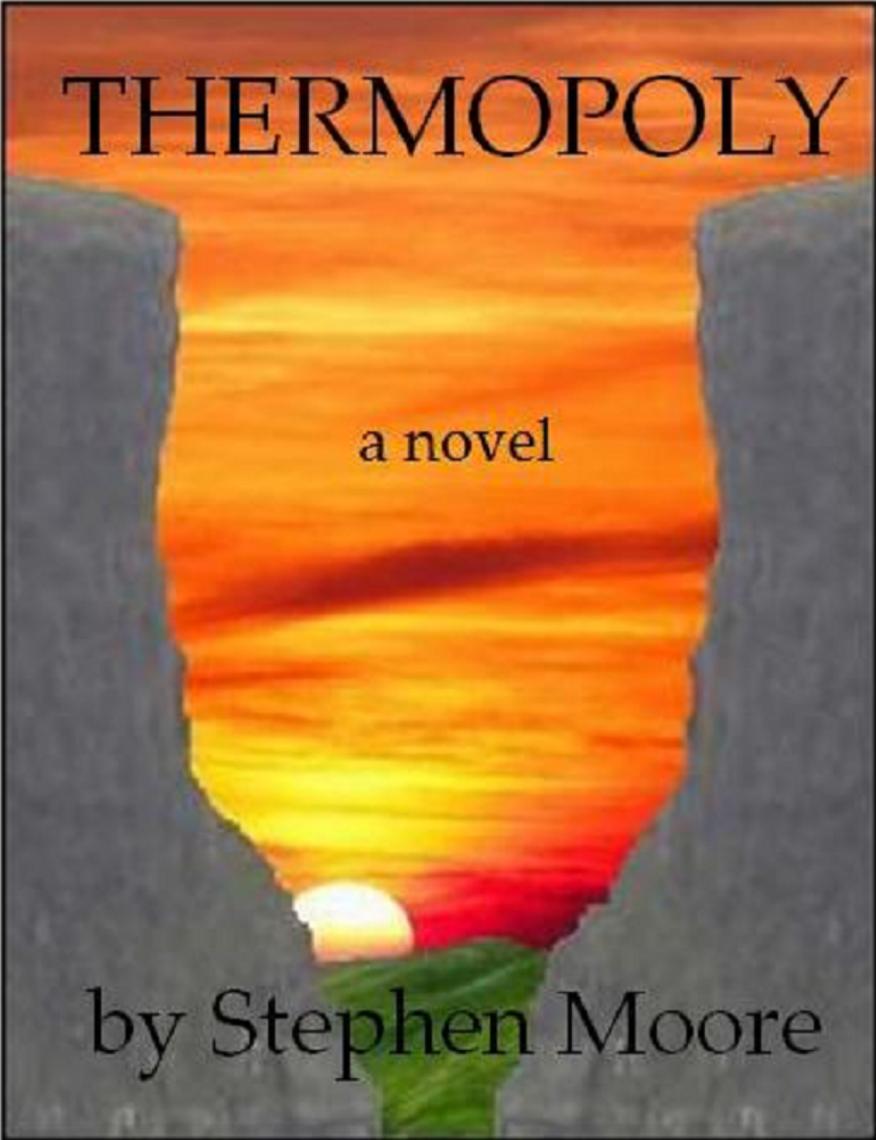


THERMOPOLY



a novel

by Stephen Moore

from the author of
Cheating Death

Thermopoly

Stephen Moore

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Contents

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	19

Chapter One

Eggs for the Dying

The sun was yet to rise for another two hours. Most were still tucked away beneath their multiple quilts against the bitter cold of night. Few remembered the times when nights were not so cold and days were not so devilishly hot. Most of the old ones had died long ago, generations ago in fact, and the new ones knew no other world save the one that existed from day to day in the Ithaca polity. Two eyes would open, however, to this darkness so thankless and strangely quiet.

Koosh's eyes were set to an internal clock that even she was not able to fathom. Every morning, two hours before the sun's yellow disc peeked over the horizon, her eyes flew open as she jumped out of bed, fully clothed, and ready to face the world. Because it was dark, her reflexes took her through her first motions of the day. First in her hands were her slings, one short-range and one long, which hung from her bedposts. Next was her water jug, which she had kept beneath her quilts, for all water in the polity was frozen before the sun rose, and the wells would not give their due until the sun had been risen at least an hour. Next she walked past her father's bedroom door, listening for his breathing, which was always rather rasping and uneven. She would pause for only a moment, for a moment was all she could afford, and would smile and thank her destiny

for not taking him from her during the night. She would whisper a heartfelt farewell, and then cast herself out into the cold, uninhabitable night.

Koosh had acclimated her body to the daily shock of going out into the fierce cold by never having slept until sunrise a single day, constantly pushing herself out into the frozen void that was two hours before the dawn. Her father had once told her that when her mother was near death, she had taken her out before dawn to the tops of the cliffs where many went to die, where many exposed their deformed and “insufficient” babies. Her mother had thought that her daughter, young as she was, hardly more than a toddler, would stand no chance with a sick and invalid father who was not long for this world himself. A dying soul in a dying world.

