

Califia's Daughters

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Prologue

In the year 1532, Hernán Cortés sent an expedition west through Mexico to find a mysterious island which, rumor said, had brought huge wealth to the emperor Montezuma. When his man Mendoza came to the sea at last and gazed across the waters at what appeared to be an enormous offshore island, there was no doubt in his mind that this was the famed source of wealth. Nor did he doubt that this was also the land described by a Spanish novelist named Garcí Rodríguez de Montalvo in an epic cycle of knights and nobility published some twenty years earlier. California (both the "island" Baja and, later, Alta California to the north) took the name from the epic's Amazon queen Califía, beauteous of face, powerful of arm, noble of heart.

The following story takes place five and a half centuries after Califía's story was written, and the irony is as cutting as the Amazon queen's blade: "They kept only those few men whom they realized they needed for their race not to die out," Rodríguez de Montalvo writes. Little had he anticipated the rapid-fire series of plagues, wars, and environmental disasters that was to tip humankind into a downward spiral during the first century of the third millennium, slashing the world's population to a fraction of what it had been at the year 2000, overturning social orders, turning dearly held beliefs and mores to dust overnight. Particularly he could not have predicted the propensity of one virus to attach itself to the male of the species, one generation after the next.

By the time of this story, the world holds one male human being for every ten or twelve females.

Book One

The Valley *On the right-hand side of the Indies there was an island called California, which was very close to the region of the Earthly Paradise.* One

DIAN

From a distance, there was nothing on the hill-side, nothing but the dry grasses of late summer and a smattering of scrub bushes beneath the skeleton of a long-dead tree. From a distance, no unaided human eye could have picked out the dun and dusty figures from the grass around them; nonetheless, they were there, one long, slim human and two massive dogs. They had been on the hillside since morning, and they moved little.

Their presence had not gone completely undetected. An hour earlier a small herd of white-tailed deer quartering the hillside had abruptly cut short its graze to veer nervously away. Twice, sentinel quail settling into the arms of the twisted stump had alerted their flock to direct their attentions elsewhere. And now a turkey vulture appeared above the far side of the valley, gliding in languid circles on the updraft that rose off twenty acres of crumbling asphalt and debris, the remains of an office complex from Before. The bird spotted the three prone figures and sifted the wind through the distinctive fingers of her pinions, sidling across the currents to take a position a hundred feet above the invisible figures.

Hopeful thoughts flickered through her tiny brain and she dropped lower, then lower still, until one of the bodies jerked about to gnaw its flank, and another, the long one, turned its face to the sky and waved an arm. Faint avian disappointment came and went at these unmistakable signs of life, and the bird slid sideways toward the next valley. The three figures resumed their motionless watch.

Now, however, their stillness was one of alertness, even tension, rather than mere waiting. The human, no longer completely covered by the diminishing shadow of the grease bush, stared intently through a pair of large and ancient Artifact binoculars at the hillside ten miles away, where a faint haze of dust teased up from the ridge. In a few minutes the haze solidified into a cloud, its source coming clear: travelers. Eyes—blue human, yellow canine—focused on the spot, watching the drift of dust move down the face of the hill, saw the half-obsured wagons pause to weigh the temptation of the direct route through the Remnant against the unknown threats it could hide, saw the travelers turn to circle well clear of the tumbled remains. When the wagons had safely negotiated the dry streambed and regained the road, when it became clear that the travelers were firmly committed to the left-hand fork, the binoculars went into their case, the weapons were gathered up, and woman and dogs slithered over the top of the hill and disappeared.

JUDITH

Two hours later, near the place where the road's left fork dwindled to its end, another woman watched for another small cloud of dust to rise against a backdrop of trees, chewing her lip with impatience. Her name was Judith, and she sat perched on the top step of a sprawling old farmhouse that had once been painted white, shelling dried beans. Her bare toes were drawn

back from the hot edge of the sun on the next step down; the worn boards and pathway below were thick with beans that had missed the bowl under the sharp, irritable jerks of her work-hardened fingers.

Judith didn't even see the waste she was making. Her eyes were on the Valley entrance, her inner gaze fixed on that vision of the morning's frantic activity— no, call it what it was: panic, mindless and dangerous, that had gone on far, far too long. Bringing the Valley into line had been like pushing a laden cart uphill, and Judith ached with the strain. But at last the long-unused emergency drills were recalled, and order jerkily took hold, and finally the gears meshed and things ran smoothly: guards out, weapons ready, all metaphorical hatches securely battened.

Now there was nothing left to do but wait. Forty minutes earlier she had found herself standing alone on the veranda, wishing she had gone with Dian, wondering if she shouldn't take a position at the Gates with a rifle, half-yearning for a return of the morning's upheaval just so she'd have something to keep her occupied until she heard what she was thinking and berated herself: For God's sake, you're a lousy shot, Dian's better off without you, and you should be grateful things finally calmed down. Go find something to do!

So she'd found a mindless task and settled to it— badly, with shameful waste—and waited for Dian.

The worst part was the silence. She felt smothered under it, this strange, thick stillness where there was usually the workaday noise of an active community—children shouting and adult voices raised in work and song, the rumble and thump of the mill machinery, the echo of hammer and the rasp of saw and the jingle of harnessed horses pulling plow or cart. The myriad sounds that made up the daily voice of the Valley were gone, the core of its life locked up and guarded in the hillside caves high above the farmhouse. The oddly muted sounds of cow and goat drifted down from the upper pastures; the cock crowed in protest from the enclosed run behind the barn. Even the imperturbable blue jay that haunted the walnut tree seemed flustered at the impact his raucous voice made on the still air and flew off into the redwoods. Judith listened to the few voices of low speech, the crackle and patter of the beans dropping into the basket, the breath soughing in and out through her nose: no competition for the pervasive quiet. The hot air shivered with silence, and Judith watched the Gates.

Not actual gates, of course, not like Meijing had— there was no way to wall the area against determined invaders, although God knew they'd talked about it, especially, Judith gathered, during the early years. But the Valley was peculiarly well suited for defense, the hills at its back steep and heavily wooded, the low ground in front marshy where the creek spread out between a pair of rocky prongs. And then, when the worst of the riots had been raging Outside, the community had responded to an unspoken urge to strengthen those prongs and built them higher and thicker until the Gates came into being. Nothing high explosives or a concerted effort wouldn't push aside, but a few armed women atop the structure would slow an enemy down.

