long pork, is it?”

Molly cocked her head. “Is that the opposite of short pork?”

“Never mind. What spices are in the spice rolls?”

“Whatsoever we can get.”

Ben was beginning to doubt the girl was going to give him a straight answer. “Which is?” he prodded.

“Um...ginger, cardamom, artemesia, angelica, ginseng, cedar...oh, and chinquapin nuts.”

“Hash and a spice roll for me,” said Ben.
“Hash and oats for me,” said Jacob.

“Sure,” said Molly cheerily. “Anything to drink? We have half-coffee, apple cider, and mead.”

“Half-coffee?”

“Well...maybe less than half. Fine, a lot less. It's as much as we can find, the rest made up with chicory and dandelion root.”

“Cider, then,” said Ben. He'd never really been that much of a coffee drinker anyway. Even so, he had it on good authority that the post-Change substitutes were all more than a little disappointing.

“Mead,” said Jacob.

Ben raised both eyebrows and leaned imperceptibly toward Jacob.


Molly spun about and trotted off. She returned shortly with two stoneware tankards nearly full of a warm, amber liquid, then left again.

Ben took a sip, then winced. Before he could say anything, Jacob took a sip, too, then grinned. Ben groaned. “Don't get used to it,” he said.

“If I'm staying here...” Jacob let the sentence dangle.

“If you're a medical professional, albeit one in training, and a representative of the Band, then you're going to stay sober. That's not negotiable.”

“I'll be careful.”

“You'd better.” He took another sip. “Not bad, actually.” It was definitely hard cider, no doubt about it. But it didn't taste terribly so. It was sweet, but not overly so. In fact, if one had to drink an alcoholic beverage, it would be the one.

Jacob took a gulp.

“Whoa, slow down there, slick,” Ben said. “You want to actually taste it, don't you? And your breakfast?”

Jacob made a hrmphing sound. Ben couldn't help but smile over his drink.

“Really, though,” said Ben, “if I knife one of those guys in the dark, how much effort will his buddies spend looking for the guy who knifed him?”

Jacob just looked at Ben for several moments. “I don't know. None of them like each other, that's for sure.”

Ben took another sip. “I'm starting to think these guys are being held together by the highest bidder.”

“The highest...oh, yeah. Yeah, they do keep talking about getting rich. Hey, what if we scraped together a whole lot of money and just bought them all out? Then we'd be the highest bidder, right?”

Ben took a long, slow sip of his drink. “Not bad thinking, junior. Except for two things. One, money is relative. Two, I am not buying back our people. People are not property to be bought and sold. Not bad problem solving, though.”
Their food arrived and, just as they had over dinner, their conversation ground to a halt while they ate.

The hash was very good. The potatoes were a little firmer than he'd remembered, though it had been a couple of months since he'd had any. The eggs, which he only rarely had an opportunity to eat, were perhaps slightly undercooked, though he preferred that to overcooked. The slightly caramelized onions were chopped and both red and white, with a little green mixed in. The goat cheese was very tangy. There was also a little garlic and some ground biscuit-root and angelica seed, with just a hint of the sappy tang of ground juniper berries.

The spice roll was, like the bread, dark. It was probably also a mixture of wheat, buckwheat, and whatever other grains grew within a day's ride. The sugar inside the roll was probably a mixture of beet sugar and honey. The spice mixture was excellent and well-balanced. He almost missed the actual cinnamon.

When they were finished, they strolled back over to the house, his head only slightly abuzz from the cider. The sun had risen a few diameters and was hard at work burning off the mist. Ben wasn't terribly optimistic that an early March day would do much good. Conditions felt about right for a persistent fog at least until midday.

David was awake when Ben walked into the house. “How do you feel?” he asked.

David grunted. “About the same as before.”

Ben looked up at Maggie. “We discussed it,” he said. “Jacob has agreed to stay here and help with your medical needs while I continue after my daughter and the others. When I'm done, I'll collect him on my way south.”

At length, she said, “We appreciate that. But I have to ask, what if ye fail? Worse, what if ye...donna come back?”

Ben sighed. “If I don't come back, it means someone killed me. If that happens...” He looked at Jacob. “…then I guess you'll have to make a new family here.”

Jacob looked like he was about to tear up. Instead, he just threw his arms around Ben. Ben hugged him back.

Two hours later, Ben stood by the gate to the compound. Maggie had arranged for as many spice rolls as he could carry, in addition to a couple of jugs of cider. They hung from the back of his pack like something out of an old Western movie. Other provisions and restocked medical supplies, particularly alcohol, were safely stowed within.

He wore the kilt and shirt Maggie had given him. She said the kilt clashed with his dull rust plaid flannel shirt, but he didn't particularly care. His jacket peeked out of both sides of his pack.

He hugged his nephew tightly. “I'll be back. I promise. I love you.”

“I love you too, Ben.” Jacob sounded like he was about to cry. Ben could relate.

“Take care of him,” he told Maggie. Then he turned and trudged across the grass and onto the shoulder of the freeway.
The real Bun Hunt still hasn't seen much Star Trek, incidentally. Although when we were visiting him a couple of weeks ago, he wasted few opportunities to needle me about "Star Trek, that's the one with Luke Skywalker." And so on.

"Hork" is apparently a Canadian-ism. I learned it from Ben, who learned it from his elder brother Luke, who learned it either from the movie "Strange Brew"--which is actually a rather clever retelling of "Hamlet" set in late-twentieth-century Canada--or from some guys when he was studying glaciers in Alaska a while back.

In 1961, Russian doctor Leonid Rogozov performed his own appendectomy in Antarctica. He had the benefit of some available novocaine for use as local anaesthetic. Ouch!

Next time you're travelling along I-5, do stop in at Heaven on Earth. In addition to their famous cinnamon rolls, which are about half the size of your head--I'm not kidding--they have nut spice rolls, carrot cake, red velvet cake, and a whole plethora of other baked goods. I haven't eaten at their restaurant, however, so I based the menu on what I figured an establishment like that might have to alter in the Changed world. For more on Heaven on Earth, please see their website: http://www.heavenonearthbakery.com/
Chapter 8

Myrtle Creek, OR
March 11, CY 10, 2021 AD

Drip...drip...drip...drip.... A watery rhythm countered the staccato pattering of rain on leaves, both blending with rushing river water. All were familiar sounds. Huddling beneath a freeway overpass, on the other hand, was less so.

That wasn't to say it was the first night he'd ever spent under a bridge. Far from it. It had just been a while. During the First Change Year, he'd spent quite a few nights beneath bridges as the Hunt Clan had dodged Eaters, banditry, and early autumn storms in the Sacramento Valley. But once the Clan had begun to acquire more tents in CY 2, the days of sleeping beneath bridges had ended.

The practice had certain advantages. A bridge gave absolute shelter from rain, sun, and often wind and heat. It was also the next best thing to a cave, which was exactly what one wanted when trying to camp unobserved, or just duck out of sight. And, of course, one didn't have to pack up a bridge when it was time to move on. It also didn't leak, except near the edges where rain water trickled down between expansion joints.

But bridges had become terribly inconvenient once the Clan had begun using pack animals. And, of course, there wasn't always a bridge available when one was needed, which was the case far more often than not. In that respect, Ben had been a little spoiled since leaving Ashland.

Despite a decade of default deferred maintenance of most roadways, bridges had held up nicely. Except where flood damage had caused problems. Mostly, those had to do with bank erosion at one or both ends of a span, and sometimes large debris pinned up against pylons set into a riverbed. So far, none of that interfered too much with travel by foot.

But the one inescapable problem with camping under a bridge was finding a level spot to throw out a bed roll. There was sometimes a ledge where ferro-concrete pylons had been sunk into the cut during original construction, and sometimes there wasn't, depending on how a particular bridge had been engineered.

Ben had lucked out. The western bank of the South Umpqua River was more or less flat where a bridge spanned it between I-5 and the town of Myrtle Creek. A gentle slope beneath the span's footing met the not-quite-flat gravelly apron on which he lay not far from the river's high water line. A ferro-concrete pylon stood between him and the river.

The opposite bank, on the other hand, was steep, brushy, and practically right under the nose of what passed for a fortified guard tower. He'd thought about moving on, lest he be discovered by some midnight patrol. But his fatigue had been persuasive, and with it the knowledge that exhaustion made a person prone to careless mistakes.

Ben lay stretched out in a pre-Change down sleeping bag, well-patched with duct tape in some places, whip-stitched in others, and melted-together nylon in still others, a tattered and taped pre-Change Thermarest RidgeRest pad beneath him, trying not to move much. He chewed a last bit of jerky while pondering yet another very long day.

It had started out well enough, for all that he'd left his nephew among complete strangers. The going had been easy at first, the highway flat and long cleared of vehicles. The weather had been chilly, but dry enough for early March. The climb up from Quines Valley toward Canyon Creek Pass had been
uneventful.

Ben’s habitual wariness had yielded nothing of note for the several forested miles between the pass and the ramps to the southern end of Canyonville. That had been where the trouble had started.

He’d been warned that the Round Prairie Indians tended to run hot-and-cold when it came to their relations with Clan McClintock. They were, as they’d been before the Change, a geopolitical island. An informal treaty granted McClintocks nearly-unrestricted travel along Pacific Highway through their territory.

But when Ben had arrived there, he’d been intercepted by several mounted braves just outside of town. Half of them hadn’t looked particularly Indian. That was common enough among the various Indian nations with which the Hunt Clan was familiar. So Ben hadn’t asked about it. The questions he had asked, particularly about anyone matching the description of his quarry, had been met with near-silence.

But that silence had told him a lot about what he'd wanted to know. Namely, that his quarry had started some sort of trouble and the Indians had sealed their borders until further notice.

After God knew how much back and forth, and despite the standard practice of approaching a stranger with arrow point down and draw relaxed, the braves had escorted Ben rather unceremoniously to the southern end of Main Street where it dead-ended at the freeway.

Ben had retreated southward under the watchful eye of his not-so-warm welcoming committee. As soon as he’d rounded the first bend in the road, he’d immediately plunged into the forest, climbing westward into the hills. He’d known even those first steps to be a gamble. But he’d run low on options.

To the east lay more Indian territory and then the still snow-bound Cascades. To the south was a lot of backtracking and more than likely a circuitous route toward the coast before arcing back somewhere west of Roseburg. Both of which would have been equally unacceptable.

He’d known he could have been followed. Even before the Change, Indian trackers had had a reputation. But he’d also known that such reputations had often been exaggerated. Variations on “he can track a man across bare rock” had been the stuff of legends. But since the Change, after which so many people had come to depend on someone’s ability to follow a game trail, halfway decent tracking skills had become quite common.

In fact, he’d been expecting it. That in mind, he'd carefully negotiated a drainage running up toward the crest. Fir and cedar had filled in nicely in the absence of commercial logging. Through the boughs, he could barely make out the road-way. Still, he moved slowly and smoothly. He crossed and recrossed the drainage creek several times on his way to the crest, having first removed his moccasins to keep them dry while he padded barefooted over rocks and bare logs, the cold slowly climbing up his legs.

In some places, marble-leaved trout-lilies poked out through the duff between sword ferns near where broad-leaved maples and black alder clung to the streambank, still a week or two from opening their creamy flowers. A few salmonberries spread vivid pink, pendulous flowers, their leaves just starting to break bud.

A short traverse along a ridge-line blanketed with large patches of late-season snow had brought him to a gravel road deserted of all except a line of fresh cougar tracks through lingering snow drifts still laying in shadow and hollow.
A view to the northeast had shown him most of Canyonville and the surrounding valley, the ribbons of I-5 and the South Umpqua River threading around a ridge to vanish northward. He'd spent his lunch break scanning the countryside west of the Interstate for potential routes. Once his stomach and mind had been satisfied, he'd spent some time doing sword katas.

He'd been more than a little resistant to taking up the blade back in the first Change Year. But a couple of Medievalists and a particularly violent encounter with a band of Eaters had changed his mind. It had still taken him some time to reconcile the use of violence with both the Hippocratic Oath and his Christian faith. He'd eventually decided failure to lift his hand in defense against violence to be the greater sin.