It was two hours before sunrise when her mother had taken her to the cliffs and laid herself down to die. Koosh had held her mother and cried for her soul, keening against the sunrise on that morning she would never forget. For Koosh was one of those rare beings to whom the gift of music would come naturally when times of sorrow or happiness would engulf the world around her. Long was her keen, and copious flowed her tears on that morning so long ago. When she was finished and the words ceased to flow, the sun had yet another hour ere it was to rise in the sky, and the fierce cold would be transformed into an overpowering heat, especially on the barren landscape at the top of the cliffs where not a blade of grass could withstand its withering effects. She knew then that she

would soon follow her mother into the unknown. Most children her age would have lain down by their mothers' corpses and soon joined them, but Koosh walked toward the cliff's edge. Along the way were piles of bones, bleached white by the unremitting sun.

Koosh was seized by a sadness which yawned before her like a pit, bottomless and black. So many tiny bones of souls barely entered into the world, exposed because they were incomplete, insufficient, deformed, hopeless. But she was born complete...one of only a sad few, and her father needed her. She drew herself away from the pit wishing to gulp her up into oblivion, and crawled to the edge of the cliff, looking down below to the polity to which she was born. To a world that was dying. But she would live a while longer.

Hours later, Koosh walked into the polity, parched and nearly senseless. The people of Ithaca crowded out of their houses to see the girl, so tiny and fragile, who had survived the killing fields atop the cliffs.

"How did she get back down?" they asked in wonderment. Some attributed it to some miraculous cause, for some still believed in miracles. Others just shook their heads and felt sorry for her; her father nearly dead himself, and the polity shrinking by the year. She would be one of the last to witness its final extinction.

A generation before, Ithaca was one of five polities in existence, in what had once been one of the most powerful nations on earth. Proud and boastful, the nation had built up its deadly arsenal under the foolish philosophy that

if they possessed the greatest capacity to split the atom, none would attempt the destructive forces that atom would unleash. But one day the fatal button was pushed and a conflagration ensued that engulfed the earth in a fire that was still wreaking invisible death through its radioactive and mercilessly continuous onslaught. And the earth was dying.

A generation before, Ithaca was strong and possessed what was thought to be a sustainable population of near five thousand people. But now most were simply waiting to die, waiting for the radiation sickness to manifest itself and reduce them to toothless skin and bones; wraiths waiting to be relieved of life. The whole of the Ithaca polity may have boasted two thousand, growing smaller every year.

A select few, for reasons unknown, clung to their health and strength despite the sickness and death daily manifesting itself around them. Koosh was one of these few, for she was lithe and sinewy, though tiny, and possessed a pronounced agility that enabled her to climb the local cliff faces and extract the eggs from the raptors' nests that dotted the sheer and unforgiving declivities.

She was fifteen years of age.

And she always opened her eyes two hours before the sun rose.

*

She strode steadily down the midnight-blackened lanes of the polity. She seemed to see in the darkness, when actually she walked through a reflexive memory of what

surrounded her in the waking hours of harsh daylight. The lanes ran along the many ridges overlooking the gorges of Ithaca. Two ridges from hers, she turned to the side and knocked upon the frosted window pane of a small hut. Inside was a supine figure, covered with multiple quilts piled so high as to make the person beneath them indistinguishable from any lump that the quilts might have fostered in the act of being thrown one upon the other.

She rapped more forcefully upon the pane, thinking that if she struck any harder it would shatter, when she noticed a slight rumbling beneath the pile. She rolled her eyes heavenward as if to ask, "Why do I waste my time?" and opened the door which was never locked. Indeed, locks in Ithaca had long ago become pointless.

"How I ever get anything done with you around is beyond me," she yelled, as in one quick movement she pulled all the layers of quilts off the bed and onto the floor. The young man, lying practically naked beneath the pile, found himself suddenly exposed to the piercing cold.

"Aaack!" he cried, as the realization hit him that he could possibly freeze to death in a short interval.

"Koosh! You're gonna kill me!"

"Ha! That's not likely, Maggot." Koosh replied, "It would take a lot more than a little cold to freeze your thick hide. Now get up and let's get moving. Time is on the wing."

Maggot, (for that was his name, not an acclamation), began to search desperately for his clothes. He had placed them somewhere between the covers near himself so that they would be warm when he dressed in the morning, but

now they were buried in a pile on the floor next to the bed.

“Damn you, Koosh. Why do you have to make my life so difficult?” he asked as he shiveringly explored the stacks of fabric and batting before him. Koosh had little sympathy for her friend. She was hardened to the cold...seemed to absorb it and make it a part of her personality, and she paid little attention to those who complained about things that couldn't be changed. In fact, she found the whole scene rather humorous. Slowly the situation began to tickle her and she began to giggle at his hopeless attempts amidst a sea of goosebumps and desperate searching for clothes. His short pants were all he had against the penetrating frigidity of the night, and her giggles began to turn into loud laughter. But she wasn't so hard-hearted as not to lend a hand. Thoughtlessly she began to rummage through the pile and extract several layers of shirts and sweaters that would make up his protection against the early morning temperatures.