As now it seemed to be slowing Dian, damn it. The minutes crawled, beans continued to fall into the bowl and across the steps, and then finally, a faint suggestion of dust rising into the air down toward the Valley entrance. A minute later, sounds reached through the utter silence: a woman's

faraway voice—Dian's, she was sure, calling a salute to her unseen sentries. In a minute Judith could hear the clear thud of cantering hooves on the planks of the lower bridge; her eyes shifted to the dam, the pond behind it as unnaturally motionless as the air without its usual midday complement of splashing bodies, the mill frozen against the weight of the collected waters. After four long minutes Dian appeared around the side of the mill, her horse at a trot. The smaller dog, a two-year-old brindle that stood thirty-four inches at the shoulder, shot away from her side to galumph like a mad ox through the shallow edges of the mill pond, heaving up great sheets of water at each stride until it stopped, belly-deep, to lap furiously. The other dog, fawn-colored and bigger by three inches and forty pounds, remained at Dian's left stirrup until she turned her horse's head to the water. Then he, too, waded forward to drink. Judith watched him closely for an indication of Dian's feelings, and was relieved when he appeared relaxed enough to snap playfully at the water.

Dian only allowed her animals a small refreshment before pulling the horse back onto the road and whistling the dogs to her side. Judith heard hoofbeats again as Dian crossed the mill bridge; as if the sound had been a signal, the rider shifted in the saddle to peer up at the house, then threw up an arm in greeting.

Judith started to rise, only to exclaim in exasperation both at the basket, which nearly upended down the steps, and at the awkwardness caused by her expanding belly. She thrust the beans to one side and stepped into the full sun to respond with a wide wave. In another moment Dian disappeared behind the apple orchard. Judith continued down the steps, pausing to bend laboriously and gather a few stray beans, then abandoned the project to set off across the stunted lawn to the entrance of the farmyard proper.

Dian would reach her in two minutes, and Judith compromised with her impatience by standing at the gatepost in the shade of the old walnut, the farmyard's guardian since the first rough shack had been raised there by her great-great-grandparents. The five-bar gate itself was so choked with weeds and walnut sprouts that it would have taken a crew to force it shut, but as other gates now kept livestock from the crops, there was no need. She leaned her arms on the top of the fence, which like everything in the Valley needed paint, and breathed in the acrid odor of the thick, oily leaves. Over and around her hung thousands of smooth green nuts the size of a baby's fist, still tightly wrapped in their husks, a good month yet from harvest. Her own time would follow theirs, by two or three weeks. She smoothed her belly and pictured the soft, pale infant walnuts straining against their spongy husks, then her mouth twisted in irritation and she moved out into the hot road. Think about something else. Think about the travelers.

It was Dian, inevitably, who had seen the approaching wagons, at dawn. She had been out on one of her increasingly frequent and far-ranging overnight forays and had spotted them many miles away, and waited only long enough to be reasonably sure of their destination before riding hard for home. At nine o'clock that morning Judith had been down at the mill contemplating an obstinate piece of machinery when there was a stir of alarmed voices along the road. She stepped out of the mill house to see Dian clattering up the road on a horse white with lather and shockingly near foundering, Culum gamely at her heels and no sign of the two other dogs she'd set out with. The sweaty rider reined in the instant she saw Judith.

"What happened?" Judith was demanding before Dian's boots hit the ground.

Dian glanced at the curious faces turned their way, and called to one of the youngsters.

"Patty, would you do me a big favor, and take Simon here up to the barn? You know what to do with a hot horse?"

"Of course," the child said, with the perfect disdain of a ten-year-old, and took the reins. She had to pull with all her weight to get the exhausted animal moving again.

"Thank you, Pats. Okay, Culum, you can go home now." The huge dog seemed to nod his shaggy head at her as he passed, ambling off at a bone-weary plod. Dian turned to the other adults.

"I need to talk to Judith for a minute," she said apologetically, and they faded away with curious glances and concerned remarks. Dian waited until they were out of earshot, then turned urgently to Judith.

"Jude, there are people on the road. Two wagons and a bunch of riders, at least ten or twelve."

"Coming here?"

"Where else is there?"

"Couldn't they just be tinkers or traders or something?"

"Didn't look right, and tinkers would know not to ride through the hill road. Besides, they looked, I don't know, purposeful. Tightly bunched, but moving as fast as they could manage."

"Two wagons, though—what's the worry? We stop them outside the Gates and see what they want."

"Last year it only took one wagon, with some kind of gun inside, to wipe out the Smithy village," she reminded Judith grimly. Judith winced at the memory of dry blood and buzzing flies, and studied her sister's face.

"You're nervous about this. In fact, I could swear you look frightened. You're having one of your Feelings about those wagons, aren't you?" Judith's emphasis put a capital letter on the word, recognition that, every so often, Dian seemed to know things she couldn't.

"Yes, and no. They seem wrong, somehow. Not necessarily dangerous, just very wrong. I don't like the idea of them coming here with us all open like this." Her hand gesture took in the scene: the nearby field with its paused workers, the cluster of gaping children, the slim young man walking down the road.

Judith's eyes thoughtfully followed this last figure, her cousin Philip, before returning to Dian.

"You want me to call an alert," she said flatly.

"Yes."

"When we're all working from dawn to dark to get the crops in, you want me to declare a day off, so everyone can go play in the caves."

Dian heard the thread of capitulation hidden beneath the protest, and looked sideways at Judith, summoning a faint air of mischief.

"We'll have some nice babies in May," she suggested.

"It's no joking matter, damn it!" Judith exploded. "I can't go around calling alerts because someone feels nervous, even if it is you. This is serious."

Dian's attempt at humor faded.

"You can't honestly think I don't realize that?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, no, Di, I know you do. Sorry to be so touchy. The heat." Dian nodded. "It's a strong feeling, then?"

"It is."

"Strong enough to nearly kill a horse and abandon two dogs," Judith noted.

"They'll find their way home—Maggie bruised her foot—but, yes, that strong."

"There's going to be screaming about this."

"But you'll do it."

"Yes, damn it, I'll do it. We need a break anyway, and I suppose it'll do us good. When do you think they'll be here?"

"The road's bad and they've got two creeks to ford—if the wagons and riders stay together, they won't arrive until dark. If they abandon the wagons and ride hard, they could be here in four, five hours. I'll talk to Laine and Jeri, and if Carmen will trust me with another horse I'll go back and watch the road. I don't think we should wait too long to clear the place. At least get the menfolk out of the way."

Judith glanced nervously down toward the entrance to the Valley.

"You're sure about this?"

"No," Dian answered unhelpfully.