Following back roads had always been tricky, even before the Change. They hardly ever went where expected. The road—bearing the usual tell-tale signs of at least seasonal use—had eventually spilled him out into some valley west of Canyonville. Just how far west, he hadn't been sure. So he'd taken a nap up the slope against a tree and awoken some time after dark.

Making use of his infrared vision, he'd twined across that valley, over the toe of a small hill, across more farmland, across a still-intact pre-Change bridge spanning a swollen stream, and then up into more hills where he'd decided to stop for what remained of the night.

He'd spent the whole next day roller-coastering over ridges and along dirt and gravel roads, some of them still in use, others clearly not. All the while, he'd had to move more slowly than he'd have liked. He'd been trespassing on private land after entering a country illegally. If caught, he'd probably have been shot and then fed to pigs, his head stuck on a pike as a warning. Or so the stories always went.

His ever-shifting, but always north-by-northeastery, route had taken him through forest, open grassland, cleared crop and pasture land, the occasional pre-Change clear-cut, and a recent burn area. The sun had set about the same time the rain had begun to fall. It had been a light drizzle at first, but had gradually built into the sort of steady spring rain he'd come to know and not-quite-love.

The sound of the river had replaced that of freeway traffic as an auditory navigational aid. As Ben had descended carefully from the hills, he'd had little idea of his location relative to Canyonville. With no city lights to guide him, he'd had to guess. Even in the dark, he'd easily read the pre-Change sign: Exit 108 to Myrtle Creek.

Ben barely remembered where that was and still didn't know if it was within Indian territory. Now, huddled beneath a bridge and waiting for sleep, he figured he could worry about that in the morning.
A light mist hung over the South Umpqua River, giving everything in view a light grey tint in the pre-dawn light. A gentle lapping of water over the wide gravel apron beneath the silent Interstate and the distant rushing of shallow rills upstream and downstream blended into the mist. A blue heron slowly plied the shallows upriver.

Ben's attention was on the tangles of willow, alder, and cottonwood jutting out into the water directly downstream. That was one of the places trout were likely to be, hiding from herons and osprey.

Going fishing had once been a pastime, back before the Change. It was still fun, in its own way, but Ben had completely changed the way he thought about the activity. It had been one thing to try to catch a fish to supplement a standard macaroni-and-cheese dinner during a backpacking trip.

But needing to catch a fish to feed himself and his family was something else entirely. In some ways, it required the sort of mindset employed by fly-fisherman—thinking like a fish, paying attention to the hatch, reading the water. But unlike casual fly-fishing, failure to catch fish wasn't much of an option.

That wasn't to say Ben hadn't seen more fishless days than he'd have liked. Those had been quite frequent the first few years after the Change, especially where local human populations had cleaned out the rivers during the early weeks and months leading into the Dying Time. But as angling pressure had all but vanished, fish populations had rebounded. Statistically, the more fish there were, the greater the chances of catching one.

That didn't mean they were just going to let him walk up and grab them, of course. Fish were still fish and it still took nearly the same amount of skill to avoid spooking them. It took even more skill to find bait on-site and then properly present it to a fish. But Ben had a good decade of practice. So, also, did everyone else.

He glanced downriver in the direction of Roseburg proper. He was sure the river had been cleaned out in the wake of the Change. He was just as sure that fish living in less accessible places had migrated to fill unoccupied niches. The fishing pressure had probably dropped off anyway. People just didn't have enough spare hours to spend in pursuit of trout more than occasionally. He suspected that, as in other western rivers, fishing focused on salmon runs, which tended to have a substantially more favorable return on labor.

Soon enough, Ben felt the tell-tale staccato tug at the other end of his line. He gave it just a little bit of slack, letting the fish take its first tentative nibbles before setting the hook. The fish immediately reacted. Ben kept a firm pressure on the line, using his arm to absorb the shock in the absence of a limber rod.

There'd been a time when fighting a fish had been most of the fun of fishing. He still enjoyed it. Sometimes it was even necessary, depending on the size of the fish. But since the Change, one didn't have the luxury of spending inordinate amounts of time landing a fish.

Ben let the fish take only as much slack as it needed to not break the line. Monofilament was increasingly hard to find in usable condition. Worse, he'd have to start all over again, tie on another hook—which were even harder to find than good monofilament, even if they lasted longer--find
more bait, and then present it to spooked fish.

Twenty minutes later, Ben lay his cleaned trout—a nice twelve-inch rainbow—on a large log while he built a small fire. As he worked, his memory drifted back to the days of his youth, and those of his almost-youth.

Back then, any old fire was usually satisfactory. Sometimes there had been certain situational requirements, even if some of those were perceived. There had been the fires in his home's steel wood stove. And the large bonfires like the one he and his friends had built during his bachelor camp-out that had immolated several small trees. Fires, too, had Changed along with everything else.

Besides the noticeable lack of so much crackling, presumably due to the general failure of gases to expand rapidly enough to blow bits off of burning wood, one had to be even more careful with fire than before. A poorly-contained cooking fire was dangerous without a U.S. Forest Service to do things like drop retardant on a summer wildfire.

That danger had become starkly obvious many times during the First Change Year. Ben had seen multiple fires during the Sacramento Crossing, as it had come to be called. A couple of those had been escapees from a Hunt Clan campfire. Others had likely been from someone else's. Others still had probably been from a funeral pyre. A few times, they'd encountered the aftermath of a fire, charred bodies reminding Ben of nothing so much as the still-smoldering remains of Owen and Beru on Tatooine.

In addition to the immediate environmental hazards, kindling a fire was the surest way to signal your location to anyone, friend and foe alike, who might be watching. And so everyone in the Clan had gone to great lengths to learn how to build smokeless fires. As was so often the case, the practice was far trickier than the theory suggested. Achieving it required hot and fast complete combustion and that required diligent fuel preparation and deliberate introduction of that fuel to the fire. The whole thing was as much art as science.

It took Ben at least as much time to build his fire as it had for him to catch and clean his fish. Once he had a solid bed of softly-glowing embers, he went about making his meal. By then, there was enough sunlight to see without his enhanced eye, even in the light shadow cast by the freeway span.

He lodged the ends of two stout sticks between some rocks, then shoved the trout onto them such that it hung suspended above the coals. Normally, whoever was on cooking rotation would have used a pre-Change barbecue grill.

While the fish cooked, Ben mixed up a batch of biscuits-on-a-stick and set those to bake next to the fish. He dipped a small titanium kettle into the river and set that to boil. After that, he set a spice roll to warm on a rock beside the fire.

It was one of those times he wished he had some Tang. But no one had even seen any of that in several years. It was true that food warehouses had been operated in some pretty unexpected, and sometimes out-of-the-way, places. It was also true that the Hunt Clan had stumbled upon a few of those during the first few years after the Change. They had also stumbled upon the occasional food truck hidden in some ravine or other after having crashed the night of the Change. But those days were long gone.

For years, all beverages were either herbal tea—infusions, technically—or just plain water. Occasionally, dairy, goat, or sheep milk was available. A few times a year, they ran across someone willing to trade real coffee for medical care. Ben chose ground dandelion and chicory root cut with peppermint and Agastache urticifolia, adding a sprig of western red-cedar he'd plucked along the way. He poured a couple of tablespoons of it into a stainless steel Sierra cup.
When his water had reached a boil, he poured a little into the Sierra cup and set that aside, then added two fists full of oats, some raisins, and pieces of dried nashi to the remainder of the water. He returned his attention to the fish.

As he expected, the fish was not going to cook evenly. Fortunately, he didn't possess an aversion to raw fish, even before the Change. He nimbly flipped the fish around so that it continued to cook head-down. He rotated the biscuits and spice roll some more. It still amazed him sometimes how much post-Change cooking came down to a lot of waiting, even more than pre-Change camping, especially since things like Kraft Mac-&-Cheese, Top Ramen, and S'mores had all but faded into legend.

Ben spared a few moments to look around. The I-5 bridge spanned the river at close to a forty-five-degree angle relative to north-south. Across the river stood a building he'd seen on his way in. Only just visible above the alders lining the river bank, it rose a few stories above adjacent railroad tracks, sheet metal walls slowly rusting. Its original purpose was a mystery to him.

Above the building, the eastern sky continued to lighten with the promise of a coming sunrise and at least part of a clear day. He knew the old Hwy. 99 and north-bound off-ramps lay on that side, dead vehicles having been hauled off long ago. Some of those had been deposited at the Department of Transportation yard and the grounds of the plywood plant and school bus parking lot south of the river crossing. Ben assumed those vehicles had been progressively cannibalized over the years.

An open, grassy slope rising up from the river ended at oak and madrone woodland, its flocks of sheep not visible from Ben's campfire. The view both upstream and downstream was nothing but more alders back from which stretched more cleared land, some in pasture, some in winter wheat.

As various parts of his breakfast finished cooking, he sat back and ate them, chewing thoroughly. He knew he'd once taken food almost for granted. It had taken the Change to instill in him a genuine appreciation for it.

As he ate, first his biscuits, then the fish, alternating sips of his rapidly-cooling pseudo-coffee, and finishing it all off with a generous chunk of spice roll, he contemplated the plan for the day.

It had been so long since he'd traveled I-5. He'd been mainly making it all up as he went. He seemed to remember some cliffs near one of the Roseburg exits, cliffs that could quite easily have calved off large rocks and making the road impassible.

That was a distinct possibility, one he'd seen multiple times and not just north of Ashland. Without heavy machinery, any rockfall on any road had to be cleared by hand or heavy livestock, often with the use of block and tackle. And if that weren't possible, the route was abandoned in favor of another, usually one dating back to the nineteenth century.

He'd seen little sign of his quarry since his initial descent into the Umpqua Valley just south of Glengary. Even that had been some not-so-fresh horse scat. But it had contained the right amount of whatever their handlers had been feeding them. Even if they'd taken the exit into town, there was a possibility that would slow them down enough that he might be able to get ahead of them.

After eating, Ben did more sword katas while the coals died down. He raked them out, scattering them across the gravel, then did knife katas for good measure. When he was satisfied that the coals had lost enough heat, he packed up and headed out.

As he'd suspected, the high cut west of the freeway had spilled copious amounts of rock onto the road bed, despite the multiple terracing that had been engineered specifically to avoid that much rock fall. But, as he'd seen so many times to the south, a decade of deferred maintenance had led to the
cumulative effects of land slides.

The entire south-bound side was completely blocked. Multiple rocks had spilled over into the north-bound lanes. Horses could have passed easily enough, and people on foot for sure. But there wasn't enough room for a wagon. Nor were there signs that anyone had attempted to move any of the rock. No, his quarry must have taken the exit east of the river crossing.

Just past the rockfall, the way opened up again. Ben could see several burned-out areas from the freeway. But without a more elevated perspective like the one he'd enjoyed passing Grants Pass, it was impossible to determine the extent of the damage. Even so, it was quite clear that the city north of the second river crossing had been abandoned after the Change and had remained so.

That wasn't surprising. That had been the state of things everywhere. Every surviving community had contracted, dramatically in some cases. Between population loss and the logistics of defense, it was a rare town that occupied even close to its pre-Change acreage.

Roseburg was no exception. From an overpass, he could see a pair of fortified guard towers at the eastern ends of the twin bridges leading into the downtown area. That alone told him Roseburg's core had survived.

That was not always the case, of course. It was a rare town that had been untouched by fire the night of the Change, and a rarer one still that had remained so in the weeks and months that had followed. But the location and extent of the fires varied widely. The reasons for that were equally varied. Even when a downtown area had been spared the flames, it had sometimes been abandoned anyway.

A small knot of people ahead caught his attention. Even from that distance, he recognized the scene of an accident. It was going to be another long day.
Ben crested the low, unnamed pass south of Rice Hill and breathed a sigh of relief. Passes had always been among the places of choice for ambushes, going back for thousands of years. That had been one of the most salient travel hazards since the Change, especially given the way most roads had been engineered in the twentieth century.

Despite a decade of experience, he continued to be somewhat surprised at how well a highway's verge tended to become overgrown. When the Change had rendered sheep and goats the only truly efficient mowing equipment, a solid wall of vegetation alongside a road had become one of the surest signs of a lack of civilization. He hadn't seen much of that since just north of Sutherlin.