After what seemed an eternity to the anxious Koosh, the young man was finally clothed against the frozen world outside. Getting an early start when gathering the eggs from the cliffs was essential, for the raptors who laid the eggs were beginning their morning hunt for food themselves and were rather non-attentive to their nests until later. They walked out of the polity toward the lurking cliffs in the distance. Even at this early hour, a slight luminescence was manifesting itself on the horizon, just enough to make out where they were going.

At first the cliffs seemed to keep their distance, as if

walking never brought them closer. Eventually, though, they grew before their eyes, looming like lurking giants above them, and making their efforts small and insignificant. Koosh was after something in particular, something that could only be found in the cliffs. Maggot, on the other hand, just wanted to crawl back between his quilts and get warm again. He tried to ignore his shivering frame as they walked along, engulfed in the fog clinging to them as each breath exhaled a new cloud that hung about their persons. He never understood how Koosh could be so impervious to the cold, as if she were daring it to touch her or hold her back from her appointed rounds. But she never thought of such things; not cold, nor danger, nor dark of night. She sauntered up to the cliff, rising from the plain and, like an unerring friend, she touched its face with her bare hand.

Maggot wore his warmest gloves against the frightful cold of the cliff face, but Koosh understood the granite and greenstone surface, as if it spoke to her, telling her at every move how to raise herself upon its bosom. No rock was too sheer; no stone was too cold to be her nemesis. She began to climb effortlessly and swiftly. No one ever knew why the rock gave way to her touch and conquest. There was a local tale, among the folk of the polity, that she had climbed down the cliff face when her mother had died. No one really took it seriously, but some attributed her skill at climbing to a spiritual connection she shared with the rock. So long as she trusted the stone, she would be protected by that entity. The horrors of that holocaust of long ago, so long ago that it only caused shudders in peoples' dreams,

left the surviving population denying that there was a god or gods of any kind. Koosh, though, felt differently. To her there was a spirit in the stone; a spirit with a pulse that beat once every millennium. She understood that pulsing spirit and embraced it.

As Maggot struggled behind her, she rose without hesitation higher and higher up the face of the stone. High above, in the rock's face, were small cracks and crevices. In those crevices were raptors' nests; hundreds of them, filled with eggs. To gather these eggs, Koosh needed only three things: her slings, a bag of small stone projectiles, and a good length of rope. And, of course, she needed Maggot.

No one could quite remember where Maggot had come from. He had no relations or family connections to anyone in the Ithaca polity. Lore had it that he was with a contingent of citizens that had been shunned and rejected by the Sparta polity far to the west. After an epic crossing of the great plain between them, he straggled into Ithaca; the solitary survivor of a desperate journey which had claimed his family and everyone else he had ever known or loved. Thin, bedraggled, covered in cuts and bruises, scorched red by the sun, everyone in Ithaca had given him over to an inevitable destiny. But he survived. The ones who witnessed his arrival believed he was about the age of seven when he first appeared. Living off discarded scraps and whatever he could gather from the scabbly earth around Ithaca, he made his home in the inhospitable atmosphere shown to outsiders. They named him Maggot for his scavenging ways.

The first person in the polity to show him any kindness at all was Koosh. She noticed him one morning just before sunrise sifting through the refuse bins, searching for cast off scraps from the night before. People didn't make a habit of feeling sympathy for those who were less fortunate than themselves. In the polities only the strong survived. The weak, the sick, the tired, and hungry fended for themselves against the near impossible odds they daily had to face. Many surrendered to the inevitable call of destiny and either wandered into the void beyond the polity, or climbed the trails to the top of the cliffs...to the killing fields, full of the bones and the wailing ghosts of all who had given way to the inexorable fate that called them to such places.

On that particular morning, Maggot looked pale and thin. Shivering in the cold in clothes that were ragged and worn thin, he appeared as though he was on his last leg. Koosh was ten and he was thirteen, both just children who had grown up in a harsh and unforgiving world that had shown no pity or remorse. She watched him from a hidden corner as he repeatedly failed to secure any sustenance from the numerous bins in the alley. His eyes began to glass over in that hopeless stare which always preceded the crushing state of despair that finally possessed the hearts of all in like circumstances. Dropping the bin lid listlessly to the ground, he walked out of the alley and toward the cliffs.

Koosh followed, keeping a cautious distance so as not to be discovered. For some reason she felt an affinity with this poor forsaken soul, left alone and fending against impossible odds. Perhaps she shared an understanding of

the suffering he had experienced. She too had lost her rock in life to which she had clung to as her only means of survival. That she had pulled through against equally impossible odds, she attributed to a destiny that was hers to manipulate. As he drew nearer the cliffs, she drew nearer to him. Then he found the trail to the top, the same trail that had been trod countless times by overpowering despair and grief and hopelessness. Koosh began to feel the tears welling up inside.