"Your hunches are usually right."

"Maybe this time I'll be wrong," she said, but her voice said she did not think it likely.

"All right, then, we'd better get on with it. What do you want me to do?"

Four minutes later the assembly bell rang (five strokes, just short of a drop-everything-and-run emergency) and twenty minutes after that Judith glimpsed Dian, on a fresh horse and followed by two dogs (one of them Culum, who would not allow a little thing like exhaustion to keep him from Dian's side). Her sister rode against a rising tide of alarmed adults and frightened children, turning her back on the shouts and confusion of the Valley's alert.

It had taken nearly two hours for the quiet to settle, for sentries to set out and the livestock to be rounded up, for the menfolk, the pregnant and nursing mothers, and the girls under fourteen years of age to climb to the caves. When they were finally away, Judith and the others looked at one another, and went off to their tasks. Judith's job in theory was to be available when someone needed instructions, but in practice what it had meant was waiting and chewing her lip, sitting on the front steps of her house while her fingers worked their way through a heaping basket of dried beans.

Now she could hear Dian's voice from behind the head-high corn, speaking words of praise and encouragement to dogs and horse. As Judith walked past the remnants of the farmhouse's picket fence, they rounded the final corner, the horse at an easy trot, barely sweating. The dripping dogs, tongues lolling, spotted Judith; the brindle broke into a run to greet her, while big Culum satisfied himself with a wag of the tail from his place at the horse's side. Dian quickly whistled the young one off and gave them both the signal for "home." The dogs obediently circled around Judith, looking somewhat apologetic at their muddiness, to lope on up the hill toward the cool and shady pond behind the old barn.

Dian dropped off next to Judith, and the two women started up the road to the barn, leading the horse.

"They're coming, then?" Judith asked, although it was not really a question. "How many?"

"They're coming. Should be here around nightfall, unless they can speed up, which didn't look likely. And they're playing it cautious—they went around that Remnant where Kat was killed."

"That could be a good sign."

"Or it could mean that they're smart enough to know that guns won't do much against booby traps. And it's a well-scavenged site, which means a lot of traps. Anyway, there's just the two wagons, both with canvas sides—no seeing what's inside, but only two horses on each, so the loads can't be too heavy. Ten riders, two drivers, three more horses tied to the wagons. All the animals looked tired. Unlikely there's more than twenty women altogether."

"Unless it's a Trojan horse."

Dian nodded. "In which case the wagons are full to the brim with women and guns. The Smithy's gang looked innocent too, from all accounts."

"Just the argument I used this morning whenever anyone objected to the alert." Judith accepted the reins from Dian, who walked ahead to pull open the heavy barn door; Judith spoke to her sister's back. "You were right last week when you said we were getting slack. Between the arguments and collecting last-minute things and trying to decide who was going where, it took nearly two hours."

"Shit. If it'd been a right-now emergency . . ."

"I know. We haven't had so much as a drill in months, so even if this is a false alarm, it's good practice."

"How many of the boys had to be bodily carried off when they found you weren't going to let them stay and fight?"

Judith gave a tired grin. "Three."

"You can't breed hormonal impulses out of males in a couple of generations."

"It would make life a hell of a lot easier for us if you could."

A person could argue, Judith reflected as she handed the reins back to Dian, that male hormonal impulses were precisely what had gotten the world into its present condition, that in a horrendous sort of cosmic joke, menfolk were bearing the brunt of actions chiefly their own. However, to say that, one would have to assert that women lacked the aggressive tendency, and no one with a sister like Dian was about to make that particular assertion. No, violence and belligerence were at home on either set of chromosomes.

The ancient wooden barn the two women entered was a dim and fragrant place redolent of twelve decades of horse and hay and childhood games, its air placid with the rustle of mice and the patience of cats; once inside, Judith's taut apprehension lessened a notch. She lowered herself onto the bench that stood against the wall, letting her head fall back against the rough boards, her hands laced together under the round of her belly. From beneath half-closed eyelids she watched her sister flip the reins around the stanchion, into the groove worn by countless reins, then remove her weapons from the horse: rifle for distance, bow for silence. As Dian leaned both in the corner and reached for the cinch buckle, Judith allowed her gaze to rise into the vast reaches of the building, to the web-draped rafters that had been cut from trees on the surrounding hills and raised, thick and bright and hopelessly anachronistic in an age of aluminum siding and prefabricated girders, by her grandmother's grandfather. She had never met the old man in person, but she met and used his handiwork every day of her life, from the bed she'd awakened in that morning to the time-black bench underneath her now. She followed a shaft of light from one of the ventilation holes he had cut in a corner of the hayloft.

“Hey, Di—you remember the owl?”

Dian let the saddle thump down onto the top of the stall partition, then turned to look at her sister.

“The nest, you mean?”

Yes, there had been a nest. It was an oddly disjointed memory, as if it had been from early childhood, although she must have been, what, fifteen? sixteen, even? when she had slipped into the barn on Dian's heels late one night, a night when a huge full moon flooded the Valley with depthless blue light, seconds after the barn owl had dropped from the high opening of the hayloft and disappeared on silent wings down the fields. They scurried, noiseless as the owl—or at any rate, Dian did, with clumsy Judith, nearly twice her sister's age and half again her size, stumbling behind. Two girls, Dian's inseparable four-legged shadow for once left behind, running across the barn floor and up the ladder, to bury themselves into the hay and wait.

Even then, Judith had been bad at waiting: moonlight crept an infinitesimal path across the boards while she stifled sneezes and itches and boredom, and then without warning the owl was there, a brief outline against the bright night in the loft window before it swooped noiselessly through the barn. Tiny hatchling cries rose up over their heads, then came a faint rustle from where eight-year-old Dian lay. Suddenly a mouse was twitching across a bare patch of boards—it must have been late spring, the hay nearly gone—scrabbling and squeaking and behaving in a suicidal fashion. The owl dropped from its nest in the darkness above, only to meet bare boards, a pile of hay, and—a hand. Holding her breath, Judith saw the bird flap its wings to land on the loft floor, then eye the closed fist that protruded from the hay. Its face was a flat blue-white surface set with two unamused black holes; it seemed very large. Slowly Dian's hand rotated, and opened, until the dead mouse was proffered between two fingers. The barn waited. After a long minute the owl took a step forward, its claws brushing the old wood with a faint scritch that Judith felt up her spine. It paused, then took another step, and a third. Inches from Dian's hand it stopped, settled its wings in a sort of decisive shiver, and reached forward delicately to seize the offering. When it had the mouse, it retreated a step to study the empty hand. For a moment the owl was both a rather stupid bird and a visitant from the divine. Judith must have made a noise, for the owl spread its wings and was gone.