After assisting with the accident he'd seen in Roseburg, which had involved a wagon and a pedestrian, one thing had led to another. Five days and several surgeries later, he'd finally persuaded the town's medicos to allow him to leave. But the delay had cost him all sign of his quarry—or mostly.

A few broken big-leaf maple or Douglas fir saplings along the way had marked where something the size of a wagon had passed in its effort to steer around stalled vehicles that still sat where they'd died. In some places, partial wheel marks or hoof prints had been pressed into a gravel road shoulder. Twice Ben had encountered a freshly-dismembered blow-down.

The descent to Rice Hill presented him with what might have passed for a photograph of the town the day before the Change. As in most places, vehicles remained where they'd stalled that evening. A couple of them, mostly at the foot of the grade, bore scorch marks, white bones visible through broken or dirty auto glass. Most were empty, some with doors still ajar. Ben hopped up onto the concrete median separating the north-bound and south-bound lanes. He certainly wasn't surprised that most post-Change traffic between Drain and Sutherlin had followed Hwy. 138 along the Umpqua River, rather than Pacific Highway.

Rice Hill had once been essentially a big truck stop along I-5. A small but thriving ice cream place, the K&R Drive-in, now deserted, occupied a spot west of the freeway, towering cottonwoods slowly encroaching on the grounds. Ben recalled that the place used to serve ice cream produced by Umpqua Dairy.

East sat the remains of the Ranch Motel, laying like a scorched whale, charred timbers reaching skyward like so many blackened ribs revealed by a hatching alien leaving half the carcass untouched. A slowly-fading Arco sign identified a gas station that probably still held something flammable beneath the pavement. Beyond that, the words on a badly-damaged black-and-yellow sign were barely legible as “Adult Store,” the building beside it a pile of charred rubble. A Motel 6 showed no sign that anyone was there to leave the proverbial light on for travelers. The sign for a Pilot Travel Center and the associated Subway and Denny's restaurants loomed above a small fleet of tractor-trailer trucks still awaiting a fueling they would never receive.

Head-high saplings—mostly maple, fir, cedar, and madrone—grew where seed had fallen. Where the usual roadside grassy verge had been, mounds of Himalayan blackberry presented an effective barrier. In some places, a glint of glass or metal marked where a vehicle lurked beneath the vegetation.
Several not-so-long dead bodies lay in the verge near the north-bound offramp, limbs tangled in blackberry canes. Two of them had broken arrow shafts protruding from obviously fatal wounds. Another had been stabbed in the throat. Obvious blunt-force trauma injuries on the other three bore the signatures of a bludgeon weapon. They all appeared to have been stripped of anything valuable. Ben estimated that they'd been dead at least three days, possibly as long as a week. Being both a doctor and a Change survivor tended to give a person a pretty good eye for such things. Only a coroner or a medical examiner might have had a closer estimate.

Around them, the blackberries and what little grass remained had been heavily trampled. In one place, it looked like something large had fallen onto the blackberry canes and later been dragged off of them. Ben guessed it had been a horse injured or killed in whatever violence had transpired. That animal had probably been butchered and eaten. Banditry was apparently still alive and well in McClintock territory.

Ben padded cautiously down the offramp to John Long Rd. Nothing stirred. An anomaly off to the left toward the Pilot caught his attention. The asphalt in the middle of the parking lot had been partially melted. It even still bore a little residual heat. Whatever had been there must have burned either very hot or over a long period of time. Possibly both. A dark stain near the melted area smelled very much like days-old blood.

The owners of the dead animal seemed to have dragged it to this spot, butchered it, cooked or smoked the meat, incinerated the leftovers, then scattered the ashes. It didn't require much imagination to guess who had done it, nor who had been compelled to perform the less-agreeable tasks.

Ben cast another look about, searching for any signs that anyone might be watching him. He toggled on his infrared vision. In the cool spring weather, any body heat was sure to stick out like a sore thumb. But there was only the expected background heat. Satisfied, he padded across the expanse of asphalt toward the Pilot.

Every one of the tractor-trailer trucks had its cargo doors hanging either slightly ajar, or all the way open. Many of the trailers could have been hauling any number of things. Others, like the Winco Foods truck that had stalled mid-turn, or the McDonald's trailer half-visible beyond a Winnebago, had most certainly been picked clean the first week after the Change event. Ben went snooping about anyway.

As expected, there was nothing edible anywhere. Even a Hostess truck had been picked clean. Ben made a face. He remembered a joke someone had made at one point that addressed doubts about a Twinkie actually being food. The issuer had put several Twinkies through a battery of tests. In each one, the Twinkie did not respond like any known edible. In the end, the experimenter determined that Twinkes were not, in fact, food. Apparently, someone in the wake of the Change had disagreed. Which was too bad, really, since a packaged Twinkie was known to have an inordinately long shelf life. On the other hand, one might have made him ill. Even before the Change, he'd noticed that the more he ate good food, the less he was able to tolerate bad food.

A UPS truck had been ransacked, the boxes torn open, their contents strewn about. Ben picked up first one item, then another. It was almost like an archaeological dig, a glaring reminder of what the old world had valued and the things around which people had built their lives. Some of it was simply junk: plastic toys; designer clothing; sports memorabilia. Other things had once been useful, mainly electronics. Still others had been, and still were, worth having: books; a few tools; certain kinds of office supplies. Other boxes had been emptied of whatever had been inside them.

An Aaron’s Appliances truck still contained, as expected, electric refrigerators, ovens, and washing
machines. The trailer doors stood open. Most of the boxes within arm's reach had been ripped apart, though whether by humans to be used as fire tinder, or by rodents as nesting material, Ben couldn't quite tell at a glance. Otherwise, none of the cargo seemed to have been disturbed.

Of four flat-bed trucks, two had clearly been looted. Tie-down straps and shredded bits of some sort of wrapping still dangled from the trailer. The other two still held concrete drain pipe and a piece of heavy grading equipment, both possibly once destined for the same construction site.

A moving van still contained most of some family's possessions. Ben leaned against a sofa and cried like he hadn't in years. Not for the loss of furniture, or fine tableware, or a wardrobe full of suits and dresses. It was the corner of a family portrait peeking out of a ripped-open cardboard box: mom, dad, two boys, a girl, and a golden retriever. There was something about things like burned-out buildings or wrecked vehicles that had been normal even before the Change. He'd even become hardened toward the sight of human remains. But there was something about that portrait that made the whole thing personal, as though he'd just had a brief connection. The items in the trailer had been someone's life the way items offered at a pre-Change estate sale had represented someone's life.

And so it went. Sometimes, he could tell what had been taken based on packing slips. Other times, he'd simply guessed. In some cases, it seemed that the looters knew what they were doing. In others, they seemed to have been desperate, or simply rushed. Sometimes a brown blood stain testified to violence. He'd even found a couple of skeletons sprawled where they'd probably died, and one that had been dismembered by scavengers, probably coyotes.

Ben didn't bother looking inside the building. He knew from years of experience what he'd find there. Had it been January, he might have sought shelter within. As it was, the overhang in front provided sufficient cover from both whatever rain might fall from the slate grey sky, and casual prying eyes. He shrugged off his pack and sat down with his back to a corner, contemplating his next move as he ate.
Chapter 11

Cottage Grove, Oregon
March 22, CY 10, 2021 AD

Ben stared at what should have been a familiar road sign, the one identifying the Lane County line. The large, green sign still stood bolted to a pair of stout four-by-fours. The words on it had changed.

At first, he'd suspected that a new sign had been made. But that would have necessitated pre-Change equipment that no longer functioned. When he'd peered closely at the sign, and then again with his infrared vision, strange ripples in its surface jumped out at him.

There appeared to be stretch marks or ridges marring the surface. It was almost as if the white, reflective letters had been dragged across the sign's surface while still attached to the rest of the sign. The more he looked at it, the more it became clear that the letters had been shifted and re-formed without having been removed first, some even having been contorted into completely different letters.

That wasn't all. The sign itself was much larger than the previous County Line identifier. Ridges in the metal suggested that it had been stitched together out of several other signs, but without having been welded. The twin posts supporting it showed a strange helical twist, as though they had been a single post that had been split and then regrown. That could mean only one thing: magic.

That explained why he recognized the otherwise strange font on the top half of the sign. It was the same script he remembered seeing scrawled on a piece of paper that had served as the blueprint for his new eye, a blueprint designed and written by an Ingarian. On the bottom half of the sign, large, friendly block letters in English confirmed it: “Welcome to Ingary.”

Ingary. That had been the name of the homeworld of Sophie Pendragon, the woman who'd reconstructed his ruined eye the summer before the Change. But Ingary had been obliterated by a supernova and as far as Ben knew, most of its survivors lived on Kupreanav Island in southeastern Alaska. Apparently, the Ingarians had again relocated.

That might explain the strange rumors he'd heard from a trader near the junction of the road toward Drain, rumors that had kept him awake for a good long while the previous night as he'd lain stretched out on half-dry conifer duff in what had once been Pass Creek County Park outside of a small, dead town identified as Curtin. The same trader had told him that refugees from Eugene had overrun that area and that it had yet to be resettled. The occasional bits of sun-bleached bone and shreds of clothing poking through vegetation and fallen detritus testified to that.

The rumors had been something else. Apparently, someone powerful had deposed Norman Arminger and taken control of his Protectorate in early March. Another someone, or perhaps the same someone depending on which variation of the rumors might be closer to the truth, had begun moving into the ruins of Eugene.

He'd pondered those rumors over breakfast as he'd sat beneath a covered picnic shelter waiting out a heavy spring shower. He still pondered them as he stood staring at a bilingual sign written in Ingarian and English. He still didn't know the details. But he was quite certain that if anyone had the resources to help him find his abducted children, it would be Ingarian magi.

Ben started walking. The second thing Ben noticed, aside from the sign, was that the road was empty. It wasn't simply absent of travelers. It was completely empty of everything and anything. The
verge was still just as overgrown and shaggy as it was everywhere else. But someone had removed every last stalled vehicle in both north- and south-bound lanes from the Ingarian border as far as he could see.

He continued to scan the vegetation. Any body heat was bound to stand out against the background of cool weather and the overnight dampness. Minutes later, the little Pass Creek valley opened out at the top of a rise into what he vaguely remembered had been open farm land.

Aside from the missing vehicles, there was still no sign of habitation. Yet even the occasional human bones, which still littered the highways and adjacent land in most places, were gone. If the Ingarians had indeed only been in the area for a couple of weeks, they either had an awful lot of manpower, a good deal of other kinds of power, or an interesting sense of prioritization. Ben suspected it was probably all of that and more.

A third thing he noticed was that not only had all the signs been rewritten, but all the names had been changed. An offramp led not to Cottage Grove, but to Market Chipping.

For a while, there was very little to see but a wall of Douglas fir, western red-cedar, big-leaf maple, and English hawthorn on both sides of the roadway. The still-bare branches of the deciduous members of the verge yielded the occasional glimpse of fields beyond, overgrown with un-mown grass and mounds of blackberry.

The even more occasional horse droppings could have been left by his quarry. The scat content was right. But Ben had no idea what the Ingarians fed their horses. But then again, perhaps they rode something completely different, something alien. Further, he had to admit that, for all he knew, alien animals just might leave curiously equine scat.

He drew in a long breath, held it for several moments, then slowly released it. His quest was turning out to be more complicated than he'd imagined when he'd first set out. He'd been under no delusions of its difficulty. But aliens and magic had certainly never been part of the equation. At least, not beyond his eye, and that had been with him for a decade.

Ben kept an arrow on the string as he walked. He picked up the pace a little, resisting the urge to hurry. Rushing things was a good way to get a person killed, especially in the Changed world.

A short time later, he crossed an overpass. To the northwest, what had once been a lumberyard lay in charred ruins. To the east and across a creek, a few mobile homes remained in a lake of ash and cinder. After more overgrown verge intermittently giving way to views of shaggy, blackberry-dotted fields, a sign on another underpass identified Sixth Street in both Ingarian and English.

