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THE
STONE
TESTAMENT

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HOPE FOR A BETTER DAY

Everyone was dead. Not just in that room, but in the next, and the next. She knew because the flies told her. One or two at first, in aimless heavy flight, buzzed and banged against the windows, but the weather had been very warm, freakishly so for the time of year, and now the sound was a constant, busy, monotonous drone as if the many had become one. She could feel the imprint of their tiny clawed feet as they crawled across her face, her hands, every part of her body that was exposed, but still she did not move. Even the flicker of an eyelid would give her away. The flies did not come alone. Baal-Zebul moved with them. This was how she knew him. He had

been given many titles over the millennia, but the meaning of his name was always the same: Lord of the Flies.

The destruction would be general. The Fifth Age of the World would end in fire and flood, tempest and tumult. The Beast Gods would stalk the land and only the Children of the Sixth Dawn had been forewarned. Not just here, but in identical communities all over the country, all over the world, the Children of the Sixth Dawn, C6D for short, had left early, going to another level to await the Endtime, the final setting of the sun.

She had been taken young. She did not know her age, or her true name, or the place of her birth. She had no memory of the time before they took her, but sometimes, in dreams, she saw a place that was very different from this: a place that was the colour of ashes, a land of craters and ruins where a hot wind always blew and the dust was white with stinging salts. Sometimes she saw a ruined settlement: mud huts, crumbling to dust, straggled out of a burning town. Behind them, a dried-up lake, behind that, a line of grey hills riven with black gullies. In front lay a highway with no traffic on it. A thin

dog tore and worried at a lump of something that lay beside a wreck at the roadside. She knew there were people, crouched in the corner on the mud-stamped floor of a hut half destroyed by rocket fire, but there were no people in her dreams. There were never any people in her dreams. She was always alone, tasting the bitter wind.

They had probably purchased her. When they were harvesting, they went well equipped with dollars. They went to countries which were poor to begin with, torn by war and conflict, where there was no lack of people willing to sell their children. They had given her a name: Zillah. They consulted a name book when they took in new children, working through A to Z and back again, as methodical in this as in everything else. She had no surname, no family name. She was a Truechild of the Sixth Dawn. That was seven years ago. She would have been perhaps seven or eight years old, older than their preferred age for taking children, so now she was probably fourteen or fifteen. Old enough, anyway, to be moved to the Women's House, which was where she lay

now, surrounded by the only family she had ever known. She felt no sorrow or pity for the dead who lay around her. She held no affection for any one of them. Relationships of any kind had been discouraged. The children in the Kinder House were regularly rotated to discourage friendship; their carers constantly changed to prevent any kind of bonding between adult and child. All contact with the outside was, of course, strictly forbidden. To be a Child took believers beyond earthbound ties of family and friendship. Such relationships were invalid. They were formed of clay. That was what they had believed. And they had all been believers. They had obeyed the edict. Taken their lives without question. Now they were all dead and her only feelings were anger and contempt.

All love was reserved for the Divine Founder, saviour and preserver, the ineffable I AM. His was the only true religion, based on vision and visitation. The Founder had passed on to a different level years ago, but His work was carried on by another, the Advocate. All other belief was false. It was all written down in *The Meaning of the*

Sixth Dawn –The Book of the Law. This was the only permitted work, but Zillah had found other books.

The Children of the Sixth Dawn had community houses, called Chapters, spread across the world, but this was the Master House. Formally called Ringmere Hall, it was perfect for the Children: a secluded mansion set in large grounds deep in the English countryside, with electronic gates at the top of a long drive and high fences all around. The main building was very grand, fashioned from dark honey-coloured stone and built around a central courtyard. The Children only used the porticoed main building and the two wings leading off it; the eastern range over the entrance was sealed off from the rest of the house. This was the Founder's Wing, where He had lived when this was His home. It was kept as He had left it, with nothing changed, in anticipation of His possible return.

Entry was forbidden to all except the Advocate.