“Stop,” she whispered. The dead quiet of the night had not yet given way to the noise of foraging animals and humans of the early morning. A whisper was a shout against this sullen silence. Maggot stopped, wondering who it was that would even bother to recognize his existence. He felt as if he was in a dream world beyond his control, and into this dream world the voice of an angel was calling him to another. He stood perfectly still, refusing to break the spell, refusing to acknowledge the voice or turn to see its possessor. A heaving, wrenching force began to wrestle with his soul, and he exploded into uncontrollable sobs, splitting the silence with his deafening wails.

Koosh stood before him and took his hands in hers as his chest heaved with the groans of a damned and lepered outcast. It was half an hour before his sobs slowly subsided into a steady flow of tears as he poured out his soul to the young girl clasping his hands before him. All his longing for a simple nod from a stranger to verify his existence. All his desires to have a single friend who could share his thoughts and grieving moments. All his past, all his future,

all his wishes and hopes and fears and...

He emptied himself into her eyes, which never looked away as he unburdened himself before her. For her part, Koosh had made it a point until then not to trust anyone. Not only would the betrayal of her trust have been devastating to her psychologically, but the loss of another through the sickening and death meted out by the radiated earth would have been more than she could handle. Yet, as much as she wanted to run from him, she held his hands tightly as if both their very lives depended on the outcome of that moment.

When his rant had dwindled to an exhausted conclusion, a pregnant silence settled between them for minutes on end. Neither knew how, or wanted, to break the silence. There was no discomfort. In fact, both Koosh and Maggot felt an unexpected closeness and comfort connected to the whole unexpected exchange.

“Friends...forever,” said Koosh, finally breaking the silent reverie between them. She had a way of packing a lot into a few words. It wasn’t clear if she had made it a question or if she had just given him the chance to accept or reject a relationship that would propel them forward into a new partnership beneficial to each other’s needs.

But Maggot never took his eyes from hers and replied, “Yes. Friends...forever.”

*

It was then that Koosh began to teach Maggot her ways. That first morning he watched her scurry up the cliffside

and rob the wild raptors' nests.

"What ever impelled you to do such a thing?" he asked in disbelief when he had first seen her first slip up the face of the rock so swiftly and easily and come back with a haversack of eggs.

"They're for my father and others who are dying," she said as she began the walk back to the polity, "As they often lose their teeth, they find the game brought in by the hunters to be tough and impossible to chew. A soft-boiled egg is an act of mercy."

"But they're dying," he uttered, not understanding the sympathy inherent in her nature, "This will not change or alter the fact."

"That may be so," Koosh replied, "but my father is all I have left of my family...my only hold on my past. He seems to want to live another day, knowing that I'm working hard to sustain him and making that one day count as if it was a lifetime. In a way, it is a lifetime, for when he leaves this world, my life is ended too. Sure, I will still go on, but what will it all mean?"

Maggot could never completely understand her utterings along these lines. In the Sparta polity where he grew up, the "final" sickness was given a wide berth. The sick and dying were shunned and ignored, quickening their end. If you couldn't contribute, you were a liability. One could not be sentimental and wasteful with resources. Simple as that. Some lives come to an end, others go on. Destiny defines itself.

On the other hand, he felt a certain nobility of purpose

in her actions. After all, had he not heard her whispered entreaty to stop, he would himself have been destiny's child on the killing fields atop the cliffs. Slowly he began to learn how to climb, seeking each handhold and making it his anchor, fastening him to the cliff's face and allowing him to ascend ever higher. It wasn't easy, though Koosh made it look effortless, but the years of negotiating the sheer rock were beginning to pay dividends.

Maggot had never gotten use to the cold though. Every morning was a monumental effort for him, but she was unceasing in her efforts. She would never for a moment slacken her pace or determination, so motivated was she to keep her father beyond destiny's hold. Maggot climbed up the rock behind her in the cold, musing at her driven constitution. She was every ounce lithe and muscular, not given to overeating and idleness. Her black hair was singular in its appearance, cascading just past her shoulders in wispy curls. Needless to say, those curls were attractive and exotic, but she felt them to be a terrible nuisance. She would have cut them to the quick long ago had not Maggot one day expressed his liking for them. She seemed to cater to his whims if they meant his happiness was increased. So if a few pesky curls made him smile, it was no great deal to her. After all, it was a rare occasion for him to smile.

The years of living in Ithaca, once Koosh had befriended him, were beginning to show on Maggot too. He had grown into a fine young man, strong and careless and fiercely independent in his ways, except where Koosh was concerned. He would risk anything for her, even his life if it

had ever come to that, for he owed his life to her. He never even glanced at any of the young girls of the polity who vied for his attention. He had no time to waste on them. After a while, they gave up on him, calling him rude and stuck up, but secretly they wished on many occasions that they were in Koosh's shoes.

"What a waste!" they would say when the two of them walked by, for they all knew that Koosh didn't have the slightest inclination toward romance with anyone, especially Maggot.

