Hana ran through the broken streets of Blood Burrow. The smell of burning followed, sliding into her mouth as she gulped for air. It was as damp as toads. She would never wash herself free of it, and never stop hearing the women scream or wipe out the memory of the Limping Man.

“Mam,” she cried as she ran. Mam’s smiling face, her shrewd eyes and careful hands, Mam bringing food and finding shelter and teaching her, always teaching, and always loving and always there—and Mam who had swallowed frogweed and was dead. Mam hadn’t burned. Unlike the others she had found time to chew and swallow. She hadn’t burned.

Hana had woken that morning to the cries of men in the streets, the screams of women and the wailing of children. Her mother came bursting into the shelter with the dawn sun streaming behind her, and wrenched
the sack across the entrance. She turned and screamed, “Hana, run.”

“Mam?” Hana cried.

“Into the crawl. Get as far away as you can. Don’t stop.” With one hand she jerked Hana from her sleeping place, with the other clawed a fistful of weed from its pot on the shelf. She stuffed it in her mouth.

“Mam,” Hana shrieked.

Her mother forced her down, rolled her with her foot into the crawl. “Go. The Limping Man,” she cried, with green froth dripping from her chin. She snatched more weed. There was terror in her eyes. “Hana, they’ll burn you.”

Hana went into the crawl, scraping her head, bruising her knees. “Mam, come with me,” she screamed. But already her mother was rolling the stone across the entrance. Her mouth was foaming and the bite of the poison made her groan, but her eyes were as bright as embers and she said, in her own clear voice: “Hana, live. Don’t ever come back.”

Stone grated on stone. The hole closed. Hana heard the shouts of men in the room. She heard Mam scream and knew she had drawn her knife and run at them. Then she heard her fall and knew her mother was dead. The frogweed, the old women said, killed in twenty breaths.

Hana lay still, biting her hands to keep her terror and grief from breaking out. Men’s voices, panting, the clank of body armor, the hiss of swords sliding into scabbards, were less than a body length away. A dog, if they had dogs, would sniff her out. But there was only the
sound of tearing wood as the constables kicked down the sleeping bench in the corner, and the crack of pottery as they ground the mug and dish Hana had shared with her mother into the floor. Then the swish of the sack door pushed aside and the voice of a man in command: “This is her? The queen witch? You let her die?”

“Captain, she ate the frogweed,” a thick-tongued burrows voice replied.

“He wanted her alive.”

“Sir, she ran from us. She went down holes we could not follow.”

“Where’s the girl? She had a daughter always at her side.”

“No girl, sir. No one else.”

“You were too slow. He’ll have you whipped. Bring this one. He’ll burn her anyway.”

Hana heard them drag her mother out of the shelter. She heard the clop of horse hooves and the creak and rumble of a cart and the thumping sound of Mam’s body thrown on the wooden tray. Women in the cart wailed and cried her name: “Stella, oh Stella, love.” She recognized Morna’s voice and Deely’s voice and thought: He’s got them all. He had killed her mother. He had taken all her mother’s friends for burning.

Hana curled up tighter in the crawl. She pressed her arms and legs into herself, trying to shrink to nothing, to sink into the stone. She sobbed silently, and when the cart had rumbled away and the voices were gone, sobbed aloud. She did not know how long she lay on the cold floor, but realized, later, that she had slept, and she cried out
with horror that she had allowed herself that escape, with her mother dead and her friends taken. She saw how Mam had saved her. There was room in the crawl for Mam, she could have come, but then there would have been no time to roll the stone across and hide the entrance. She had saved Hana, and died by frogweed rather than burn.

Hana lay curled up for a long time. She had no strength to move, although Mam’s words rang, and sometimes whispered, in her ears: “Hana, live. Get as far away as you can.” She knew of no place to go. She wanted to stay near Mam even though she was dead.

At a time she judged to be noon she heard shuffling feet and hoarse whispers in the shelter. Scavengers had crept in and were sniffing and scraping in the wreckage. They would find Mam’s knife—she heard them find it—and some rags of bedding and a shirt and hood and sandals worn through on the soles. Little more. There was smashed wood that might be used on fires, and the iron pot sitting on ashes in the corner. No food in the pot. She heard their grunts of disappointment. Let them eat frogweed. The frogweed was still on the shelf. They went away and soon afterwards more whispering and creeping came, but this was a family, a man and woman and two children seeking a better home than the one they had. She heard the woman sigh with pleasure—this was a much better place. Hana wished the scavengers had left the pot and rags for her. A child whimpered and the woman said, “Hush,” and at that sound Mam’s voice spoke in Hana’s ears: “Don’t ever come back.”
She lifted herself to her knees and her head struck the roof of the crawl.