And the child Dian had laughed, had scabbled out from the hay and shook herself off, then turned toward her teenage sister and crowed in glee at the workings of the universe. Dian used to do that a lot, Judith recalled, back when she was still called Lizzie. Not anymore.

Judith let her eyes drop from the rafters and found Dian gazing down at her, a faint trace of that long-ago amusement on her face.

“Pleasant dreams?”

Judith flushed, but she did indeed feel refreshed, whether because of the barn, the daydream, Dian's presence, or the possibility that the invasion would be harmless, she could not have said. She stretched and picked up the water bucket that sat on one end of the bench. When she turned

back there was another person standing there, a dark stump of a woman whose head barely reached Dian's chest, scowl on face and hands on hips as she glared at the stripped horse.

"Calmate, Carmen," Dian began immediately. "El tenía una siesta larga abajo de un arbol and then had an easy twelve miles home. I never pushed him out of a canter, and he positively begged to trot up from the creek. Te juro por Dios." She put her hand over her heart to emphasize her honesty.

The horse had looked around at Carmen's silent entrance and was now pulling against the immobilizing reins in an attempt to snuffle at her hands. He was barely wet, in spite of the heat, and his neck and ears moved vigorously, but still Carmen fixed Dian with an eye filled with baleful threats and said nothing.

"Mira, Carmen, siento mucho lo de esta mañana, what I did to Simon this morning. I hated to do it to him, it hurt me to take advantage of his big heart, but I had to. I hope he'll be all right?"

The compliment to her charge did it, and the horsewoman allowed herself to reach out and make contact with the horse's soft nostrils before snorting a brief forgiveness.

"No fue gracias a ti," she grumbled at Dian.

"You looked at his off hind? I think I got the stone out before it bruised him, but—"

"Go teach your abuela to suck eggs. Don't you have anything better to do than stand around here jawing? Go get yourself something to eat. Darte un baño, por Dios, you're stinkin' up my barn. I'll finish him up. Got nothing better to do, hanging around here."

"Oh, Carmen, I can't let you care for a horse that I—"

"Shut up. Vayate." She waved a dismissive hand at Dian, snatched the bucket out of Judith's hand, flicked the reins from the groove in the stanchion, and stalked off, muttering Spanish imprecations. The horse shambled after her, eager as an adoring puppy. Dian and Judith looked at each other, stifled laughter, and gathered up Dian's possessions. TWO

. . . there were no males among them at all, for their way of life was similar to that of the Amazons.

The two women who emerged from the black cavern of the barn door were a study in contrast. One was a tall, loose-limbed woman closing in on thirty, killing weapons tucked easily under her right arm, left hand stretched down as if making ghostly contact with some hip-level object. She was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and long trousers over tall soft boots; everything about her was the color of dust. Her wiry, scorched-looking blond hair was closely cropped above angular cheekbones, sun-dark skin, and intensely blue eyes, and she walked with the lithe economy of a distance runner. Dian had chosen her name when she attained her womanhood, in a self-conscious but determined evocation of the goddesses of war and hunt, for, even then, half her

lifetime ago, she had known what her skills would be. Her contributions of game to the village's tables were regular, and she held a fanatic's eye toward the security of their boundaries.

The woman at her side, the woman she called sister, was a full head shorter, looked more than her eight years older, and moved with the more compact strength of a person whose muscles dig and lift and build. Her face was browner than the sun could dye it and broad across the cheekbones, set with eyes of the darkest brown and surrounded by thick black hair, glossy smooth in the sun with glints of white in the braid down her back. Her mouth was soft and smiled easily, although there was a long history of burdens borne in the lines beside it. She wore a loose, sleeveless yellow blouse, amateurishly embroidered with bright flowers, and rough woven shorts belted with a similarly colorful and badly woven sash. She had simple, thin-soled sandals on her feet, and she walked with that pelvic looseness peculiar to the last weeks of pregnancy, when ligaments relax and the center of balance shifts almost daily.

The two women, in fact, shared no known ancestors. They were adoptive kin only, milk sisters, Dian rescued and brought to the Valley by the person they both had called "Mother."

Judith was still smiling at Carmen's truculent generosity when they reached the corner of the barn, and Dian made to turn right, toward her quarters up behind the building. Judith stopped her.

"Come to the house," she suggested. "There's some lemonade."

"God, Jude, I would kill for lemonade. But I should go wash first—my clothes are filthy and there's probably ticks in my hair." The farmhouse, with its huge dining room and oversize kitchen, was the social and (if the word can be stretched to fit a community of 285 souls) political center of the Valley, as well as its lending library, town hall, records office, and savings bank. However, it was also Judith's home, and Judith was considerably more fastidious than Dian in matters of housekeeping.

"Don't worry about it," she replied, but added, "we'll sit on the porch."

They went around to the front, up the worn steps where Judith had shelled the beans, Dian raising an eyebrow at the mess but refraining from comment. Judith scooped up the basket and bowl and pulled open the much-mended screen door, then continued through into the house while Dian leaned her things against the screen walls, her left hand unconsciously signaling to absent dogs that they should lie down, and eased herself into one of the shabbier chairs. She let out a deep breath at this first moment of peace she'd had in what had already been a long day and was far from over; then she put first one booted foot up on the low table, crossed the other over it, and closed her eyes.

Only to become suddenly aware of how very angry she was.

In an unknowing echo of Judith's earlier vision, the picture her sister had painted stood vivid behind Dian's eyelids: the Valley's residents racing round like frightened chickens, as open to invasion as a group of twentieth-century innocents. It made her feel like hitting something. She wanted to go out and shake Laine until the woman's teeth rattled—she was supposed to be Dian's

second; why hadn't the damned woman just taken charge? Judith shouldn't have to do it all, she wasn't in any condition to carry that burden. Hell, Judith really shouldn't be here at all, she should be up at the caves with Kirsten and the others.

But it wasn't just Laine she was furious with, wasn't even stubborn Judith. You stupid, stupid bitch, she swore at herself. You think you can go and have a camp-out any time you feel bored? What if you'd gone toward the sea like you wanted to? What if you hadn't just happened to wake up so early, hadn't had that headache, had gone downhill for firewood instead of up?

Christ, you could have been counting waves and contemplating your fucking navel while the whole Valley was being wiped out. You'd have come back and found burnt-out ruins and the buzzards picking over their bones, and how about boredom then?