Nearly another mile later, a second overpass gave Ben a view into a couple of residential neighborhoods. As with nearly everywhere else, multiple adjacent lots had burned, probably from someone's runaway fire burning out the neighbors during the first weeks after the Change. And just as with everywhere else in Ingary thus far, vehicles and human remains had been removed. Another overpass a few hundred yards later yielded a similar view of housing tracts to the east and west, clumps of them burnt to the ground.

At a third overpass, Ben lurched to a screeching halt above Main St. To the right, the road curved around trees and into mostly-intact residential. To the left, he had an unobstructed view straight into downtown a half-mile away.

On the north side of the street, signs identifying Bi-Mart, Arby’s, O’Riley Auto Parts, Walgreens, Safeway, and Pink House Restaurant peaked out around street trees, some shaggy and some long dead. On the south side, Ben could make out an espresso place and some apartment buildings. Some
of the building looked intact, while others had obviously burned partially or completely, and others still not visible enough to tell. The far downtown area was too far away to see well, even with his telescopic vision.

As before, all stalled vehicles were missing. Otherwise, the center of town teemed with activity. Everywhere Ben could see, scores of people carried objects to and fro. In some cases, those objects were clearly building materials, usually broken pieces of lumber and masonry. Those they loaded into dozens of sturdy carts. But instead of horses, the animals hitched to the carts were not like any Ben had ever seen. A few resembled bovines. A couple of others looked remarkably like Brontothereum. Others he'd never seen before, either in drawings or in museums. One looked suspiciously like a Protoceratops, though it was too far away to be certain. At one point, someone trotted down the street astride what had to have been a moa.

Those parts of the rumors were apparently true. The Ingarians had moved into what had once been Cottage Grove, intent on rebuilding it. Ben watched for several minutes, the sounds of breaking wood, rending metal, and clinking masonry blending with humanoid voices and braying beasts.

At last, he tore his attention away. He had a job to do. As he walked, he tried to remember what the pre-Change population of Cottage Grove had been. Eight thousand? Ten? It had probably been something like that. But he did remember that somewhere in excess of three hundred thousand Ingarians had survived the destruction of their homeworld. He had no idea what the attrition rate had been since then. Even if they'd lost ninety percent of their number, as had been the case with his own kind in the wake of the Change, the people he'd just seen would still have accounted for only a small fraction of that.

The offramp to “Downtown of Market Chipping” still bore the dark stains left by fluids spilled from the vehicles and people that had died there the night of the Change. Otherwise, the roadway remained eerily empty. Post-Change road conditions, complete with dead vehicles and cleared lanes, had become so much background over the years. But somehow, though he now knew the reason for it, Ingary’s vacant highway gave him the willies.

It apparently gave his quarry the willies, too. Another pile of several-day-old horse scat lay just past the offramp. That meant they hadn't attempted to leave the Interstate. Or maybe they'd tried, but their scouts had recommended against it. Either way, there was still a chance he might catch them, even without help from the Ingarians.

The signage indicated a Row River Rd. as well as the downtown area. A gap in the vegetation gave him a view of the usual post-Change carnage.

To the west, tall signs stood over the burnt-out husks of a McDonald's, a Jack-in-the-Box, and a Carl's Jr. A Dutch Bro's Coffee stand beside the Carl's still looked intact, though there was practically no chance it still sheltered anything edible. Behind the Carl's, a Best Western motel still looked habitable.

To the east, a WalMart sign towered over that establishment's parking lot. It was impossible to tell from that angle if the structure was still even remotely sound. A hospital and an airport also supposedly lay in that direction, according to the signage, but vegetation blocked any views.

As he’d seen since the southern border of Ingary, roads and parking lots were completely empty. As baffling as determining the means by which all those vehicles had been removed, the question of just where they’d all gone was equally so. And unlike the downtown streets, the area adjacent to the exit was empty. Well, almost.

Ben dropped his bow, and the arrow with it, his jaw following. Down the embankment, three large
animals stood just off the street, munching away on an expansive mound of blackberries that had overgrown all the unpaved ground bound by the Interstate, its north-bound on-ramp, and Row River Rd. He recognized the animals immediately.

One of them was a bit smaller than a Volkswagen Beetle, the other two the size of a large U-Haul truck. They gave Ben the overall impression of rhinos with their squat stance and rough-bumpy-looking skin. But the similarities stopped there. Brick-red hides bristled with conspicuous stiff hairs that gave them a vaguely fuzzy appearance. Sturdy tails counter-balanced massive heads. Broad, stiff frills obscured their necks, twin horns jutted out from their foreheads, and a third, much smaller horn stuck up from stiffly-beaked snouts.

Ben blinked, then blinked again, finally managing to close his mouth. It was one thing to see animals that had become extinct on Earth within recorded history. Setting eyes on a trio of living Triceratops was something else entirely.

When Ben was finally able to pry his eyes off the dinosaurs, he retrieved his dropped weapons and quietly moved onward. No sooner had he left the interchange behind, then the south-bound traffic began to pick up.

Naturally, anything would have been considered “picking up.” A lone wagon driven by a young-looking couple and pulled by a single animal that looked mostly equine left the freeway headed into Market Chipping. Ben didn’t know if they’d noticed him.

A few minutes later, he passed an adjacent golf course supported a small herd of what looked like camelids tended by a pair of herders astride moas.

The scene repeated itself over and over as Ben plodded northward. Ingarians had set beasts to graze in the overgrown fields. Some of the animals he recognized from drawings and the fossil record: anatosauras; glyptodonts; parasaurs. At one point, he slowed to give a wide berth to a lone ankylosaur gnawing on a blow-down. The beast looked over at him, grunted, then went back to its meal. Other animals were familiar: cattle; sheep; llamas. Others still were totally alien. Ben didn’t know how to begin to describe them.

All the while, traffic continued to stream south-bound, a wagon loaded with possessions or people here, a lone mounted person there, all separated by what Ben guessed to be fifteen or twenty minutes. Occasionally, one of them turned to wave at him. Children laughed and pointed. Every single person wore a smile on their face. Ben couldn’t help but smile and wave back.

As darkness fell, Ben bedded down in a Douglas fir thicket just south of what should have been Creswell, but had been renamed Well of Watercress. Clearly some things had been lost in translation.
A light snuffling sound invaded Ben's sleep. He gradually became aware of intermittent puffs of warm air on the side of his face. His eyes flew open, a spike of adrenaline dragging him into full wakefulness.

He forced himself to remain still, despite the numbness where his body weight restricted circulation on his left arm that had again wound up pinned beneath his body in the night. Beyond the rim of his sleeping bag, something grey and furry stood in brown needle duff. The animal's head loomed over his own, sniffing at him. For several long moments, he didn't dare look at it. The sniffing continued, followed by a very damp snort.

Had he been anywhere else, he could have counted on one hand the possible identities of his visitor: coyote; cougar; bear; dog; horse. He knew all of those animals and how to deal with each one. But given what he'd seen the previous day, it could have been anything. More to the point, he had no idea what to do when confronted with any of those other critters.

“Ya-Hiltha? Ya-Hiltha?” The voice sounded like a young girl, and very close. Ben guessed she stood between him and Pacific Highway, or whatever it was the Ingarians had renamed it. “Ya-Hiltha!”

The animal snorted again, its feet rustling in the conifer duff.

“Eh siuriska? Oh!”

“Ya-Elithi?” A woman's voice pierced the trees. “Eh siokhilka?”

“Ya-Mana!” called the girl, evidently Elithi. “Fi hin nashanlon!”

“Sahka?”

“Ai! Sah!” In a more quiet, but commanding, voice, the girl said, “Ya-Hiltha, hin fofenil!”

Ben felt a whoosh of air, then the distinctive dull crunching of footfalls. More footfalls approached, but with a different cadence to them.

“Ya-shanlon?” said the girl from just a couple of paces away from the sound of her. “Sishobuka?”

That word Ben knew. It meant, are you well, or are you alright.

“Ya-Elithi!” said the woman, probably the girl's mother, from even closer than she'd been a moment before. “Reon fomenolg!”

“Leh?”

“Fereglith tukhall.”

“Sahka?” Elithi didn't sound convinced.

Ben rolled into his back and looked up. Three faces stared back at him. Elithi looked like she might have been seven or eight, her large, pale eyes reflecting her mother's. She craned her head around to
look up, a purple-tinged sandy-brown ponytail gathered at the nape of her neck whipping about, then back as she returned her attention to him.

Their clothing looked vaguely Norse, olive green wool apron dresses over straw-colored linen blouses with baggy sleeves. Yellow-ish leggings were visible between the several-inch gap between lower hem and the tops of mid-calf brown leather boots buttoned on the sides.

Beside Elithi, her fingers absently stroking it, stood an animal Ben had never seen before. Slightly larger than an Irish wolfhound, it looked almost like a very lean Microceratops. Instead of a beak, a fleshy, almost equine, muzzle twiched in time with flaring nostrils apparently still sniffing at Ben. A light grey fluff, looking a lot less like fur than it had initially and a lot more like sphagnum moss, streaked with brown and charcoal covered most of the animal. The fur-feathers stopped a little above the eyes, leaving exposed dark grey skin on a frill that flared out from the base of its head. Short, glossy black horns protruded over each eye. When it turned, Ben could see a neck more than twice the length for a ceratopsian.

“Um,” said Ben, “good morning. Er...nal-heratha.” He recalled a few shreds of Ingarian from the days Sophie Pendragon had spent at his parents' place the summer before the Change. The Hunt Clan had used a few words as a sort of code after that. But Ben was sure he'd forgotten at least half of what he'd picked up originally.

The pair said nothing. A grin finally split Elithi's face and she giggled.

“Lem sihunanon!” she laughed.

“Ya-Elithi,” said the mother, “thushanlon fomoetopl.” She turned her attention to Ben. “Musibelthekka?”

Ben blinked the last shred of his sleepiness away. “Um,” he said, searching his memory, “minondelfas.”

Elithi and her mother just blinked at him with their large eyes. Hiltha snorted.

For several long moments, human and aliens gazed at one another over barely a dozen paces, Elithi absently stroking Hiltha's shoulder. After a prolonged silence, the girl smiled. Ben smiled back. Which brought a like smile to the mother. Before long, all had burst into laughter.

“Fomolowi,” said the mother to Elithi after the laughter had abated, “we thushanlon hufri tofreith moalfut.”

She looked at Ben. “Kerl siminondelfas, lem toimuthiad misiskid. Fosidethid thal.”

Elithi turned, waving at Ben as she went. Ben waved back. The trio vanished through the verge. Muffled voices floated back from the roadway, then all was once again quiet.

Ben sat there for a few moments before crawling out of his bag, the rustling of nylon the only sound as he stowed his bedding. A few bites of the last cured garlicky sausages he'd been given in Roseburg, and the last half of a stale spice roll from Heaven on Earth sufficed for an early breakfast.

He stepped onto the road's verge beneath a grey sky. A wagon, presumably the one that had borne Elithi and her mother, had retreated a good distance southward. Ben turned northward on the empty road, quickly picking up his pace. Either the two Ingarians had arisen before dawn, or Ben had slept in. Probably both. In any event, he felt a keen kinship with a certain White Rabbit, scurrying frantically about on his way to some very important date.
More horse dung led Ben past the offramp to Well of Watercress. Patchy mist hung over what bits of field were visible between the small trunks of bare maple, cherry, and hawthorn saplings. Large lumps of what he presumed to be still-sleeping beasts rose above tall grasses. Otherwise, not much moved for some time.

It was easily midday by the time he reached the junction with Willamette Hwy. Ben recalled that it angled more or less straight on its southeasterly route over the Cascades to its junction with Hwy. 97 south of Bend. The altered sign read, “Cascade Mountains” with an arrow pointing in that direction. It also read, “Queensbury South” with another arrow indicating a left-hand turn after leaving the freeway. Apparently Goshen no longer existed. Ben supposed that if the former Lane County really did belong to the Ingarians, they were free to rearrange things as they saw fit.

More animals grazed the grasses, berry canes, and volunteer saplings all around the highway junction beneath a clearing sky.