They climbed about twenty feet above the raptor's nest they intended to rob and fastened the coiled ropes securely to an outcropping of granite. Very few words were spoken, for the two of them had done this so often. Koosh rappelled herself downward to the left about ten feet below the nest while Maggot carefully lowered himself down to the crevice possessing his quarry. They made a visual acknowledgement of each other to make sure they were stationed and ready to proceed. This was the most dangerous moment, for if a raptor from afar suspected that her nest was being robbed, an attack would be inevitable. That was Koosh's role in the business before them. She carried in a pouch greenstone pebbles about half the size of a fist, polished smooth and round. She loaded her sling with a stone and kept a watchful eye on the skies beyond, slightly coloring themselves toward a dawning hue. Maggot hurriedly, but carefully, began filling his pouch with the half dozen eggs before him, knowing that if any threat appeared from the sky, Koosh would protect him.

Moments later, the threat appeared in the form of a huge raptor speeding toward her victim with intent to kill. This one was particularly large and deadly, with talons sharp and extended for gripping her prey, and a hooked beak with a grasping power capable of ripping and tearing even the strongest sinew and muscle.

Koosh's muscles tightened and tensed, ready to spring. Timing was essential, as the slightest miscalculation would easily result in fatal injury to her friend, but she held patiently to her position on the rock until just the right second. As the desperate raptor neared Maggot, flying with talons outstretched before her, Koosh sprang from the rock's face in an oversweeping arc. With sling ready, she sent a stone hurtling toward her deadly target. With the raptor's talons flexing, just inches from Maggot's neck, the stone met its target. With a screech that echoed against the neighboring cliffs and split the morning's calm, the raptor fell stunned from the sky, landing unconscious upon a neighboring ledge.

"A little close don't you think?" Maggot exclaimed, a slight smile on his face.

"Aww! I had her by a mile!"

Maggot knew that once a stone left Koosh's sling, it never missed its target. It was as sure a thing as the sunrise and their relationship. With his haversack thrown over his left shoulder onto his back so the eggs wouldn't crack against the rocks, he slowly regained his footholds and began to descend. Somehow, for Maggot, the descent was always more difficult than the ascent, but Koosh was

always there to guide and make sure he didn't misstep. Indeed she had already scurried up the face to loosen his rope from the outcropping. As she did so, he disconnected it from his waist belt after which she coiled it up and threw it to the ground far below, which made his stomach feel even more uneasy.

Eventually they both made it back to solid earth just as the sun was brightening the sky to a peach-like pallor. This had always been their time to talk and keep each other updated on things that had happened the previous day and things that were expected to happen on the coming day and perhaps even things unimportant to anyone or anything but the musings of two teenagers with nothing better to talk about. It was always a more relaxed walk back to the polity in other words.

"It was a good haul of eggs this morning. Thank you," began Koosh, speaking like they had just emptied the chicken coop. Chickens, by the way, had ceased to exist about three generations previously due to an epidemic that wiped the population from the map. Before the atomic holocaust, the only thing keeping the chicken populations alive was massive antibiotic campaigns on grand manufactured farms. Without the continued protection that the industry had come to rely on, the entire system collapsed and chickens had suffered extinction.

Their conversation wandered about rather aimlessly this particular morning. The air grew warmer as the polity grew closer. Signs of life began to stir as the sky grew a brilliant blue. Once in town, the eggs were placed in the

many solar ovens that dotted the yards and lots around the polity. As they walked through the environs of the polity, they began to pass others who were walking the opposite way; the hunters who would reap the harvest of game all around the perimeter of the polity, and the gatherers who would harvest the wild flora the earth had to offer to the knowledgeable collector.

Koosh and Maggot, however, had other business to attend to. After a few minutes on the boil, the eggs were ready for delivery. The first in the appointed rounds was Koosh's father. Bald and nearly toothless, suffering loss of vision and motor skills, he had amazed everyone, having survived his wife these last ten years through the sheer will power of a daughter who refused to accept the fate that destiny meted out. Koosh didn't believe that destiny was inevitable. Her stubbornness and refusal ruffled many who had grown used to the disconcert shown to the dying. But she adamantly ignored those who tried to tell her that the dying were as good as dead and that she accept the fate allotted them.

Gently she tapped the shell and broke into the treasured nourishment predicated by an aroma and steamy goodness that was emitted therefrom. Slowly she spooned the contents into her father's waiting mouth. He gazed into her eyes, watching her grow, day by day, into a young woman. That he might have died long ago and never seen her grow to what she had become, seemed to him a great disappointment that he was glad his daughter fought to avoid. Changing him from his warm nighttime clothes to

cool daytime wear, she bid him goodbye for a time, while she went to visit others in similar conditions.

Maggot came to appreciate her concern for the dying souls who depended on her for comfort in their last days. He began to understand that as long as people felt compassion for one another; as long as a helping hand was extended to the needy, the hopeless, and the desperate; as long as one life could be extended for another day; the world could not die. He was an example of this compassion and selfless giving. He, like his savior and compassionate friend, would spend all his days making sure that compassion and hope could alone change inevitable destiny. And he would ever protect the one who gave him his life...to the extent of his days.

That was the meaning, the significance, of these eggs for the dying.