Hey, a small voice objected, if I hadn't been bored and gone out in the first place, we wouldn't have known the wagons were coming until the outer guards spotted them, and we'd be in no better a spot. But she rode over her mind's objection, because she was frightened and furious and grave danger was coming wrapped inside two strange wagons, and there was not a thing she could do to stop it.

Luck alone had put her on that hillside at that time. She'd been bored because nothing had happened for so long, and now that something was happening, she wasn't ready. Of all the stupid, irresponsible things, to be off in the woods playing with the dogs instead of doing the job the entire Valley depended on her for. Only dumb, blind, terrifying luck had prevented those wagons from rolling into the Valley unannounced.

Dian was all too aware of the outsize role played by luck in the Valley's very existence: luck the place was overlooked by roving bands of Destroyers at the beginning, two generations ago; luck those raiders thirty years ago hadn't been better armed or more numerous; luck the people hadn't just quietly starved to death or fallen under some plague; luck they hadn't been twisted into brutal parodies of humanity like so many other communities. They were even fortunate in their fairly high fertility rate, and two of the boy children born in the last three years looked as if they might, please God, survive. Luck, too, in her own life: what but sheer chance could have brought the woman she came to call Mother to the crossroads just a few hours after a girl baby, not yet walking, had been abandoned? Sweat, and some blood, and more than a few tears had played their parts, but the potential catastrophes kept her sleepless as it was—and now her irresponsible inattention to the job had placed the Valley in jeopardy, dependent yet again on the whims of luck.

She gnawed a bit of rough skin from her knuckle and opened her eyes to the rich fields and the orchards beyond, to the smooth pond and the lush hillside vineyard and, rising dark above the far orchard, the protective curve of hills, clothed in silent redwoods. A pulse of some series of emotions seized her, something that for an instant brought her absurdly close to tears: love for those hills, that orchard; despair that she couldn't seem to be happy within those bounds like Judith; knowledge that somewhere—hidden deep, faintly felt, instantly suppressed, but nonetheless there—had been a tiny wistfulness at the idea of being free of the Valley, that finding the vultures squabbling over their bones would have been a horror but also (don't even think it!) a freedom.

Alone was a word with two edges.

The gentle sound of ice chips moving against delicate glassware broke her bitter reverie, startled her with a brief but vivid evocation of a string of naming ceremonies: Mother, Judith . . .

But it was only Judith, backing through the inner door, holding a laden tray with solemn attention.

“Both ice and the glasses?” Dian asked. “I don’t know that the day calls for a celebration, Jude.” Ice marked a social occasion, since the supply was limited to what one small freezer in the healer’s office could produce and what the Valley had managed to store in the deep cave under sawdust. The glasses holding the ice were quite simply irreplaceable.

Judith set the tray on the table and lowered her bulk into the chair next to Dian’s. She handed Dian a glass and held her own up to the light to admire the pale color of the liquid and the translucent slice of lemon, running her tongue voluptuously over the smooth edge before she drank deeply. She set the glass down with care on the table.

“I find them a comfort. Sometimes I get one out just to have a drink of water. It’s like I can feel Mother’s hands on them. And Father’s too.” Judith’s father had died before his daughter entered womanhood, so that Dian had only a vague memory of him: neatly trimmed beard, strong arms, happy voice. One of his sons had lived, the pride of the community, Judith’s big brother, Peter—hidden away in the cave now with the others. “I’ve gone ahead with the preparations we talked about. The sentries are set, the next ones should go out in about an hour; that’s what Jeri said you wanted. I decided that you were right about wanting to keep the visitors away from the houses, but keeping them outside the Gates entirely seemed too blatant a message. They’re hardly concealing themselves, after all. So I set Hanna and her family to putting up tables outside the slaughtering sheds, asked her to heat up the boilers. Did everything seem to be coming along okay when you rode by?”

Dian nodded. “Yes, it looked fine. I still think outside the Gates would be better, but even in the meadow I can put Laine and Jeri in the trees with their rifles, to cover us. What did you decide about Ling?”

“Dian, I can’t send our healer up to the caves when there might be trouble.”

“Trouble,” Dian snorted.

“For heaven’s sake, she’s been here ten years, plenty long enough to knock the aristocratic edges off her. And she never was as fragile as she looks.”

“That’s true,” Dian admitted. The healer’s delicate hands had never hesitated in that emergency amputation last year; her lovely Chinese eyes had not so much as winced away from the sight of the Smithy’s bloodbath. The woman was an enigma—no family, no casual relationships, no reason to be here, as far as Dian could see. She’d just ridden in with Mother from a trip to Meijing

nine and a half years ago and been here ever since. She'd come here to leave something behind, no doubt. Or someone.

Dian shook her head to clear out the extraneous thoughts and tapped the last precious chips of ice into her mouth, placing the glass on the tray with care. "I'd better go feed the dogs," she said, then paused in the act of getting to her feet. "Speaking of whom, how many of them do you think I should have down there tonight? I'm not sure I can control more than four at once if things go bad. I'd have to just turn them loose."

Judith looked at her grimly. "If things go bad, we'd want them turned loose. Bring five or six. You won't have any trouble with that many if things stay friendly."

"Right." Dian raked her long fingers back and forth through her hair, loosing a shower of dried leaves and dust. "Look, you asked me this morning if I thought there was danger. I don't know, but it doesn't feel exactly dangerous." Her hand moved to the back of her neck, and she stood, cupping the spot. "I wish I could pin it down, but it just feels like something very odd is going on. On the surface this whole thing is a straightforward problem, but I feel . . . prickly. And it's not just the foxtails in my shirt either!" She shot a glance at Judith, then sighed, gathered her weapons, and went out. Judith sat and looked at the sparkling, empty lake, her hands unconsciously traveling up and around the swollen globe of her belly.

The sun moved across the sky, the shadows began to lengthen. In the chapel, Judith recited the prayers she had learned at her mother's knee, then sat listening to the polyglot prayers of those around her, from Latin Hail Marys to half-remembered Nicene Creeds: the age-old divisions between Catholic and Protestant meant about as much now as the division between MacCauley, the Valley's nominal owners, and Escobar, who had begun as farm hands. Judith was both, as her prayers were both Catholic and Protestant. In the infirmary, Ling the healer finished packing up her scanty drugs, set another batch of bandages to sterilize, and lit a stick of incense in front of her small Buddhist altar, praying in fervent Chinese that her services would not be needed. In the barn, Carmen, speaking her own native Spanish, reciting her own form of prayer, talked to her equine charges, telling them what was going on and that they shouldn't worry, before she went to help her two co-wives with an early milking.