Zillah found a way in when she was ten or eleven. A small door at the foot of a neglected flight of steps led to the sequestered wing. She'd kept her visits infre-

quent, choosing her times carefully: afternoons when the younger children were supposed to be resting, or in the grounds exercising; at night when everyone was sleeping. She collected stubs of the candles used in ceremonies, stole matches from the kitchen and moved like a ghost through the shuttered rooms. It was clear that the wing had not been occupied for many years. Wallpaper peeled and tapestries gaped, the heavy fabric torn by its own weight. Dark portraits glowered down from the walls and shrouded furniture made vague shapes in the dim light. The rooms smelt of coal fires, long extinguished. The corridors were swept clean but cobwebs hung like banners from the ceilings and dust lay on every other surface. Zillah was careful not to touch anything and crept from room to room, fearful that she might find the Founder's mummified form stretched out behind the drooping canopy of one of the four-poster beds, but there was no sign of Him, or anyone else.

Except in one room that Zillah called the library. Books lined the walls and lay about open on tables, as if

someone had just been reading them. When Zillah found this room, her heart beat harder. She stood on the threshold, gripped by fear. The small, windowless room was completely free of dust and cobwebs, which meant it was visited, and frequently. A leather chair was pulled up to the fire. Next to it was a small round table with an oil lamp on it, a decanter of amber liquid and a glass coated with a sweet, sticky residue. Some kind of alcohol, she guessed, although such things were against the Law. The ashes in the grate were still warm, and a large coal scuttle contained the makings of a fire. Leather trunks and suitcases lay in a row on the floor. If she was found in a forbidden area, there was no telling what would happen to her, but her curiosity overcame her. The suitcases tempted her into the room.

The battered leather cases were stamped across the corner: B. G. Wesson. A chill ran through her as she recognized the name of the Esteemed Founder before He shed His earthly persona, but she was curious. She had never thought of Him as a real person with possessions. The cases were covered with old labels, half torn off,

brown and brittle, from all over the world. Inside, they contained a baffling mix of things. One was full of old documents: maps and manuscripts. Another contained personal papers of some sort: curling, dog-eared letters written in the same cramped hand on small sheets of cream paper, the ink fading to sepia. Another appeared to contain bits of rock, some marked in red crayon to show where there might be an inscription. The last contained a series of small objects, their shape uncertain, worn away over time, or sucked by the sea. There was a strange, domed box, made of discoloured bone or ivory, brown and streaked, like an old man's teeth. It was covered in faint symbols, worn to mere scratches. It was empty. The inside was lined with padded green leather, ridged and gnarly, like crocodile skin. Zillah was about to close it, disappointed, when she saw something gleaming through a crack in the lining. Zilla reached in to retrieve it, using her finger and thumb like tweezers. The object was small, but made of gold. It was hard to see what it was, but Zillah thought it was a bee. The wings had broken off, the body had been smoothed by

age, but there were still faint stripes on its back, and the shape tapered from a broad head to where the sting would be. It fitted exactly into the palm of her hand.

At that moment, the cobwebs in the corridor stirred and fluttered, disturbed by a draught of cold air coming from behind her. She listened and her ears seemed to move on her head as she heard the gritty scrape and tread of feet on stone. The door by which she'd entered was not the only entrance into the room. She shut the box with shaking fingers, checked that she had disturbed nothing, and crept out the way that she had come.

It was afterwards, when she was back in the dormitory, that she realized that she was still holding the golden bee. She'd never owned anything. Personal possessions were not allowed. Everything was communal, even clothes. This was the only thing she had that was different from anybody else. She had kept it ever since, making a pocket for it in the mattress of each successive bed that she occupied. Somehow, having it near her made her feel safe. She had it now. Clutched in her hand.