Chapter Two

A Message from the League

Little did Koosh or Maggot realize the significance of the day they had woken to. Sometimes, when all appears to be regular and routine, when the world becomes comfortable and without challenge, someone or something comes along that sets everything spinning in a different direction. That alternate direction can be caused by something so insignificant as to be unobservable or unrecognizable, or it can be caused by an event that is cataclysmic, an event that through the rest of one's life, each person remembers what they were doing at that very moment.

Koosh and Maggot had just arrived at the last house of the morning when the moment occurred. It was the house of Ode, the leader of Ithaca's Senate. Ode's mother was one of those poor unfortunate sufferers whose life and happiness had been increased by Koosh's care and eggs.

"Bless you, my child. Is Maggot with you today?" Ode's mother's eyes were dimmed by age and sickness.

"He's right here, Mama." Koosh always used the terms Mama and Papa for the old ones she cared for.

"Good morning, Mama."

Maggot had slowly become a member, through his efforts with Koosh, of the Ithaca polity. No one now even seemed to remember a time when he wasn't around, helping the sick and needy of the polity. There would

always be those who recalled that he was an outsider and remained suspicious of his actions, but those who possessed any empathy or common sense knew him to be kind and considerate of others, the kind of member the Ithaca polity appreciated.

“Maggot is a fine boy you know,” uttered Mama with a raspy voice, “I hear from others that he has eyes for only one girl in the entire polity. You would not do badly to return his affection.”

Koosh colored slightly at such a suggestion, but made it a point to agree with those she catered to, regardless of improbabilities or contradictions to reason. Usually she found their advice to be wise, but the very idea of she and Maggot having a romantic bent toward each other was so far beyond her recognition as to be an impossibility.

“Nothing is impossible child, regardless of how improbable it may sound.” Mama seemed to read her mind at times, bringing Koosh to an honest and unexpected darkening blush which was not lost on Maggot, who couldn’t help smiling at her embarrassment.

It was then that the commotion was heard outside on the streets. A gatherer had arrived, winded and nearly exhausted, into the polity. It was obvious by his condition that he had seen something unusual and requiring the attention of the polity. Collapsing in the square, many ran to help him to a bench, patiently awaiting his recovery so he could share with everyone else the import of his news.

Upon recovering, he began to relate his adventure on the edge of the western plain, where a certain cooking

herb was plentiful. While there, his eyes were struck by a thin pillar of dust rising from the plain in the distance. A member of the polity is always on the lookout for any odd activity beyond its boundaries. Raiding and warfare was not unknown in the past and could arrive at any moment if a polity became desperate for resources that became scarce or lacking.

Then there was always The League.

Generations ago, when the populations were much greater and resources were scarce, the five polities chose representatives amongst their number to meet apart from any particular polity, in an undisclosed location, to discuss matters that would avoid conflict and strengthen the survival abilities of all the polities when resources worked against them. This representative body came to be known as The League.

For the most part, The League had very little influence or control over the separate polities and was rarely heard from. When a pronouncement or announcement did come from The League, it was always a big event. The whole polity would gather in the square and await with eagerness whatever was to be announced.

The other hunters and gatherers were fetched from their separate locations to gather in the square, which being on an elevated position in the middle of the polity, gave the people a view of the dust cloud fast approaching.

Traveling from one polity to the next was a difficult venture. A solitary traveler was unheard of. Even a small contingent was at definite risk venturing across the plains.

After the atomic fire had settled, the population of fauna throughout the land was severely tested. Many species suffered extinction. Some battled for the alpha step in the ladder, and even amongst those species, there was a constant culling to the fittest, the fiercest, the strongest. The wolves of the temperate plains eventually ended up the alpha species, and their culling resulted in a fearsome product. No single human being, nor even a small contingent, could hold their own against them, for they traveled in packs possessing an intelligence for hunting unequalled by any other animal. For this reason, any messenger or group of messengers from The League were usually surrounded in their travels by a military contingent, armed and ever ready, to fight off the predatory wolves who constantly followed them on their journeys. They also served to protect The League's messengers whenever their announcements met with disapproval or resistance. However, only once were they ever used to enforce an edict. That was five generations before, when they had to use force against the Amazonian and Spartan polities involving what they felt was a too "democratic" decision made by The League.

The League consisted of four representatives chosen for life from among the five polities. Amongst its twenty members, one would serve in rotation every year as Consul, or head of The League's Assembly. Needless to say, with each polity practicing different forms of administrative government, arguments both fierce and contentious would result in ten votes on each side of an issue. In case of a tied vote on any issue, the Consul possessed two votes,

which decided the argument. Any succeeding Assembly was forced to live by past decisions and could not annul or reverse them. Therefore, careful and deliberate steps were taken to arrive at consensus, and their work was slow and sometimes painful. Because of their lengthy deliberations, very few decisions ever worked their way to the separate polities as final announcements, so when a messenger did arrive, it was a momentous, if not a trepidatious, event.

Ode arrived at his mother's side with two others to help her walk to the square, for his mother was not as bedridden as Koosh's father. Koosh and Maggot went back to her father's house to carry his bed to the square, for everyone, regardless of frailty or mobility was expected in the square. As they carried her father's cot into the square, people gave way and opened a path before them, for her father had often been chosen in his younger days as leader of the Senate in Ithaca and was well respected, if not outright revered, by the polity. He was placed next to Ode and his mother at the front of the crowd. Koosh sat next to her father, holding his hand tightly. Maggot retreated to the back of the crowd along with the other younger folk, the girls vying for position as near him as possible.