The evidence so far indicated that the bandits he tailed wanted nothing to do with Ingary. Perhaps it was that anyone who could tame animals like dinosaurs and moas should remain unmolested. Ben agreed, but for more reasons than just the threat of retaliation. So Ben remained on the freeway.

As he neared the Willamette River, the roadbed climbed. Breaks in the vegetation provided a view eastward where several ponds lay surrounded by cottonwood, willow, and red-osier dogwood. Several hadrosaurs plied the pond edges while a pair of shovel-tuskers mucked out one of the smaller ponds.

Cresting Coryell Pass, south-bound traffic increased. As he'd seen the day before, a more or less steady trickle of people on foot, mounted, or in beast-drawn carts headed southward to repopulate the former Lane County. The sight made him happy and sad at the same time.

On the one hand, Ingary was a land without a people for a people without a land, a people who'd had their homeland literally ripped out from beneath their feet. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of humans had died in order to make that land available. Never mind that much of the trouble was the sort his own people had largely brought upon themselves for various and sundry reasons.

Just before the Willamette River crossing, an exit's sign declared, “Queensbury Center” and “University of Ingary.” Ben blinked. Naturally, he wouldn't have expected the University of Oregon to have survived the Change when its supporting city had imploded. But were the Ingarians really establishing their own university so early in their occupation? Perhaps they were merely planning ahead with the signage, with the full intention of using the U of O campus for that purpose at some point.

Beneath the high overpass, foot and wagon traffic streamed below, mostly eastward, the people clearly busy reclaiming the erstwhile city of Eugene and its satellite municipalities and making them their own. Some of that traffic trickled up the on-ramp headed south.

To the east, a large swath of buildings lay in scorched ruins. As he'd seen in Market Chipping, people worked at dragging rubble to the street and loading it into wagons hitched to sturdy beasts. Where they might haul it Ben could only guess. A landfill? Somehow he suspected the Ingarians to be more resourceful and imaginative than that.

Ben leaned on a concrete barrier and watched for several minutes before trudging off across the span. He passed first one metal sculpture of a camas plant at one end, then another different one at the other end. He didn't remember those having been installed the last time he'd driven through Eugene all those years before. But that didn't mean the Ingarians had installed them either. Chances were
good that they just barely pre-dated the Change.

Far below, the waters of the Willamette River rushed over rocks and around the concrete pylons supporting the I-5 bridge. Four people on skiffs twice the size of a wind-surf board floated up-river at bicycle speed. Ben peered at them, then zoomed in.

Each skiff held three people, one of whom stood near the stern holding a staff. Water rippled out from amid-ships, yet the vessels continued their progress upstream as though driven by small outboard motors.

A few minutes later, a good view westward across Alton Baker Park nearly took his breath away. All around, dinosaurs and other animals munched at blackberries and blow-downs, just like he'd seen since early the previous day. But the sheer number and variety of them was nothing short of impressive.

Some of them he'd seen earlier: camels; bovines; sheep and goats; ceratopsians; ankylosaurs. Ben also recognized anatosaurs, iguanadontids, and small, short-necked sauropods. People darted about mounted on ornithomimids, large theropods, and moas. Several other animals the likes of which Ben had never seen and could barely begin to compare to Earth fauna grazed, browsed, or carried riders.

He shrugged out of his pack and perched on the concrete median, munching on a late lunch of honey-sweetened whole-wheat soda crackers with stone-ground peanut butter, sharp white cheddar cheese, and wild carrot, while watching the menagerie spread out before him. He nodded and waved wordlessly to the Ingarians trickling by.

The roadbed descended and Ben soon found himself once again in a canyon of green, overgrown saplings casting late afternoon shade across the road and plunging the next cloverleaf into shadow. He almost remembered which highway it was spanning Pacific Highway, but the new signage didn't help.

It was then that he noticed a pattern to the traffic flow. To the south, it had all been flowing from the direction of Queensbury. Which stood to reason, since Alaska was far to the north. One look at the cloverleaf told him more. Every single person and wagon, with very few exceptions, traveled eastward or southward. Not only were the Ingarians coming from Queensbury, they were coming from a specific location within it.

Ben padded past the interchange, then beneath a pedestrian suspension bridge. More animals grazed the verge around the Beltline Rd. cloverleaf. Small tracts of agricultural land just north of it lay in freshly-plowed furrows.

Beyond that, and nearly obscured by the lowering sun, a rainbow hung in the sky. As he looked away from it, something seemed to move. He looked back. The more he looked, the less like a rainbow it appeared. He toggled his infrared vision and almost had to slam his eyes closed. Whatever it was, it pulsed with a mind-boggling amount of energy. One end was out of sight somewhere to the west, but still very close, probably within the city limits. From there, it rose almost vertically, then arced sharply to the north. Ben would have bet real money that it was the energy stream of Howl's Bifrost Jr. transporting Ingarians from Kupreanov Island a thousand miles north.

Moments later, a distinctly bird-shaped shadow flickered across the road. Ben instinctively glanced upward...and froze. He'd expected a low-flying crow, or possibly a turkey vulture. But the animal soaring above was clearly neither. He initially mistook it for a heron. It shared the same long, sturdy beak, the same neck, the same general wing configuration. But the similarities ended there.

The animal above him held its neck straight like a goose, rather than bowed downward like a heron.
The wings had pointed tips like a swallow, rather than the heron's rounded profile. A tail as long as the neck and head together trailed behind it without any obvious plumage. Lastly, but certainly not least, the obviously humanoid figure perched on the animal's back gave an excellent indication of its size.

Ben watched what had to be some sort of pterodactyl and its rider wheel about like a vulture the size of a Cessna. After a few more wide circles, it flapped its great wings and sailed off northward to perch atop a prominent hilltop that Ben was sure overshadowed the highway.

A short time later, Ben stood on the bridge over the MacKenzie River, gazing up at that hill and some sort of construction underway. It was impossible to tell just what the Ingarians were building up there. From that angle, it looked part castle, part look-out, and part something else. Ben knew next to nothing about Ingarian architecture.

After a few more minutes, he passed a sign that read in English, and presumably Ingarian, “Thank you for visiting Ingary. Please return!”

Ben bedded down beneath trees a little south of Coburg, his head still swimming.
Chapter 13

Woodburn, Corona (formerly the Portland Protectorate)
March 30, CY 10, 2021 AD

Ben Hunt looked up at the St. Paul Hwy. overpass. Someone had painted a large swath of the concrete purple and on that, a bold golden sun. Large, friendly letters beside it said, “WELCOME TO CORONA! ENJOY YOUR STAY!” On the other side, other large, friendly letters said, “WILLKOMMEN IN CORONA! GENIEBEN SIE IHRE ZEIT MIT UNS!” Below that, it presumably said it again in what Ben recognized as Ingarian script.

That much was certainly different. It contrasted starkly with the rumors concerning Norman Arminger's Protectorate. But it also squared nicely with what he'd learned from a young MacKenzie woman he'd encountered near Albany. Which, in turn, didn't seem too far off from what he'd heard south of Ingary.

He trudged up to a pair of armed guards, the draw on his bow carefully relaxed, arrow pointed conspicuously toward the ground. Both men looked bored and slightly agitated at the same time. Ben decided not to push things.

One of them stepped forward, pole-arm in hand. The other stood back, crossbow at the ready. “Good afternoon, sir,” said the man. “Can I have your name, please?” He sounded unaccustomed to issuing those particular questions. They might have been part of a newly-instituted border policy.

“Ben Hunt.”

“You got...”

The second man cleared his throat.

“Uh...can I see your identification?”

Ben suppressed a blink. He could easily count on one hand the number of times anyone had asked to see his I.D. since the Change and he barely had to use any fingers. “Um...sure,” he said.

He knelt down to lay his bow and arrow on the ground, then slowly and deliberately shrugged out of his pack, conscious of the weaponry that could quickly make his life miserable and abbreviated. He just as slowly brought out the small pack containing his med kit and pulled his long-expired California driver's license from a small pocket sewn into the well-worn nylon lining. “Would this do?” he asked, holding it up.

The soldier took the card and peered at it, looked at Ben, back at the card, then again at Ben. “It's the beard, isn't it?” Ben asked.

The man grunted, then handed the card back, apparently satisfied. “You, uh...” He closed his mouth, twitched his lips slightly, eyes focusing on nothing in particular. His next words seemed to come with a little effort. “I strongly recommend a shave. It will match your photo eye dee better.”

Ben nodded. “I'll do that,” he said, and meant it. Over the years, he'd found that a good shave did wonders for morale, yet was something far from one's typical daily routine in the Changed world.

“What's your purpose in Corona, milord...er, Mister Hunt?” the man asked.
Ben suppressed another blink. “I'm on the trail of the people who kidnapped my daughter. I have reason to believe they intend to sell the children they abducted and that they mean to do it in Portland.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Kidnapping, eh?”

The second man cringed, then blew air out through his lips. “Their Majesties are not going to like that,” he said.

The first man visibly shrugged off an apparently palpable discomfort and returned his attention to Ben. “How long do you plan to stay in Corona?”

“Hopefully not more than a week.”

“Where will you be staying?” The man's questions were starting to sound eerily like the ones Ben remembered being asked the last time he'd entered Canada.

“I have no idea.”

The man's eyes narrowed. “Do you know anyone in Corona?”

The exchange quickly turned from an interrogation to an opportunity. When the MacKenzie woman had mentioned the names of Corona's new leadership, Ben had tried to avoid letting himself be carried away by potentially false hope. The names were surely coincidental. But perhaps not. He decided to risk it.

“Yeah. Eugene and Rapunzel Fitzherbert.”

The man's eyes widened. “You...you know their Majesties?”

“Bullshit,” said the other man. He laughed. “You don't know their Majesties!”

The first man cocked an eye at Ben. “Prove it.”

Ben slid his I.D. back into the pocket of his med kit, then pulled out a folded photograph. It had been taken in Dorrington just after he'd received his new eye.

A group shot, it showed the whole crew: himself; Luke; their parents and wives; Eugene and Rapunzel; Rapunzel's parents; Howl and Sophie; Howl's nephew Neil; Sophie's sisters Lettie and Martha and their husbands. The picture had been taken on his parents' back deck, everyone in what Neil had called “hiker clothes,” instead of what people in various places had started wearing after the Change. Despite a little water damage to two corners, the images were still quite clear.

He presented the photo to the guard. “Will this do?”

The guard took the photo and peered at it, looking back and forth between the photo and Ben several times. Moments later, his eyes widened. He sucked in a breath, then beckoned to the second man.

He stepped over and likewise looked back and forth between the photo and Ben several times. He muttered a curse, then pointed. “Does that,” he asked the first man, “look like Master Howl to you?”

The first man peered at the photo, then nodded. “And Mistress Sophie.”

The two looked at each other in mild alarm.

“When and where was this taken?” the second man asked.
“The summer before the Change,” said Ben, “down California.”

The first man looked again at the photo before finally returning it. “Are you carrying any weapons?” he asked.

“Um...what?”

The question was perfectly clear, of course. And it would have been perfectly relevant to any international border crossing before the Change. But since then? No one ever went anywhere without a weapon. In some places, a person didn't so much as pee in the woods outside camp without at least a knife hanging from a belt. Even children were given a four-inch blade and taught how to use shortly after learning to walk.

“Standard procedure,” said the guard.

“Dammit,” muttered the second guard, “if he knows their Majesties and Master...”

“I know...sir,” the first guard interrupted. “Gotta...um, we're required to ask. Aren't we?”

The second man considered that for a moment before nodding.

“Longbow, several dozen arrows, gladius, Bowie knife, Swiss Army knife,” said Ben. He decided to omit the several scalpels in his med kit. He considered those to be tools of his trade.

The man considered that for a few moments, then said, “You'll have to un-string your bow.”

“Not like you'll need it anyway,” said the other guard.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “You'll have to forgive my incredulity, but, why won't I need it?”

“No banditry,” said the first guard. “Not in this part of Corona, anyway.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

The second one snorted. “No one's stupid enough to try it.”

“Why's that?”

“Because,” the second guard half-shrieked, “if you'd seen what I saw at the Battle of Larsdalen, you'd be scared of them, too! The Coronans, I mean. But if you know them, then you know what they can do.”