Not all the residents prayed. Dian finished doctoring the paw of the young bitch, Maggie, who had limped home during the afternoon, then went to look for Laine and Jeri. She found her two lieutenants arguing over sniper positions among the trees and buildings, and settled it by telling them who she wanted where. Before Laine could do more than bristle, a rider cantered up the road with news of the wagons' progress; she hesitated between Laine and Dian, then to Dian's further vexation, gave her report to the space between them. The report was brief; the rider's relief at getting away from the two aggrieved women palpable.

Others prepared for the coming invasion in a manner neither spiritual nor combative but merely practical. In the clear space between the sheds atop which two snipers would lie, plank tables were being assembled, cook fires lit, beer barrels hauled, slabs of beef laid ready, mountains of corn shucked.

Of all the residents of the Valley, perhaps only one nurtured a degree of satisfaction: Judith's thirteen-year-old daughter, Susanna, although as apprehensive as anyone else, was also gratified that she had been allowed to stay in the Valley instead of being hidden away with the men and the children. She pestered Dian until finally her aunt threatened to throw her bodily into the pond and sent her down to help at the makeshift kitchen.

And in the big cave, hidden deep in the hillside over the Valley, more prayers were said, another set of defense preparations was made, and old Kirsten prepared to tell one of her simple stories of Before.

KIRSTEN

Kirsten was old, had been old ever since anyone could remember. Ling, who in addition to being the village's healer was its unofficial historian, had long tried to pin down her age, with limited success, because the old woman made a game of keeping everyone guessing—even her granddaughter Judith didn't know for sure. The next oldest resident was about sixty-five, having been born during the final throes of what the West called "civilization." Pubescent when she had arrived, Ruby remembered Kirsten as being gray-haired even then; that would make Kirsten now in her late eighties or nineties; Ling would not bet that she had not passed her century mark.

Although her eyes had dimmed and she often slept now in the afternoons, Kirsten's hands and voice were firm, and her wits as sharp as ever. As she sat waiting for her audience to settle, the sunlight crept into the passageway that connected the cave with its entrance. The ancient eyes looked past the half-illuminated moving figures, past them and into a time long, long gone.

I am so tired, she thought to herself. I have seen too much, fought too many battles, tasted more adrenaline than one woman ought. Long, long ago I was granted a few sweet years of childhood; then the Troubles began, with images burned into our minds: planes slipping into buildings with a bloom of fire; a city school dead down to the last classroom pet; a small town littered with corpses from a bioweapon. The vocabulary of terror—virus and nanophage, genetic modification and dirty bombs—causing the collective mind to wince back from the horrors, that grinding fear of crowds that seized us all, and our powerful mistrust of all but the simplest of technologies, followed finally by the Valley's retreat into itself. Riots raging Outside, and civilization's Destroyers—technophobia gone mad—at the Gates for our last male-fought battle, which saw three of our precious boys bleeding into the earth: my sweet Tony, little more than a child, pounding down the road with a gun in his hand, a David into battle. Only this Goliath killed his shepherd-boy before falling.

Too many sights, too many changes, too many years of chosen blindness—growing crops, raising children—and here we are, yet again counting our bullets and sharpening our arrows while old Kirsten keeps her people occupied and calm.

What pretty stories shall I tell you, my children? she mused. About my mother, maybe? First in her family to go to university (and last, it looks like, for a long time), fought her way out of a bad first marriage (No bad marriages now, are there, my children? We can't afford them) and through a male-oriented tenure system to establish a department of Women's Studies? There's a pretty

story for the cave: the bitter joke of feminism, so many strong women fighting for so long to get the merest crust of equality, only to have the world turn around and shovel the entire feast onto our heads. Shall I tell you about equal rights, and we can laugh until our throats hurt?

No; all you want now, my children, is men's history.

Not the story of Alicia, for three years my very best friend, who came here from being raped by a mob, who whimpered whenever she saw more than two or three menfolk walking together, who finally hanged herself from the walnut tree when she was nineteen. And not how secretly glad it made me at first, for her sake, to hear that men all over the world were dying off.

Oh, my bones ache. How old does a woman have to be, to be allowed to vent her anger?

But they sit and wait, needing me.

No; when the time comes for you to hear those tales, when curiosity begins to unfurl like a fern frond out of a fire-ravaged hillside, you will begin to remember the books we all wrote for you, sitting on the library shelves, untouched and waiting. I won't live to see the day, but never mind.

For now it's a pretty story you want, my children, not something to trouble your sleep too much. Something to set the mood so we can pretend this is a party, a tale to take our minds off those approaching wagons.

Not a dark story, then. But because I am old and my bones do ache so, there may be threads of dark showing through the light. That I can't help.

The cavern had quieted, the faces were expectant. Kirsten's old lungs drew breath and she began obediently as she always began: When I was young...

"When I was young, the Valley belonged to my grandparents, and we always came up for the summer. When school stopped in June we would all come up together for a couple of weeks, before my father went back to work in the city. It took us half a day to get here. We would load up the car the night before—you all know what a car was?" This was a ritual question, and invariably the children would demand to be told, and Kirsten would launch off into a description of the joys and terrors of the great, gleaming steel monster whose rusted shell now lay in the lower orchard, a home for mice and a beloved plaything for the children. "And once when I was a little older than Shawna here we had a car with a top we could fold back, and driving it over the hills to the farm the wind would grab our hair, and I remember how it felt to let my hair fly in the breeze, like some movie star." ("The movies" and "television" were two other favorite topics with her audiences, although it had been years since the last television screen had gone black, and the Valley's sole computer in Ling's infirmary was too valuable to spend on the few remaining discs.) "It took me two days to get the snarls out of my hair," she laughed a rueful chuckle, "and I cut it all off the following week."

"How many people used to live here, Grandma Kirsten?" prompted one of the girls.

“Well, let’s see. My grandparents the MacCauleys lived in the big house, and the Escobars had the three houses at the far end of the Great Meadow—I married the son of one of them, Rosario, much later. So maybe twenty people altogether. Of course, when I was about, oh, ten or eleven maybe, my mother brought us up here for good, when the plagues began and the world began to go strange. By the time my womanhood came on me there were thirty-eight or forty of us here, almost as many men at first as women. My mother was here—my father was killed in one of the first Destroyers riots—and Grams and Gramps, although he died soon after we moved up. And of course my little sister and my brother Will. My mother’s two sisters brought their families, and a bunch of Escobar relatives came, and some friends of both families came here too, toward the End. Now, who would you like to hear about?”