Much talk and discussion was bandied about the assemblage of polity folk as they watched the cloud grow larger and larger, and began to make out the individuals in the contingent. The excitement was palpable. Ithaca was a place where survival on a day to day basis resulted in an ennui brought about by the members of the polity establishing a hierarchy of duties and responsibilities according

to their abilities. Hunters hunted every morning. Gatherers gathered every morning. Cooks cooked and governors governed. Precious little change occurred in the routine.

In a way, it was a comfort to know where you stood in relationship to everyone else and what your duties to the whole involved, but it left some wondering if there was not more to be had out of life, outside of the grinding daily drudgery. And through it all, more were dying than being born. And a higher percentage of those born were deformed, incomplete, insufficient, or any other term the people used to describe the condition of those babies who would be considered an undue burden upon the polity, which demanded that they be exposed. Every birth elicited a visit from Ode and other representatives from the Ithacan Senate to inspect its health and wholesomeness. If the infant didn't measure up, it was taken away and left in the killing fields atop the cliffs to be exposed. Many adults also voluntarily climbed atop the cliffs by an accommodating trail to see their end there. Koosh took it upon herself that as few as possible would voluntarily seek that end. She felt it more dignified for the sick to die in the bosom of family and friends than to plunge themselves into such a frightening and barren end in the killing fields. After all, she had experienced them first-hand, and found them terrifying and inhuman. Her efforts had brought back a modicum of empathy and respect for the dying that didn't exist before her daily scaling of the cliffs for the raptors' eggs. The people of the polity had grown to respect her and honor her for the humanity she had given back to them,

and she would often be invited to keen over the dead of the polity.

She would also accompany the midwives of the polity to birthings, and was usually one of the first to know the conditions of the infants. Often she would run to Ode's house and consult on the outcomes. If she believed a condition was not so bad as to cause a burden to the polity, sometimes it would be overlooked and save a child's life for future contribution to the polity. Ode and the Senate came to respect her for her reason and consideration in such decisions. If an exposure was inevitable, she would go to the house affected and keen a farewell to the child whose life was determined unfit for the polity. Although she hated the practice, she understood its necessity. In her keening, she would always make her message one of the child's necessary sacrifice for the good of the whole, giving the infant a name and a status of martyrdom. This brought an acceptance, if not comfort, to the mothers who had to make the ultimate sacrifice of their babies.

In this way, Koosh had become an important and respected member of the polity. She was sought out for advice by the young and old. But she was also set apart from them as rather an odd and distant figure. For these reasons, no one blinked an eye when she took her position at the front of the polity with Ode and her father. Indeed, it was expected.

Eventually, all the polity was gathered in their respective places in the square, seated upon stone outcroppings that formed a natural amphitheater. Soon the sound of the

contingent could be heard in the distance. It consisted of about forty “protectors” who would have to be fed and housed for a few days, as well as three messengers, in case any one messenger came to harm or a sudden end. There were also about twenty who hunted and gathered on the way, as well as carried supplies for the rest of the contingent. They usually lived in tents and didn’t burden the polities. More than likely, if the polities died out and ceased to exist, these nomadic hunters and gatherers would probably be the last human inhabitants of the land.

When the contingent arrived at the edge of the square, the protectors opened their ranks to allow the principle messenger and his two aides a passage to the center of the assembly. A hushed silence pervaded the polity as all were anticipating the messenger’s pronouncement. They had not seen a messenger now for five years. Indeed, many thought that today’s message might be the standard five-year announcement of the population figures among the polities. Five years ago, those figures had shown a considerable decrease in the populations. Ithaca and Sparta alone had experienced a leveling somewhat in their birth and death rates. In Ithaca, many attributed this to Koosh’s considerable efforts. In Sparta? Well, the individual polities knew very little about what happened in the other polities, but Sparta was known for its subjugation of the human will to the maintenance of the whole, blindly following the policies of their Commander.

It turned out at first, as the messenger began to elucidate the tallies of the separate polities, that this would

simply be a recurrence of five years ago. But there was a tenseness in the messenger's voice that was read by many in the audience who were familiar with these kind of pronouncements. They bided their time as the statistics were read out. Sparta's population, as expected, was holding steady. Athens, the only polity south of the temperate zone, was showing a definite decrease. Delphi was the gravest of news, their population falling to under a thousand. Amazonia was hard to gauge, for there was no population center as in the other polities, and the figures could not be depended upon to reflect the realities. Nods were given when Ithaca's population figures were shown to stand steady. Some gave Koosh approving glances when they were announced. Her father squeezed her hand in acknowledgement.

Then the messenger paused for a moment. Was he perhaps thinking of the other four messengers sent to the other polities with the same missive? Was he contemplating the reactions that might occur when he said next what he was about to utter? Or was he simply tired and wanted this seemingly insupportable message to be given and left behind?