Ben nodded. He was well aware of at least some of their abilities. He had his eye. And he'd seen Rapunzel incinerate the remains of a deer carcass with her mind. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how that might have been brought to bear on a battlefield, nor was he sure he wanted to know just why they'd decided to take over the Protectorate in the first place.

“I'll be careful,” said Ben.

“I'm serious. Don't piss them off!”

“Wasn't planning on it.”

“Good,” said the first guard. “But I guess since you're friends with them, that won't be a problem.” He said it in a way that sounded reminiscent of a brief conversation he'd had back in high school with the police officer in Sacramento who'd ticketed him for jaywalking. He waved Ben in a
generally northward direction. “Just don’t start anything.”

Ben nodded, re-stowed his gear as quickly as he could, returned his arrow to its quiver, un-strung his bow, shrugged back into his pack, and padded on before the guards could change their minds. One thing was certain, things had become even more interesting than they were already.
Chapter 14

Portland, Corona (formerly Portland Protectorate)
April 1, CY 10, 2021 AD

Ben Hunt stood on the street looking up the steps to the front entrance of the Corona Capitol. It had once been the Portland Immigration Offices. He could see where the raised letters proclaiming it as such had once been affixed to the building, even if normal people couldn't. Most of the people who'd given him directions had also referred to the building as the new Palace, the old one having been the Portland Public Library at one time. No one seemed to know why the new management—the king and queen—had decided to move the regional governmental headquarters, whatever one wanted to call it.

Things seemed unsettlingly out of place. It wasn't because his eye-patch robbed him of his depth-perception, though he dared not remove it, not so deep in what should have been the dragon's lair, as it were. No, it was more a matter of the increasing questions he had since crossing Corona's border. He'd been originally told that Portland was the stronghold of an evil overlord, but had recently been conquered by, supposedly, his friends.

He had no idea how that had happened, beyond the bits and pieces he'd heard since Woodburn. There had been a battle at a place called Larsdalen in the Eola Hills northwest of the Salem ruins. That battle had involved magic, fire, ice, and dragons unleashed by an army of two hundred at most, a force that had effortlessly shattered Arminger's twelve thousand.

His other glaring question had to do with Corona itself. He recalled Rapunzel's father Harold telling him that Corona was on the Baltic Sea, nestled between Mecklenburg to the west and Prussia to the east. At the time, Ben had never heard of Corona, but both Harold and Howl had insisted that they not be told anything about the historical fate of the country. Howl had cited Causality and Harold simply had not wanted to know. But after they'd all departed, Ben had Googled it and learned that Corona had been assimilated during Otto von Bismark's unification in the 1860's.

If Corona had been swallowed up by Germany, how and why had it come to be resurrected in the northern Willamette Valley? More to the point, something had clearly interfered with Eugene's and Rapunzel's plan to return to the year 1603 following the completion of their Pacific Crest Trail through-hike in 2011. Where had they been since then and what had they been doing? It was all more than a little curious.

Standing before the Palace, he gazed upon a pair of banners, one purple with a gold sun, the other red with a golden flaming lily flower and three gold suns. He walked through the building's double doors into an open foyer of sorts. A second set of doors stood closed on the foyer's far side. Through it, he could hear the voices of three people, two men and a woman. The woman and one of the men sounded fairly irate about something and the second man was clearly groveling about it. Another man holding a wax tablet walked briskly up to Ben.

"Can I help you?" he said, his manner crisp and business-like.

"Uh...yeah...I think." said Ben uncertainly. He was more certain about it than he sounded and he intended to use that to his advantage. "I'm here on the trail of...of a missing person. I've run out of leads and...well, I'm here to go to the top, as they say."

The man raised an eyebrow, looked down at the tablet and then back up at Ben. "And whom should I say is here?"
“Ben H...” He started to give his last name, then thought better of it. “...the Farseer.” That was a load of BS if ever he'd given such. At least it sounded impressive...sort of. And it might make a good first impression if the Eugene and Rapunzel in the other room turned out to only resemble the ones he’d met in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

The man scrawled on the tablet. “I’ll see if their Majesties are inclined to see you.” He turned and walked through one of the closed doors. The voices briefly amplified as the door opened and closed and Ben could have sworn he recognized them. They sure sounded like the same Eugene and Rapunzel.

A few moments later, another man shuffled out through the doors, looking like a scared puppy. The man with the tablet followed shortly. “Their Majesties will see you now. But please be alacritous. They have had a very long day full of...well, that.” He nodded toward the fleeing man. Ben didn’t ask for an explanation and none was apparently forthcoming. He had no problem with that, nor did he wish to become entangled in anyone else's affairs. He was here for his daughter and that was that.

Ben followed the man through the doors. The man bowed curtly. While Ben would normally bow to no one but God Himself, he was certainly not above groveling if it meant finding his daughter.

“Your Majesties,” said the man, “there is one last piece of business.”

A woman sighed. “You said that an hour ago,” she said.

“Well...yes, Your Majesty, but...”

“Oh,” said the man, who sounded suspiciously like Eugene, “just get on with it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. A...Ben the Farseer is here about a missing person.”

“Ben?!” said the woman, obviously surprised. “Ben Hunt? Is that you?”

Ben looked sharply up. The two people seated on the thrones—if one could call them thrones—looked eerily like his friends from Corona. The man had the same brown hair and eyes, the same chin scruff, nearly the same clothing. The woman had the same large green eyes and the same long brown, orange-tinted hair, only she'd wound it up in a bun and secured with two hair pins just visible above a crown studded with purple and yellow stones. If they weren't the same Eugene and Rapunzel he'd met on the trail, he'd eat his, er, kilt.

“Eugene? Rapunzel?”

“You will address them as...” began the man with the tablet.

“Geoffrey,” said Rapunzel, “relax.”

“But...”

“I said, relax.” She looked at Ben. “What are you...oh, never mind.” She looked back at Geoffrey. “Bailiff, I think we're done for the day. You're excused.”

“But...”

“I said, you're excused,” said Rapunzel. The man bowed low and retreated from the room. “Oh, and have a good weekend,” she called after him.

He stopped and turned around. “Forgive me, your Majesty, but it's Thursday.”
“So it is.” She paused. “That means we're giving you tomorrow off.”

Geoffrey blinked.

“And get started on that family,” said Eugene.

“...your Majesty?”

“You heard me. And I've seen your wife, so don't tell me you need any encouragement.”

“Just be sure you file your report with Princess Sophia before you leave for the day,” added Rapunzel.

Geoffrey blushed furiously. “Yes, your Majesties. And thank you.” He spun about and finished his retreat.

The pair descended from the small platform, which looked like nothing more than a couple of shipping palettes.

“The rest of you are excused, too,” said Eugene to what few others remained in the room. They, too, retreated, leaving Ben alone with the king and queen.

Rapunzel threw her arms around Ben and hugged him firmly. When she'd released him, Eugene likewise caught him in a bear-hug.

“It's great to see you,” said Eugene.

“How's the eye?” said Rapunzel. “You can take that off, you know.” She gestured to the eye patch.

Ben stood frozen, staring at the Royals.

Eugene turned to Rapunzel. “I think we broke him.”

Ben blinked. “You're really in charge here?”


“King and Queen now, huh? And in only ten years?”

Rapunzel giggled. “You're still funny,” she said.

“A lot has happened since we last met,” said Eugene. “Like I said, long story.”

“It's complicated,” added Rapunzel.

“And I bet,” said Eugene, “that you're wondering why it is that we're in charge and not the evil overlord of whom you've no doubt heard.”

“Um...yeah. Well, I mean, I've heard some rumors about a battle with magic, fire, ice, and dragons.”

“All true,” said Rapunzel.

“We'll be happy to tell you all about that...over breakfast,” added Eugene.

Ben shook his head sharply. “I appreciate it...really I do. But I'm trying to find my daughter and I won't rest until I find her.”

“She was kidnapped.”

“Oh, really?” she growled.

“We can certainly help you with that,” said Eugene.

“But first,” said Rapunzel, her voice still tense, “you do, in fact, need to get some rest...and some food. You also haven't bathed in at least a week.”

“I really don't want to intrude.”

“It's no bother, really,” said Eugene. “Besides, if my wife says you need food and rest, then you need food and rest. As for the bath...I concur. We'll show you to some guest quarters and arrange for someone to do your laundry. You'll have clean clothes to wear in the meantime...that is, if you don't mind fourteenth-century Norman.”

“Huh?”

“It's what people wear around here,” said Rapunzel. “ Surely you've noticed.”

“I noticed it being obviously Medieval.”

Eugene shrugged and nudged Ben with an elbow. “Between you, me, and the lamppost, we kind of prefer what's arguably late Medieval anyway. We grew up with it.”

“Now, though,” said Rapunzel, “we pretty much go with whatever's comfortable and practical.” She gestured to herself. “As you can see.”

Ben looked at Rapunzel's clothing. It looked pretty much the same as what she'd been wearing when they'd met on the Pacific Crest Trail the summer before the Change: a red, knee-length tunic with a gold flower surrounded by flames and three gold suns and a bright yellow silk sash about her waist, and nothing on her feet.

Eugene wore something that looked like what had once been called a pirate shirt and lederhosen, with wool socks and sandals reminiscent of Birkenstocks.

“Nice kilt, by the way,” said Eugene. “Not MacKenzie.”

“Uh...no. McClintock.”

Eugene nodded.

“The eye patch?” said Rapunzel.

“Oh...right,” said Ben. He reached up, removed the patch and tucked it into the pocket of the worn flannel shirt he'd been wearing. “And the eye's fine. Thanks for asking.” After a beat, “Are you sure people won't mind? It looks awfully weird.”

Eugene and Rapunzel both laughed. “Ben,” said Eugene, “you have no idea how weird things have been since we arrived.”

“And,” added Rapunzel, “you have no idea how much weirder they're going to become. We don't think it'll be a problem. Besides, we've seen an awful lot of...well, weird. There's little that surprises us these days. Now, about that rest and relaxation. Shall we?” She gestured to a door at the rear of
Rapunzel grabbed a yellow-dyed leather belt from a nearby table and fastened it about her waist. Well-worn but just as well maintained, from it hung a sturdy purple leather pouch with an exterior knife sheath on one hip and another on the other from which protruded the handle of what, from the shape of the pouch, Ben presumed to be a frying pan. Eugene grabbed a similar belt from another table.

Ben shrugged. “Um...sure.” He followed them to the door. No sooner had he opened it, then the room behind him suddenly went dim. He looked over his shoulder. All the torches lining the walls had been flaming cheerily a moment before, but had gone out seemingly at once, leaving the room bathed only in failing grey light from outside. Ben cocked his head toward Rapunzel. “More of that pyrokinesis, right?”

Rapunzel nodded, giving Ben a knowing smile. Ben shrugged. The Royals led him down a side corridor and up a flight of stairs, well-lit by large windows of a building designed and built in an age before commercial florescent lighting had even been dreamed.

The third and uppermost floor showed evidence of recent remodeling. Its heat signature was different from that of the rest of the building. Either the work had been done very recently, or the materials had radically different heat-sink properties. Much of it appeared to be wood and drywall. Had it been ferro-concrete, he could have told easily given the thermogenic properties of curing cement. What initially appeared to be skylights turned out to be glass panels coated on the inside with something Ben couldn't identify. Whatever it was, it cast an odd greenish-yellow light not unlike that emitted by various phosphorescent diatoms. The panels supplied more than half the light illuminating the hallway.

Eugene lifted a clipboard from a stout lag screw set into the wall slightly above eye-level. He perused one of the papers secured to it, then made a note with the pencil taped to a string tied to a small hole in the board. After replacing the clipboard, the Royals continued, then stopped in front of a door halfway down the hall. Eugene knocked. Ben raised an eyebrow. “Things are still a little chaotic around here,” said Eugene. “We've implemented some standardization, but we're still training people to follow it, so it's best to always check.”

There being no answer, Eugene opened the door and the three of them filed inside. A small oil lamp on a table sprang to life. Ben glanced at it, but said nothing.