Voices called out names—“Gramps,” “your father,” “Aunt Eve”—but gradually the requests for “Will” won out. None of the children actually remembered Will, who had died ten years before, but they all felt they knew the irascible old man whose passion for gadgets and tinkering had given the community all of its most basic machines, from the heavy water-mill machinery to the much-repaired photovoltaic panels that powered Ling’s computer and freezer, and whose stubborn refusal to be “coddled,” as he called it, had driven the women to despair while setting a secret model in the minds of the young men.

“Will, is it?” Greeted with shouts of enthusiastic agreement, her old eyes glittered with amusement at their choice. “Ah, Will. He was a real rascal, that one. Always had bits of string and wheels and clock gears falling out of his pockets, always off somewhere in his mind. We used to tap on his head to get his attention—he’d never hear us otherwise.

“Will was a few years younger than me, and how he loved those early summers up here, more than any of us. It was safe here, you see, and he could run to his heart’s content without fretting about the cars and crazies of the city. Starting at Easter time he’d begin making plans, sketches and drawings, books from the library, talking to Gramps on the telephone—you all remember what a telephone is?” Most of the women present had been to Meijing, but few would have actually used one of the city’s telephones. To the rest it was another children’s toy, a Remnant lump of colored plastic that they took on faith as a variation on the cup-and-string lines of the kids’ forts; nonetheless, all nodded. “So, he knew weeks in advance what he was going to do, and just how long it’d take him.

“Then in the middle of June we’d set off, pack one day and leave early the next morning. Once, when I was very young, it took only three or four hours to get here, but later the roads were bad, and bridges would go down, and toward the end we’d have to circle way south and then come up along the coast to avoid the crazies on the hill. We’d pack a lunch, and we’d drive and drive, and the sun would always be so hot, and the air-conditioning never worked—you know what an air conditioner was? No? You know the refrigerator in Ling’s office, that she uses to keep her medicines cold? It was like that, only it kept a room or a car cool instead of just a box. An air conditioner. Anyway, it was always hot, and we’d sit and wait and fuss and ask, ‘How long now?’ about two thousand times until my parents were going crazy with it, and then finally, finally we’d come over the last hill and see the trees. We’d all shout and yell, even Mom, and when we got down to the creek at the bottom Dad would stop the car and we’d all spill out and run down to the water and splash for about two seconds, and then we’d all jumble back in any which way, and

we'd start up the last hill, past the sheds and across the bridge, up the curve, through the orchard, and at last we'd pull up through the gate and under the walnut tree and stop at the house, and there would be Grams and Gramps waiting for us, and Grams would say, 'Oh, you must be fair parched for thirst,' and we'd all stretch and groan and go off to the veranda, but—who do you think had other things on his mind? That's right—Will. He'd jump out of the car holding the box of drawings and ideas he'd been saving up and shove them straight into Gramps's hands, and Gramps would push back his hat and scratch his head and say, 'Now, what have we here, young Will?' and the two of them would go off to the workshop back of the barn, heads together, Will's bobbing up and down and his tongue going a mile a minute, and the two of them would spend the next eight weeks in just that position, bent over Will's drawings for a new kind of gopher trap or building a wind-powered water pump, or a donkey-powered threshing flail, or any of a hundred other things. The rest of us spent the summer riding horses and swimming and exploring the hills, but Will spent it getting grease under his fingernails and bruising his thumb with the hammer.

"Sometimes, though . . ." The old voice faded for a minute and became reflective. "Did I ever tell you how this cave was discovered?" A few of the older women exchanged glances and shifted slightly in their places, but it was not a bad story, really, just . . . troubling. They did not interrupt. "I didn't? Will found it. Or maybe I should say, it found him.

"As you know, in those days, when I was young, men were very different. There were a lot more of them, for one thing, so they didn't have to be so careful. In those days my uncle and Gramps ran the farm, and Grams did the house and the garden. The menfolk made most of the important decisions and, more than that, they did all of the nasty, dangerous jobs, like digging up septic tanks and felling trees and running the farm machinery. Yes, Lilyanne, they did so. Boys ran wild, climbed trees, went hunting with rifles. Girls too, but boys more. Hard to believe, isn't it?"

Again there was an exchange of frowns above the listening heads. This was dangerous ground, introducing ideas that frustrated the boys and reminded the men of their impotence. All the women, including Kirsten when she thought about it, tried to avoid referring to the times when men were men and free to risk their feet with ax blades and their lives by traveling outside the Valley. Reminders made everyone uncomfortable, and there would be repercussions from Kirsten's suggestions—young boys up in trees, teenage boys with a gleam in their eyes. There was little they could do about it at the moment, though, short of stifling Kirsten's tale—and the long-term repercussions of that would be worse. Better to let her go, and deal with the masculine urges to adventure as they came along. And have Judith give her grandmother hell tomorrow.

If there was a tomorrow.

"Anyway, Will had been reading up on bomb shelters—they were very popular around then, places to hide in case of a war—as if it did them any good when it did come, trapped underground—but he decided there must be caves up in these hills that we could use. He was eleven, I think, the last summer before we moved up here for good. He left after breakfast, didn't show up at lunch, and by suppertime everyone was out looking for him.

"I'll never forget that night. It was so hot, not a breath of wind to stir the leaves and no moon at all, just twenty or thirty neighbors out searching the hills with lamps and torches and flashlights. We

could hear each other shouting out Will's name and crackling through the bushes and calling back and forth, the sounds bouncing around the hills and the lights flickering in and out among the trees, and the old farmhouse blazing with light in the center of the Valley.

"It was after midnight when Rosario's father found Will, all day and half the night after he'd come across this cave and the entrance fell in on him. Just there," she pointed, and the heads all turned as one to the raw patch lit by the last of the sun, and stared in awe as at the proof of a god's passing.

"They got him out and brought him down the hill on a stretcher, a long line of men and women carrying lights, looking like a lit-up caterpillar as they came. He had a broken leg—that was why he always limped, you know? It never really healed properly—and after the doctor'd been and set it, after Will was asleep on the daybed on the veranda, after everyone had been fed and talked off the excitement and then gone off to their own homes, I saw my mother cry for the first time in my life. She was sitting next to him where he lay sleeping. She just sat there, holding her hands together in her lap, looking down at his face all scratched and bruised in the light of a candle, her tears just running helplessly down her cheeks and dripping onto her arms." Kirsten looked into the distance in silence for a few moments. "She lost two boy babies before Will, and one after. Not one of them got to his second birthday."