Slowly he began to speak.

"As it has been the duty of The League to consult and make decisions regarding the health of the populations in the polities, it has been decided after three years of deliberations, that a radical change must occur to continue the prospect of human life upon this continent, and perhaps upon this earth. After much soul-searching and discussion, this is the final decision that The League has arrived at

for the saving of this race, to retrieve it from the brink of extinction.”

The silence was eerie as the polity hung upon every word. As the messenger paused, with deliberate effect, after the word “extinction,” different people experienced a wide range of effects and sometimes, outright fear. Would the polities be expected to unite into a super-polity to stave off extinction and increase the gene pool? Or would they simply arrange themselves in closer proximity to share the resources of the land? And if they did unite, which political system would they adopt?

Many questions ran through the minds of the people, but after three years of deliberations amongst their finest representatives, they were sure these questions had been discussed endlessly. Their only choice was to bite their tongues and heed the messenger.

“The League is mindful of the fact that not only healthy humans and healthy political structures will help the human race to survive. Another facet is necessary...”

All knew that the next few words would determine their future. Koosh leaned forward in anticipation. Maggot stared down from the back row up above, wondering if the pronouncement would separate him from the one person he depended on for his very existence. Without Koosh, he decided, he would climb the next day to the killing fields. He listened with absolute dread as each word rolled off the tongue of the messenger.

“...an environment free of the dilatory effects of radiation and sickness.”

The audience sat stunned. Of all their expectations, this one had never been entertained in even the most optimistic of circumstances. Ode stood to speak.

“Does such a place exist? I’m afraid this is an impossibility. Are you saying then that we are destined to perish from this earth?”

“You are Ode? The leader of the Ithacan Senate?” asked the messenger.

“I am.”

The messenger bowed in what seemed to be sincere respect and admiration, but suspicion had grasped the minds of the crowd. Rumbings were heard about its perimeter. Maggot wanted nothing more than to be next to Koosh, by her side, holding her hand.

“Over the last decade, The League has made it a policy to search for such a place, if indeed it existed. Many prospects have opened up before our parties of exploration, but none have proven adequate to support a large enough population to guarantee their health and increase. At least until now...”

Again the messenger paused to see the results of this new revelation. He was a trained messenger and a master of his craft, dealing out his pronouncements for maximum effect. With each new disclosure a flood of questions rippled through the populace. How many will the location hold? All? Or just a small part thereof? What distance will have to be traveled? Will the weak have to be left behind?

The messenger raised his hand to regain their attention. Slowly the murmuring of the audience dwindled to an

uneasy silence.

The messenger's eyes scanned the crowd, catching the eyes of those he felt were the strongest, the weakest, the wisest, and the hopelessly ill. All would be effected differently by his next few words. Suddenly he felt a weight descend upon him, crushing and heavy. He faltered for a moment. The audience was silent. Only a slight breeze, warm and stultifying, could be heard, ruffling the leaves of the scattered trees that lined the crests of the gorges of Ithaca. He drew a long deep breath which revived him somewhat and gave him resolution to proceed.

"There is, along the 42nd parallel, in the foothills of the great western range of mountains, a place of purity and plenty. Grasslands are abundant and the flora exhibits a delicious radiance of color and health. The fauna roams the valley in diverse and robust herds. The birdsong is abundant and inviting. Tests have been made to determine the radioactive elements in the environment and they have been found to be minimal, nay, even negligible."

The polity sat transfixed by his words. Could it be true? A paradise in a world of suffering and sickness? The messenger proceeded invitingly.

"It is the expressed decision of The League that this valley be populated."

The messenger paused in his final reverie. Many were still thinking this could not be true. Koosh was as tense as if she were hanging from a cliff side awaiting a raptor to appear. Maggot was beginning to dream of a life where death and sickness did not govern his daily activities. A life

in which he may even make a future with Koosh. He shook his head to rid himself of such nonsense for the time being. Surely there had to be a catch!

“To arrive at this valley one must enter through a gap between two cliffs. Its only entrance in fact. Old maps of the territory list this place ‘Thermopoly,’ the hot place. And hot it will certainly be for those who wish to enter. It has been decided, through the wisdom of The League, that each polity must pick three hundred of their finest, their strongest, their healthiest, and wisest members to journey to Thermopoly and take possession of the pass and thus, the valley. The last contingent to hold the pass will gain access for their members to a life of increase and prosperity in the land beyond the gates.”

A bolt of lightning could not have done more damage to the sudden surge of hope that for a few moments the Ithaca polity felt. Three hundred? What would that mean for the other seventeen hundred inhabitants of Ithaca? It was something no one there wished to consider. All were too stunned even to make a sound.

The messenger scanned the faces of the mute audience before him. His communication had been delivered. The rest was in the hands of the people of Ithaca.

“The contingents from each polity will set out on this contest no earlier than the Full Wolf Moon.”

His job completed, the messenger stepped out of the square. Ode rose to walk with him, as he was expected to host him in his house. Before departing, he kissed his mother and met Koosh’s eyes, which were moist with tears.

“We’ll talk later,” he assured her, and walked away.