“There's a fire-starter on the table next to it,” said Rapunzel, in answer to Ben's unasked question, “should you need to relight it yourself. We have plans to install magical lighting, but that's still a month out. There's a small water closet there...” She motioned to a door on one side of the room. “...with hot water on demand. There's some goat's-milk soap on the wash basin and clean towels on a rod.”

“We'll send a spare set of clothes up for you within the hour,” said Eugene. “Just listen for a knock at the door. A maid will exchange those for...those.” He gestured at Ben's kilt, woolen socks protruding from his moccasins and old flannel-oid shirt. “Or you can simply place them outside and the maid will make the exchange and you can grab the fresh ones at your leisure. We'll return your own clothes once they've been laundered.”

“Just like a hotel, eh?”

“More or less,” said Eugene with a smile and a shrug.

“We'll send up a hot meal within your loaner clothes,” said Rapunzel.
“I get room service?”

“Of course.”

Ben nodded, barely managing to keep his mouth from falling open.

“Do you have any more questions right now?” said Rapunzel.

Ben raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, relevant to your accommodations.”

Ben shook his head. “Thanks. That's awfully generous of you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“We'll send someone in the morning to wake you for breakfast. Pleasant dreams,” said Rapunzel as she and Eugene turned to go.

“Thank you,” said Ben as his friends retreated and closed the door. He stood there for a few moments, just blinking. The surreality suddenly hit him like a brick. He walked over to the small bed by the wall and sat down heavily upon it. Springs creaked slightly.

After a short time, he stood up again and disrobed, tossing first flannel, then kilt, then shirt, then socks onto a pile near the door. He picked up the lamp and padded into the bathroom.

It looked a lot like most motel bathrooms. He set the lamp down on a small marble counter, picked up a bar of coarse soap, and stepped into a frosted-glass shower stall. Sure enough, there was hot water. As he lathered up, Ben made a mental note to ask about how his friends had managed that.

He spent what he was sure was an obscene amount of time basking in his hot shower, long after the weeks of dirt and grime had been washed off his body. Reluctantly, he at last shut off the water and dried off with a fluffy off-white towel folded up on a small shelf above the sink. He wiped a thick layer of condensation from the mirror before peering at his reflection.

He sure looked shaggy. A small dish tucked into a corner held a can of shaving cream and a pre-Change safety razor. Ben retreated to where he'd set his pack against the wall, pulled out his Bowie knife, and went to work on the bulk of his beard, depositing the trimmings into a small garbage can under the sink. When he'd trimmed it down to razor-able levels, he applied some shaving cream and then attacked his face with the razor.

When he was done, he rinsed his face and examined the results. Not bad, not bad at all. He'd almost grown used to a straight razor, what with the old safety models becoming increasingly hard to find.

A knock at the door startled him. “Milord Hunt?” said a female voice.

Ben padded across the room and opened the door. “Uh...hi,” he said.

A young woman dressed in the now-familiar Medieval servants' clothing curtsied, then handed Ben a sturdy wicker basket. Inside was a bundle of what he presumed was the promised clothing. Beside that sat a half-gallon-sized stoneware tureen with its lid tied on with twine, a small stoneware jug with a cork, and a generous chunk of coarse bread.

“Thanks,” said Ben.

The woman blushed a little.
“Do I, um, owe you anything?” he asked. He wasn’t sure he had much to offer besides the usual, but it never hurt to be polite.

“Oh, no, milord. I, um, wouldn't be privy to that anyhow. My instructions were only to deliver clothing and this food to you.”

“Well, thank you...again.”

The woman curtsied again, scooped Ben's dirty clothing off the hallway floor, dropped it into a second basket, then retreated down the hallway through the strange greenish light.

He sat down on a small wooden chair and placed tureen, bottle, and bread on his end table. He uncorked the bottle and sniffed. He raised an eyebrow, then took a sip. Warm apple cider with just a hint of hardness trickled into his mouth. Untying the twine and tipping up the tureen's lid released a puff of steam.

Inside was three-quarters full of a hearty soup. Generous bits of meat and root vegetables floated in broth seasoned with sage and thyme. The bread was a basic stone-ground whole wheat. Together, they really hit the spot.

Ben sat in dim lamplight and ate in silence, his mind spinning on nothing in particular, apparently unwilling to settle down. Still, he ate with deliberate purpose. When he’d wiped the last of the broth from the bowl with the last bite of bread, he set the tray on the floor near the door.

He retrieved his well-worn toothbrush and a nearly-depleted tube of Aquafresh and brushed his teeth.

Setting the lamp on a small table beside the room's twin bed, he slipped between the sheets, pulling a wool blanket and a down comforter over himself. He felt a slight pang of guilt at what for him was an extravagance. Here he was, all dry, comfy, and rapidly warming, while his family was decidedly less so back in the coastal Klamath country and his daughter enduring God knew what somewhere within the borders of Corona.

He briefly considered some reading material before the warmth of soup and cider pulled him off to sleep.
A knock at the door ripped Ben out of sound sleep.

There had been a time, long ago in another life, when waking up in the morning had been a chore. At his former home in Dorrington, he had maintained three alarm clocks: one by his head; one across his bedroom; and one down the hall. Only having one had made it easy to return to sleep, but by the time he got up and down the hall, well, he was up for good.

But the Change had put an end to that, as well. With all the threats out there, threats that did not necessarily respect a person's waking hours, survivors of the First Year had more often than not become light sleepers. Light, and prone to jolting into full wakefulness.

He sat up abruptly, initially disoriented. His memory returned to him as a second knock sounded, followed immediately by a female voice.

“Milord Hunt?” she said. It sounded not unlike the young lady who had brought him his meal the night before.

“Um...yeah?” he said.

“Milord, Their Majesties have sent me to, and Her Majesty told me to use this word, fetch you for breakfast.”

Fetch? He was being fetched?

“Sure,” he said. “I'll be right there.”

He almost flopped back down into the bed. The temptation was awfully powerful. Instead, he levered himself up, ignoring the cold floor under his bare feet. He toggled his infrared vision, the room suddenly appearing in shades of blue, the bed a bright red where he had been sleeping.

He found the Medieval tunic he had been loaned and slipped it on over his head. It felt like wearing a bath robe. He grabbed a leather belt that had been included and fastened it about his waist. Hrmph. He still felt like he was wearing a bath robe. Well, if everyone dressed like that, then at least no one would be staring at him. Nor would they be muttering about the MacKenzies.

“Miss?” he called out.

“Yes, Milord?” she replied.

“Should I bring anything?”

“They're Majesties were moot on that point, Milord.”

He stepped across the room and opened the door. It was indeed the same woman. She curtsied politely, then held out a pair of fur-lined slippers.
“Her Majesty said you might appreciate these,” she said.

Ben peered at the slippers, then met the woman's eyes. She looked away briefly, as if trying not to stare at Ben's larger eye. He took the slippers and said, “Thank you,” before shoving them onto his feet. They felt a half size small, but he was not about to complain.

“This way please, Milord,” said the woman.

He stepped out of his room and into the hall, shutting the door behind him. The barest hint of a pale grey dawn colored the windows, barely perceptible in the persistent greenish glow from the strange lighting in the hall.

She led him back down the hall up which Eugene had brought him the previous evening, down the stairs, and past the open door that let into the throne room, then down another hallway and to the left. She stopped at another door. She knocked.

“Yes?” said Rapunzel from within.

“Your Majesty,” said the woman, “Milord Hunt, as requested.”

“Send him in, please, Marjorie.”

Marjorie opened the door and motioned Ben inside.

“Thanks...Marjorie,” he said.

Marjorie flickered a brief smile, then curtsied and bustled off down the hall.

Ben turned his attention to the room. It looked pretty much the same as the rest of the building, down to the floor tile. It looked about half the size of the throne room, the tapestries and rugs hanging on the walls making it seem cozier somehow. Several chairs, all mismatched, had been arranged in a rough oval about the room. Three of them were occupied.

He recognized Eugene and Rapunzel, of course. The other was a woman sitting next to Rapunzel who could easily have been her sister. Except that Ben knew Rapunzel didn't have one. At least, she hadn't when last they had spoken just before leaving Dorrington the summer before the Change. Clearly the intervening years had been quite eventful.

“Good morning, Ben!” said Rapunzel.

“Uh...morning.”

“So,” said the woman beside Rapunzel, “Mother tells me your daughter has been kidnapped. Tell us about that, please, while we await breakfast.”

Mother? She couldn’t possibly have meant Rapunzel. That would have explained the uncanny family resemblance. Unless they were cousins. He remembered Rapunzel mentioning two cousins, Elsa and Anna Agtharsdottir, the ruling family of Arendelle.

He’d Google that, too. That country had merged with several others in the early seventeenth century to form Norway. A few decades later, Elsa had vanished without a trace, leaving her husband and children to run the country alongside Anna and her husband and children.

So this woman was Elsa? If she’d left the past and gone to the future, that would certainly explain her disappearance. Another cousin perhaps? Or a convoluted family relationship resulting from various
marriages and re-marriages? Something told him there was more to it than a case of the proverbial redneck I'm-my-own-grandpa situation.

“Sure,” he said. He told the story of what had happened, beginning with the attack near Orick, and ending with his plunge into Portland. Mostly, he summarized, sticking to what he considered to be the salient points.

“Hmm,” said Rapunzel and the other woman almost in unison.

Eugene rubbed his jaw. “Sounds vaguely familiar. Although I have to admit, things have been a little chaotic here the last few weeks. You heard of the Battle of Larsdalen, I take it?”

Ben nodded.

“That occurred on March ninth. Taking possession of Corona has been an interesting balancing act. One does not usually walk into a country, pick a fight, win, and then reasonably expect everyone else to simply agree when you turn around and announce that you're now in charge.”

“At least,” added Rapunzel, “not those already in power. As for the citizenry, that tends to be another thing entirely.”

“The important point,” said the other woman, “is that most of the people here are either used to being told what to do by the counts and barons and such, or are the wives of the late counts etcetera. Barring the whole devil-you-know thing, the people are more willing to cooperate with whomever is more fair, which is us. The baronesses etcetera, on the other hand, are likely to attempt to undermine us.”

“And,” said Eugene, “in fact a few of them already have.”

“Which we anticipated,” said Rapunzel. “Which is why we've been working with them. Oh, but do sit down, Ben. We insist.”

Ben found an empty chair and sat.

“While most of their late, and in a few cases surviving, husbands have been pieces of work,” said Eugene, “mostly they're afraid we're going to toss them out on their ears.”

“Which we're not, of course,” said the other woman.

“Anyway,” said Rapunzel, “Our breakfast approaches, and I suppose I should introduce you. This...” She gestured at the woman beside her. “...is my daughter Sophia.”

Ben cocked an eyebrow. There was no way Sophia could possibly be Rapunzel's blood daughter. “Let me guess,” he said, “it's one of those redneck I'm-my-own-grandpa things.”

Sophia furrowed her brow. “Now, why would you say that?”

Ben's gaze flitted back and forth between Sophia and Rapunzel. “Uh...because...” He broke off with a vague hand gesture.

Sophia's slight frown turned into a smile. “Because my mother cannot possibly be old enough to have a daughter my age, yes?”

“It's only been a decade since we parted ways in Dorrington. That would make you nine years old.”

Sophia and Rapunzel both chuckled in a nearly identical manner. “You're assuming,” said Rapunzel,
“that only ten years have passed for us.”

Ben’s brow furrowed.

“It’s a very long story,” said Eugene.

He held Eugene's gaze for several moments. “I don't doubt it,” he said.

Somewhere outside of Ben's peripheral vision, the door opened. He heard the light squeak of wheels as someone pushed a cart into the room. With it wafted the smells of bacon, eggs, potatoes, and coffee. Moments later, the cart rolled to the middle of the room, pushed by a young girl in the same sort of servants' gown Marjorie had worn, her gaze cast downward.

Ben's heart leaped into his throat. He'd have recognized that face with its large eyes anywhere. "Hemiona!” he blurted.

The girl looked abruptly up. Her large eyes appeared to grow even larger. “D...daddy?” she squeaked.