The cave was still, the faces ruddy now with the last of the sun's rays. The eyes were all focused at a mythic place long removed from sight, when men were free to travel without heavily armed guards, free to risk life and limb doing dangerous jobs, a barely conceivable time when a boy child might wander away from his caretakers long enough to get himself lost and injured. The younger eyes wondered at it, half disbelieving. Kirsten's hooded eyes watched the faces of the girls and the women as each took a deep breath, their minds coming back to this cave, and she saw how every one of them, every pair of female eyes present, glanced quickly at one or another of their twenty-seven males, from sturdy little Jonathan, asleep in his mother's arms, to Peter, his beard now more than half gray, and Anthony, ancient among the men at sixty-two. The same every time—a quick glance, a touch of pain, of love, of blessing and fierce protection bestowed. These twenty-seven were the most valuable possessions the farm community had, and also the most vulnerable.

Every person there knew that if the party on the road wanted anything, it would be the Valley's men.

It was nearly dusk when Susanna burst through the door of the veranda where Judith was trying to rest, to deliver Jeri's message that the wagons had cleared the last hill before the Valley entrance. Judith pushed her daughter gently back out the door and went to find Dian, only to meet her halfway to the house. The two women, walking shoulder to shoulder, came through the gate beneath the walnut tree and made their way down the once-paved road in the twilight. The noises of the night were starting up, the whir of crickets filling the Valley; the sun's final rays were brushing the tips of the highest trees on the cave's hillside. The night air lay sweet and dusty and warm around them. The dogs that flowed around the two women were attentive and glad for an evening out, knowing only that some form of excitement was in the air. Dian whistled them back

from the millpond but let them run on ahead to the lights and cooking smells that waited on the other side of the bridge.

Culum alone stayed with Dian, walking at her hip so her left hand brushed his massive shoulders. It was their usual position, especially when something was up, as if physical contact was a necessary element in the partnership. Judith, glancing over at Dian's expression and then down at Culum's equally intent face, hid a smile. The dog would not move from Dian's side all night. Unless his teeth were needed, she corrected herself, the smile fading. A hundred eighty pounds of muscle, teeth, and brain made for a weapon more effective than the bow in Dian's other hand.

In the meadow, the lamps were lit and hung, the big boilers gurgling to themselves. Dian checked the defenses, adjusting the arrangements slightly to her satisfaction: a half-circle of women with Judith in the center, Dian and the other archers to the sides, the rifles above and behind. As she took up her own position to the right of the greeting committee, bow strung and arrow nocked, she wondered if the others were as conscious as she of the uncomfortable overtones of meeting here, in the ground where the messiest of slaughtering tasks were done. The echoes of pig squeals and the whish of knives over whetstones seemed to tremble in her ears.

Silence gathered and spread across the meadow. A huge orange moon raised its head over the protecting hills, lighting the road beyond the reach of the lamps. The women took up their positions, the dogs arrayed for maximum effect. The short wait began.

Suddenly the sound of harnesses and hooves rang through the still air. As they drew near, Dian was hit by a spasm of apprehension: they had made the wrong decision—they should have remained in hiding until these people declared themselves. Culum whined softly, searching for the enemy she was feeling; she nudged his side comfortingly with her knee and fought the urge to step back into the shadows. One of the women beside her had unconsciously moved until she was slightly in front of Judith, protecting her and the life she carried. The strange outriders were staying close to their wagons, although they could undoubtedly see the lighted welcome party ahead.

Dian moved into the center of her dogs, the better to control them. They were alert now, aware of why they were here at this strange gathering. They sat on their haunches, the five animals, and waited with their humans.

The wagons were only a hundred yards away when Culum reacted. Culum, who left Dian's side only when commanded, who formed her other half, who had not disobeyed a command since he was six months old; Culum rose to his feet, hunch-shouldered and intent, staring at the first wagon as if he could see through its sides. His hackles bristled huge across his shoulders and down his spine, and Dian readied her bow: in a moment he would begin his war-croon, and then all hell would be loosed, but abruptly, with Dian's warning shout nearly to her lips, his head came up, his ears pricked, and his ruff began to subside; his tail even waved experimentally. Dian told him to sit. He twitched one ear and ignored her—Culum ignored her. And then, to her utter disbelief, the dog set off at a brisk, swinging trot down the road and got as far as Judith before Dian found her voice. Her outraged command cracked through the air like a whip.

Culum stopped, looked over his shoulders at her, and slowly, reluctantly, settled down onto his haunches, giving an audible sigh as he did so. He sat with one eye on her, head cocked, deliberate patience in every line of his powerful body. He was humoring her, she saw with amazement, putting up with her human shortcomings. Okay, he was saying. She had the right to order him around, but in his opinion she was being very stupid. Dian, meeting his gaze, only half-heard the approaching wagons. She had trusted Culum with her life before this; she would trust him now.

“Okay, if you say so,” she told him. He stood with an air of satisfaction and trotted off eagerly to meet the strangers. Dian kept the other dogs where they were.

The first of the riders had come within hailing distance of the standing half-circle when her words of greeting were strangled by the sight of this huge animal trotting down the center of the road. Her horse shied and cribbed against the bit as Culum went past, but not until he neared the wagon did the rider reach with an oath for her rifle scabbard, then in the next instant draw back her hand and shout in an unnecessarily loud order to her people that nobody was to move.

Culum stared up at the now stationary wagon, completely ignoring the white-faced driver in his interest at what lay within. The woman nearly fell off her perch to the ground five feet below when Culum, tired of waiting, rose up easily onto his hind legs to rest his front paws on the driver's seat, peering into the closed canvas interior behind her. Dian had a moment to wonder at the woman's dedication to duty before a movement within shifted the wagon and caused Culum to draw back and thump down on all fours to the ground, looking up expectantly, tail wagging furiously. The wagon shifted again, and a low murmur came from within. Dian's nocked arrow raised itself marginally, and in the trees around her, the fingers on four triggers tensed.

One arm lifted the flap, and the driver hastily moved aside. The top of a glossy black head of hair appeared, followed by a large booted foot, a trousered leg, and a pair of startlingly wide shoulders. Then the rest of the figure emerged, unfolding itself until it stood upright on the front of the wagon, where it raised a face to the armed women and the lights.

A face that was dark with stubble.

“Holy Mother of God,” someone whispered hoarsely into the shocked silence. “It's a man.”