“Rats. Quiet,” said the man.

“They might come out. You can get one,” whispered the woman. There was hunger in her voice.

They waited. Hana breathed softly, and after a while, as the noises of the family settled down, she crept away. She had only used the crawl once after Mam had shown her the way. Darkness had covered her like a sack, while the weight of stone pressed like hands on her back. She had felt she would never come out. Now she did not care. Tears fell on her hands as she crept.

Some way along she slept again and when she came out stars were blinking in the sky. She found water in the gutter of a fallen roof and drank. Dirty water. It did not matter. Nothing mattered now, even Mam’s order: Get away. There was nowhere to get away to. Fires glowed in the ruins, with people moving round them, families perhaps—but even those with children would not welcome her. They did not have enough for themselves and kept the warmth of their fires guarded from strangers.

Hana turned back to the crawl, then turned away. Mam had used it and her smell was there. It smelled of Mam alive, and Mam was dead. Hana held her close in her mind, and let her go, and held her close again, but each time the grief of parting set harder, until it was a stone in her chest, it was a heart that refused to beat.

“Mam, you were me and I was you.” But that was only true back in the shelter, on the bench they had shared as
a bed, in the rags they wrapped around each other at night, and now Mam was a heart that would not beat and Hana was...What am I? The only answer she could find was: I'm alone.

She wept again, not for herself but Mam. That way she held Mam again, not inside her chest as a second heart, but warm beside the fire at night with a rat stew bubbling in the pot.

“Mam,” she sobbed into the night. Then she ran, not knowing where. In the daytime she might have recognized caved-in streets and doorways that led nowhere, but in the night they were simply dips and hollows. Tiredness overwhelmed her at last and she crept under the ledge of a fallen wall and slept, dreaming broken dreams, until hunger woke her in the dawn. She held her stomach, moaning, weeping but, after several minutes of abandonment, knew she must help herself or die. Mam had taught her how to survive, that was her gift, and the rest was up to Hana.

After hours of searching she found her way deep into the bowels of a ruined building and found a black pool, and thrusting her arm into a hole at the edge, found a family of drain lobsters. Ignoring their bites, she pulled them out one by one and smashed their shells on a stone ledge and ate the flesh. Soon she would find flints to make a fire and cook what she caught, lobsters and eels and rats, but raw flesh would have to do now. She would have to find a knife to defend herself and a pot to boil water so she would not fall sick, and clothes to keep her warm and a place to sleep. But where, where?
She remembered Mam’s words: Get away. Never come back. Did she mean out of the burrows? Hana knew no world outside the burrows.

She retraced her path into the daylight. Although she did not recognize buildings or streets, she knew from the smell of the air that she was in Blood Burrow. Her run in the night had taken her into the heart of the ruined city, away from the shelter she and Mam had shared in Bawdhouse Burrow. It was dangerous here, a man’s place—the Limping Man’s place. At the thought of him she was almost sick. He had killed her mother. He had taken all her mother’s friends and today he would come down from his palace on the hill, with his armored constables, and ride in a litter, high on the shoulders of a squad of leather-clad bearers, and call the burrows men to People’s Square, and there he would burn them, the women known as witches—Morna and Deely and how many others? And burn Mam’s body as well. Hana wept again, then stopped herself. No more. No more crying, no more tears. They were a waste. They helped no one. She dried her cheeks with her hands. She must think and plan, as Mam had taught her. She must go back through Bawdhouse and down to Port and then perhaps—she shivered—she could find the place called Country and go there. In all her thirteen years Hana had seen the sea only once and had never seen Country.

She made her way carefully through the ruins. There were women with pots and buckets drawing water from a well at the meeting of two streets, and children climbing in rubble heaps, hunting for edible lichens or—
the greatest prize—a nest of beetles and a clutch of beetle eggs. There were men too, going to their work in People’s Square. They would raise timber benches, ten flights high, with a throne at the center where the Limping Man would sit, surrounded by his guests and guards and servants, to watch the burnings.