Ben launched himself out of his seat, cleared the cart in a single bound, and caught his daughter in a bear hug. She hugged him tentatively back. Tears rose up in his eyes. “I was so worried about you,” he breathed.

“Well,” said Eugene, “that was easy.”

“I'm supposed to be working,” Hemiona whispered. “I'll get in trouble if I don't.”

“That's alright,” said Rapunzel. “As of right now, you're on break.”

“Break?” said Ben. “What about that feudal system?”

Rapunzel grunted. “We're implementing a number of reforms. Among them, we the rulers of Corona no longer have servants, we have paid staff.”

“Same jobs,” added Eugene, “just better terms of employment.”

Hemiona pulled away slightly, then looked at Rapunzel. “But...Your Majesty...Miz Atwater...she...” The girl's voice fell off.

“She what?” Rapunzel asked. Her eyes narrowed. “Has she been striking you?”

Hemiona nodded curtly.

Rapunzel exhaled heavily, then stood. “Excuse me for a moment, please,” she said. She stalked out of the room, turned toward the right, took a deep breath, then bellowed. “Lucile Atwater, get your sorry rear end in here right this minute!” The sound reverberated at least as well as a pre-Change amplifier.

Rapunzel stepped back into the room, and paused in front of Ben and Hemiona. She lifted the girl's chin with a finger and smiled. “We'll just see about that, won't we?”

Ben felt his daughter stiffen.

“What's our rule?” said Rapunzel.

Hemiona said nothing.
Rapunzel's smile broadened. She knelt down in front of Hemiona and took one of her hands in her own. Ben heard the girl gasp slightly. “You can relax in our presence. We're not the Armingers. And you'll find we're not a typical king and queen, either. So tell me, have you been behaving yourself?”

Hemiona nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty,” she said softly.

“Say it in a normal voice, please, Hemiona.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” she said.

Rapunzel smiled. “That's better.” She glanced up. “Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment. Oh, and the rest of you, go ahead and dig in,” she added, gesturing to the cart.

Rapunzel rose, and stalked over toward the door where a rather substantial-looking woman had entered the room. She stood half a head taller than Rapunzel, with arms that, even through the linen sleeves of her blouse, looked strong enough to rip the wings off a goose.

“Lucile Atwater,” Rapunzel growled, “have you been striking the children again?”

“No, Your Majesty,” said Atwater.

“Lucile, don't lie to us. We'll know. We'll always know. I'll ask you again, have you been striking the children?”

Lucile opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“Well?” Rapunzel demanded.

“Children have to be disciplined,” she said. “The pressures of running your kitchens...”

“Will no longer be yours if you don't stop it!” Rapunzel snapped. “Hemiona here is terrified. And why? Because you've been hitting her. The bruises testify to it. And don't think for a moment I can't perceive them just because they're hidden by her clothing. And let's not even start with what's beneath the surface.

“First and foremost, that is not an effective, acceptable, or appropriate way to instill confidence in a child. There are ways to correct a worker's mistakes on the job and corporal punishment is not one of them. Second, no person, much less a young girl, should be afraid for their safety in their own workplace. We will not have that here in Corona, especially in the direct employment of the Government. What do you have to say for yourself?”

Margaret flicked a look at Hemiona. “She spilled an entire vat of potatoes this morning, Your Majesty. And...”

“How large was this vat?”

“Five gallons. But what...”

“Did you tell her to lift it?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“You told a nine-year-old girl to lift a five-gallon container filled with potatoes and water?” Rapunzel exploded. “Are you insane? Of course she dropped it, it weighs forty pounds! It's a good thing it wasn't scalding at the time or I would personally burn your eyebrows off!”
“How did you...”

“How she would have second-degree burns, of course!” Rapunzel snapped. “And she doesn’t. Here's what you're going to do. First, you will stop striking children for making honest mistakes on the job. Period. If I find that have done so again, I will toss you out on your ear.”

“But I don't know anyone else who...”

“I'm aware of that. I can, and will, find someone else to run my kitchens. Second, you will stop overburdening your staff. When a worker faces a bad process, the process always wins. Always. Which means that if a girl cannot safely maneuver a forty-pound kettle, then you either have someone else do it, give her help, or lighten the load. It's not complicated.

“If you want help, ask for it. That's why we're here. Never think yourself above help. And do not berate your workers for asking for help, either. We will know. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good.” Rapunzel softened. “Lucile, you can be better than this. We're not the Armingers. We're here to improve everything. But you have to let us do it and you have to give your own people room to shine. Happy workers work better. Make them want to give their best, not be afraid if they don't.”

Lucile nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“That is all. You're excused.”

Lucile nodded again, then retreated from the room.

Rapunzel returned to the cart and picked up a piece of bacon. She bit into it, chewed a few times, and swallowed. “As you can see,” she said, “we have our hands full.” She put the rest of the strip into her mouth, holding it with her teeth while she loaded a porcelain plate with quiche, country potatoes with garlic, two corn muffins, a generous dollop of butter, three large sausage links, and a slab of smoked fish.

She motioned to the cart. “Ben, Hemiona, you haven’t dug in.”

“But...” Hemiona began.

“I insist. Besides, like I said, you're on break.”

The girl nodded. She and Ben loaded up plates of their own. A couple of minutes later, they all sat on chairs, their food in their laps.

“Now,” said Rapunzel, “why don't you fill your father in on your adventure?”

“Adventure?” Hemiona said. She didn’t sound particularly convinced by that description of her ordeal.

Rapunzel chuckled softly. “An adventure is someone else being miserable somewhere far away. Have you read 'Lord of the Rings’?”

Hemiona nodded. “Mommy and Daddy read it to us in bits and pieces as a bedtime story.”

“And would you liked to have been there with Frodo during his quest to take the Ring to Mordor?”

Hemiona thought about that for a moment, then shook her head.
“He had an adventure, but it wasn't very much fun, was it?”

Hemiona shook her head again. She looked up at Ben. He felt his hear skip a beat, and tried not to think about all his little girl had endured in the clutches of her captors. Nor did he want to contemplate the unavoidable fact that his little girl was inexorably growing up.

She took a deep breath and began talking, beginning with the day she'd been kidnapped.

“They were mean,” she said. “Really mean. They hit us. All of us, and as often as they felt like it. Some of us tried to be quiet and not make any trouble, but it didn't matter. If we cried, they put rags in our mouths and tied us up. One of the boys they already had when they took us tried screaming and stuff when we were at Randolf. They stuffed a rag in his mouth, but he kept screaming and kicking stuff, so they tied him up, too. He kept doing it, so they slit his throat and caught his blood in a bowl. They fed it to some of us, but ran out before they got to me and Jacob. But Jaynie...”

Hemiona broke off with a visible sob. Ben put an arm around her. “That's alright, sweetie,” he said. “You don't have to talk about.”

She sniffed and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Yes I do,” she breathed.

Sophie handed her a stoneware mug of some steaming beverage. “This will help,” she said.

Hemiona took it, took a long sip, then nodded and went on. “Thank you. Jaynie threw it all up some time later. They hit her. One of them almost had sex with her. But I glared real hard at him and he just cussed and left us alone instead.”

“We rescued her at Hilt,” said Ben.

She smiled. “Oh, good! 'Cause we heard them talking. And...what's a whore?”

“I'll tell you later, honey,” said Ben. That was yet another moment that reminded him of the differences in how Changelings saw the world. In some ways, they led much less sheltered lives. But in other ways, they were completely oblivious.

“There was more of the same after that. Then they sold Jacob!”

Ben nodded. “I found him in Azalea. He's still there, but he's with some good folks. I made a deal with them.”

“With slave traders?!?” she shrieked.

“It's not like that. They saw it as liberating him.”

Hemiona half-glared.

“It's okay,” he said. “They're taking care of him in exchange for seeing to their medical needs.”

“So...he's working for them?”

Ben nodded.

“We were attacked a few times. Bandits, they said. Then the Indians. Then there was this place called Ingary. I didn’t see anything, but one of them mentioned it. He also said it made his skin crawl. Could have been me, 'cause that happened every time I glared at one of them.” She managed a smile. “I learned how to glare really hard!”
“When we got here, the men threatened us again while we crossed some sort of border. Some men outside asked lots of questions and the men keeping us lied about everything. Then they sold a couple of us to someone named Arminger. Or maybe it was Arminger's kitchens or something. I don't know where they went after that.”

“Who else was with you?”

“Some other boy. Roland Fairchild. They picked him up around...Roseburg, I think. Juan was still with them, though.”

Ben hugged her closely. “We'll find him.”

“Of course we will,” said Eugene.

“In the meantime,” said Sophia, “we have need of a good surgeon in our lands of Tillamook. Would you be interested?”

Ben blinked. “Really?”

Sophia nodded. “Really.”

“Do be aware,” said Rapunzel, “that it's pretty wet over there, especially in the river flood-plains.”

“But as employees of Corona,” said Sophia, “you'd have housing and a stipend. Not to mention access to the best cheese on the continent.”

“Cheese?!” Hemiona squealed.

Ben raised an eyebrow. “State-run medicine?”

Sophia chuckled. “I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that no one else in the world has ever managed that very well. And you would be correct. Except that none of them had what we have.”

“Which is?”

Rapunzel grinned. “Us!” She practically squealed it.

“Of course,” said Eugene, “we would relocate your whole family.”

“Only a few of us are doctors,” said Ben.

Eugene shrugged. “Not a problem. I'm sure you're aware of the general paucity of labor since the Shift.”

Ben cocked his head. “Shift?”

“Earth is slightly out of phase, and that's responsible for the adjustment in the Suggestions of Physics.”

Ben chuckled. “Suggestions? Sounds like the way Howl talked about it.”

“Indeed it is.”

“Labor?”
“One of our philosophies,” said Rapunzel, “is that people should have an opportunity to pursue what they love. We want them to get up most mornings and say, ‘gee, I can't wait to go to work today!’ So we’ll work with your family to find them meaningful work that uses their skills.”

“Wow,” said Ben. “That's...awfully generous of you.”

“Think nothing of it,” said Eugene.

“Will you do it?” said Sophia.

Ben felt his mouth twitch up in a smile. He looked at his daughter, then nodded.

“Wonderful!” Rapunzel gushed.

“And I bet you have a few questions,” said Eugene.

Ben nodded. “Where do I start?”

“From the beginning.”

“Whose beginning?”

“Oh,” said Sophia, “just pick something.”

Ben thought for a moment. “Why are you here, and what happened to the Armingers?”

Rapunzel smiled. “The short answer is that we were bored, so we picked a fight with Norman Arminger, won, then took all his toys. He and his wife Sandra were killed during the operation.”

Ben blinked. “You took over a country because you were bored?”

“Oh,” said Sophia, “you have no idea. Sitting around and watching the seasons pass in Patagonia is not what I would call interesting.” She stabbed the air with a pencil for emphasis.

“I thought you were from Germany...er, Corona.”

“That's right,” said Rapunzel.

“So...after you left...wait, you really did go back home, didn't you? To your own time, I mean.”

Rapunzel nodded.

Ben felt his eyes widen. “Who else knows?”

Rapunzel chuckled. “That was quick.”

Ben raised an eyebrow.

“People don't usually make the connection,” said Eugene.

“Between the boredom, living in Patagonia, cross-referencing with parts of all the stories and rumors I've heard, it added up. It also helps that I have a daily reminder that the impossible is possible.”

“And we'd prefer that you keep it to yourself. At least for a while.”

“Although,” said Sophia, “people are going to find out eventually anyway. It's just that we'd like to control that.”
“Because people wouldn't understand,” said Ben.

Rapunzel nodded. “Between jealousy and fear, far too many people would draw the wrong conclusions. Then they'd revolt, wind up with someone at least as bad as the Armingers in control, and we'd all be right back were we were at the beginning of March.”

“So, I'd love to hear your story. What happened after you left Dorrington?”

Eugene grinned. “How much time do you have?”

Chapter End Notes

The real Ben Hunt has a daughter Talia and son Silas. They and Ali live in Quincy California where they practice medicine. He's a surgeon. If you'd known him growing up, you'd say, "Of COURSE he is!" He's a pretty cool guy.

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