The library must be used by the Advocate, she

reasoned, and only by him. Only one glass, only one comfortable chair. So she confined her visits to when he was away from the house. It was easy. He travelled extensively – tireless in his mission to take the message all over the world. They were told of his whereabouts in the announcements made at Prime, so she would know then if it was safe to go to the library. She read with a hunger. The books were strange to her because all books were banned, apart from those written by the Founder. The only one she'd heard of was the Biblos. The Holy Book. The Founder used little quotations to justify things that he said in his own writings. Now, with the whole text in front of her, Zillah could see how he had corrupted what was written, twisting the words to serve his own ends. The more she read, the more she realized that *The Meaning of the Sixth Dawn* was a crazy mass of borrowed beliefs, as flawed as a jigsaw where the pieces had been cut to fit.

She wondered how anyone could possibly believe in it, yet C6D was a worldwide movement. New Chapters were formed every day, and more and more people

were wearing the multicoloured bracelets, woven from threads of brown, blue, red and gold. It was belief based on blind faith, not logic. Hope for a Better Day. The Children Will Show the Way. Slogans mixed and merged in bright, oily colours, swirling like a film on the surface of her mind. They parted to show the truth at the heart of it. The craziness was all part of it. In the dim, dark rooms of the forbidden wing, Zillah explored rare and unusual volumes. Many were very old, with strange illustrations, written in languages she did not understand, but the sense of evil was palpable. She began to discover who they really were, and the terrifying, dark secret that lay hidden within *The Book of the Law*. Then something happened that was so far beyond her wildest, most nightmarish imaginings that her visits stopped for ever.

She had taken a wrong turning on her way into the Founder's Wing and had somehow ended up in the cellars. Attracted by a flickering purple light, she came across a small chapel, the short central nave made narrow by elaborate carving that snaked and writhed over

every surface, curling round the fluted pillars and arches. The Advocate must have returned early, for he was there, standing in front of a squat stone altar, dressed in his golden robe. The violet light pulsed from something in front of him. He laid his hands upon the source and the light split into rays between his fingers, playing in beams across the embossed stone ceiling. Then his whole outline had begun to blur and shimmer. As he raised his arms, the robe took on different hues and colours and seemed to solidify and stiffen into chevron patterns of rayed striations, like huge feathered wings. He seemed to expand and grow bigger, as though his human form had become engorged by something else, something differently shaped, hideous and other. He raised his head, and it seemed to be crowned by curling horns, or a pair of curving crests. The thick bulge of his neck flexed and the musculature of his back rippled with smooth, sinuous movement, like a python or anaconda. From the base of his spine, flat, bony plates seemed to broaden out, elongating and extending, tapering into something reptilian. . .

Zillah locked her fingers into the barley-sugar twists of a stone pillar, praying that it was wide enough to hide her, while all the time fearing that she might faint. She steadied herself enough to step backwards, very slowly, very carefully, one shaking leg after the other. Then she fled.

She had no reason to believe that her incursions into the Founder's Wing had ever been discovered, but what she'd seen there on that last visit made escape from the Children imperative. All her thoughts began to focus on how to get away. She was old enough now to go on "fishing expeditions" to raise funds and recruit. She'd found life outside a revelation. The streets were not filled with the drunkards and thieves that she'd been led to expect. She saw few signs that these were the End of Days. She used her time well: to watch, listen and learn. She had just begun to formulate a plan, when events decided her exit for her. They were to make ready for departure. There was no more time.

Two days ago, just before daybreak, the whole community had assembled in what was still called the

Ballroom. Dressed in robes of brown and black, the colours of earth and the night sky, they had processed around the intricate maze of petallate patterns marked out on the parquet floor, painted in blue, the colour of water. A lector waited at each exit, as they did each morning, robed in red, the colour of the coming dawn. This time, instead of receiving benediction, each supplicant was given a small white capsule.

Perhaps the lectors' own eyes were already on eternity. Certainly, they were not paying much attention as the last, most junior, members of the community filed past. It was no secret what they were about to do; there had been preparations and meditations. When the process was completed it would be posted on the Internet, for the whole world to know. But not yet. To broadcast their intention too soon would invite tiresome interference from the authorities. Theirs was not the only community, and the whole thing had to be carefully coordinated from the Master House.