Hana did not know how many victims there would be. Usually it was two or three but once, she had heard Deely say, it had been twenty, all women accused of being witches. The smoke that day, Deely said, had risen in a brown cloud and settled on the burrows and the smell had lasted until the winter rains washed it away. Deely’s hands had writhed as she told her story, and tears slid into the wrinkles on her cheeks. Now Deely was one of those who would burn.

“There are no witches,” Mam had told Hana. “There are only women who want to learn all the things that have been forgotten.”

“Like what, Mam?”

“Like how to stop the bone rot and the belly rash and the eye scale and the twisting in the gut that kills our children, all those things. And make plants grow and seeds not die and the earth not sicken. And how to make walls stand and roofs not fall. And how to clean the ponds. How to make pots. How to make wheels. Ah, Hana, there are so many things. How to breathe into hollow reeds and make the sound of birds. Music, Hana. You have never heard music.”

“I hear birds. But there aren’t many. Only crows.”
“The birds are gone. But I remember women breathing through reeds and men beating drums—and it is lost. The Limping Man has taken it away.”

“Why, Mam?”

“Because...because he wants to leave no place for us to go. There must be no room in our heads for anything but him.”

“Where is he? Can I see the Limping Man?”

“No, Hana. No. Never go near him. He will take you by your throat and never let you go. Or he will burn you.”

Hana remembered every word of that conversation and every sad and fierce expression on Mam’s face.

“There’s a circle round him, Hana, as wide as his mind can reach. Never go inside. If you do He’ll find you and He’ll hold you forever. He’ll make you love him. He can do that.”

Hana did not believe it. I’ll see him, she thought, I’ll see him now and he won’t see me. Then I’ll get away. And one day I’ll come back...She spat like a wildcat into a corner. She melted into the shadows and came out in an alley empty of people. She and Mam had explored Blood Burrow several years before, on a day when the men had been called to the hill to worship the Limping Man. They had traveled by a roundabout way to People’s Square where Mam knew a hiding place. She had wanted to see where the witches were burned and, Hana realized, perform a ritual of sorrow and remembrance inside herself. Hana had memorized every hollow and crawlway, and she set herself to find them now. Mam’s voice guided her: “This way, Hana, under these beams. Now, jump, you can do it. This was a stable once,
see the hay rack, see the chain.” Hana found it again and crept through. The chain was gone. Then, “Quiet now,” Mam had whispered. “There are women here. See how they rest when their men are gone.” The women had lain like bundles of rubbish in the pale sunshine. Today there were none. They were in their shelters while their men went to watch the witches burn.

Hana heard shouting far away. She approached carefully until only a row of buildings separated her from People’s Square. A doorway leaning like a drunken man led into a room that seemed to have no outlet. She slid behind a fractured wall and found a stairway leading down. At the bottom a room opened out, with stone walls and a paved floor and a broad fireplace set in the wall. Mam said it had been a kitchen. There were worn patches where barrels of flour and salt pork had stood. When Hana wanted to know what those things were Mam could not say, they were words she had heard as a child when old people remembered old, old days. They were things long gone and forgotten.

Mam had led her into the fireplace, which was large enough to hold a horse and cart. They climbed—and Hana climbed now, alone, bracing her feet on the chimney sides. She rested on a ledge, feeling soot fall like rain on her head. Higher up, light as thin as a knife-blade cut the darkness. She climbed toward it and found the ledge she and Mam had balanced on. The light was cold when she put her hand in it. Outside, Mam had said, the chimney crawled up a wall on the northeast side of People’s Square, then rose like a tower over gaping roofs. Hana put her face into the light. She peered through a crack in the stones into People’s Square.
The beaten earth beside the pond was thronged with spectators. Every man in the burrows was there, and every boy on the edge of manhood. Some of the men carried boy-children on their shoulders. A few cooled their feet in the pond, where the rushes were trodden flat. Others threw stones from their pockets at the marble head, half-covered in weeds, that rose in the center, beside an arm holding a broken sword. The game was to land a stone in the statue’s mouth. Then money changed hands—the thin brown coins of the burrows.

Opposite Hana, new-built benches rose to roof height, with red-painted steps climbing to a platform where the Limping Man would sit on his throne. The benches were already taken by early comers and the seats around the throne by men dressed in ways Hana had never seen before and could not have imagined—men in robes of red and yellow and blue, in hats decorated with ribbons and feathers and pieces of glass that flashed in the sun. Their skins were red or white or black—blacker even than her own, which must now be covered in soot. They were tribal chiefs from the south and east, come to see the witches burn.