Zillah palmed her pill, substituting it for another, something harmless from the Infirmary that she had

folded into her sleeve. First light was showing in the long panel of windows as the lectors lined up to receive their capsules from the Advocate. She took her place near the back of the large room. From the opposite wall, the portrait of the Divine Founder looked down at them: his eyes like tarnished copper coins tucked in pockets of flesh in his pockmarked face.

The Advocate turned to address them, his golden robe turned bloody by the rising sun.

“Hear, my brothers and sisters.” He stared down at them. He had always been heavy set and swarthy, but lately he had begun to bear an uncanny resemblance to the Founder. They could be father and son. “Here is your salvation.” His fleshy face was shining, shining with love for them as he held up a tiny white pill between his right thumb and forefinger. He raised his hand. The heavy silk sleeve fell back. His arm was thick and muscular, covered in a spiderweb weave of fine black hairs. “Today we all attain the level above human, following the Founder to another place where the bounds of flesh and time mean nothing. There we will await the Great Cleansing

and the hour of our return to a happier world.”

The Advocate put the capsule into his mouth. It was seen as an act of faith and the cue for the rest of them to do the same. They swallowed a measured quantity of slow-acting poison and went obediently to their sleeping places, to wait for their eternal spirits to leave these perishable envelopes of flesh.

They died without a sound.

Zillah lay among them as if she was dead, too. She performed the Practice, a complex mixture of marshal arts and meditation, daily. This allowed her now to slow her breathing, decrease her heart rate, depress her vital functions and put her mind in another place. She'd lost any sense of real time, but judged that at least a day had passed, maybe two. Zillah had not intended to wait as long as this before making her escape, but she knew she was not the only one living and breathing. The Advocate was still here. She had heard him moving around, checking the dormitories for signs of life. He'd glided through here without a second look at her. That was on the first morning. Since then there had been no sign of him, but

she had not heard him leave. She should have been shocked that he was the one still alive, but found she was not. He must have taken a harmless placebo. Sacrifice would be for others to make, not himself. Because he thought he was alone, he had revealed something of his true nature. The one she'd seen in the chapel. In the Founder's Wing. Before, she had merely been afraid. Now she was terrified.

She didn't want to risk going out of her body, but she had to do it. He might have left by a different way and she couldn't lie here for ever. She had to know.

She saw herself on the bed, looking just as if she really was dead. It gave her a cold feeling, and she was wondering how the spirit could be sensitive to physical things, when she saw a movement out of the window. These rooms used to be the servants' quarters. The windows were small, the narrow panes leaded, the view further obscured by creeper, changed to its autumn colour. Down through the crimson flutter, she saw the Advocate. Just a glimpse before he disappeared out of her line of vision. He was crossing the gravel courtyard

from the Founder's Wing and had swapped his robe for a suit. He had a bag with him, which he carried cradled close to him, as if it contained something infinitely precious, like a sleeping child. He reached down to his pocket and she heard the release of an electronic car lock. He would soon be gone. The relief left her weak. And unguarded. She was willing him to get into the car and drive away, but instead he just stood there, one hand resting on the boot lid, his head cocked to one side, as if he was listening, or searching in his mind for something that he had forgotten. Then he was coming back, retracing his steps, treading softly across the gravel, hardly making a sound. She took herself away from the window fast, but not fast enough. She saw him look up.

The gravel crunched hard under his determined stride. He was opening the front door and crossing the hall. He was on the stairs, taking them two at a time. He entered the Juvenile Corridor on the floor below. His progress slowed as he checked the contents of each bed, but the pause was momentary. He was back on the stairs, coming up to the Women's Quarters. She could

hear his feet on the floor of the narrow corridor that led to the dormitories, the creak of the door, and everywhere the sound of the flies, getting louder and louder, rising and falling as he passed from room to room, the sound becoming more and more frenzied, until they were as loud as hornets, making ready to welcome him. . .

She lay as still as her companions, imagining herself as a little black ball getting smaller and smaller, until she was hardly there at all, hoping she would die before he found her, or at least that he would let her die quickly.