Hana peered at them with hatred. Her eyes threw flashing knives of hate. Then she almost screamed, almost lost her footing in the chimney, as she saw the posts sunk in the cobbled ground below the throne, each with chopped wood piled at its foot. Six. Hana closed her eyes. Morna and Deely, and one post for her mother even though she was dead. Who were the other three?

A huge shout deafened her. It rumbled like thunder, then died away into the clatter and sigh of two thousand
people falling on their knees. The Limping Man’s entourage came through a gate. A phalanx of armed constables beat a path through the kneeling men. They used leather whips and the flat of their swords. Behind them walked the Limping Man’s courtiers, men from the city beyond the burrows, then his generals in cloaks and shining boots and belts hung with swords in carved scabbards. The crowd waited on its knees, breath held in, ready to shout their praise when the Limping Man appeared.

Hana, straining for a wider view, almost fell. Soot whis- pered into the depths. She kept her grip on the edge of the crack and regained her place, bracing her hands and feet on the stones. She was aware of shouts in the square, with an underlying beat. What were they saying? Not his name, he had no name. They were crying “Man” in unison, a word that rang with the sound of an iron hammer beating on stone: “Man, Man, Man.” Hana could not see him. His banner, held high to catch the breeze, came into sight through the black hole of the Western Gate. Its device, a crooked line beside a straight, shone as red as blood on its yellow ground. Then his litter came, borne on the shoulders of four men. The top was closed like a lid and scarlet curtains on the sides hid the Limping Man.

The constables beat a path. The bearers carried the litter around the pond and set it down at the foot of the timber steps. Others had carried the throne down from the platform and placed it ready. The courtiers and generals climbed to their places. A man—a giant of a man, dressed in black leather—raised a horn to his lips and blew a long blast. The crowd fell silent.
Two men, stick-thin, like insects, parted the curtains at the side of the litter and the Limping Man appeared.

No one helped him. No one touched him. The silence in People’s Square was like the midnight silence of the burrows. The Limping Man placed a carved stick on the cobbles and levered himself to his feet. He stepped down from the litter and stood for a moment, making sure of his balance. Hana could not see his face. He was a small man, dressed in blood-red robes with yellow flames crawling upward from the hem, and a cloth crown rising in folds and bulging at the back, where ribbons drooped over his shoulders like a waterfall. She had never seen a man dressed so foolishly. How could he hide? How could he get away when someone chased him? Then she remembered that he did not need to.

The guard lowered his horn and the people bellowed, “Man, Man, Man,” as the Limping Man walked to his throne, helped only by his stick. At each dipping step he seemed to fall, then he righted himself and the people roared. They loved him for limping. They wanted to lift and carry him, but he progressed by himself; reached his throne by himself; sat by himself and settled his stick between his knees. Four new bearers carried the throne up the steps, where they turned and set it down at the center of the platform.

Hana saw the Limping Man’s face, and it was—ordinary. She strained her eyes—eyes that Mam had said were sharper than a hawk’s—but still there was nothing to see, no strength, no authority, nothing in the mouth or nose or forehead, nothing in the eyes, watery and red-rimmed and pale, nothing to make people worship him. Yet the crowd, on its knees, continued its deep-throated roar of gratitude and love.
She could not understand it. A round-faced little man with soft cheeks and weak eyes and a leg that tipped him sideways at every step, and yet two thousand people roared his name as though he stood so far above them that their arms, held rigid, their fingers clutching air, could never reach high enough to touch him.

He smiled. The crowd howled louder.

Then Hana felt something sticky crawling on her face like a midnight grub. It crossed her lips and paused as though looking for a way into her mouth. She shook her head to toss it away. A grub could not hurt her. She felt it on her cheek, then by her ear, and she released one hand from the stone to brush it into the darkness. There was nothing there. But the soft crawling continued and seemed to move through her skin and wriggle into her head. She gave a cry of fear and inched her way down the narrow chimney. This sticky touch must be the Limping Man reaching out for her. What had Mam said? He would make her love him. It was why the men in the square fell to their knees and spread their hands longingly and bellowed his name. He crawled inside their heads and made them love him. Hana felt the emotion seeping into her brain and she used all her strength to force it out. It was like someone tying her up. It was like a spider spinning a web around her. She fought it away with the memory of Mam.