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Sent: 26 October 2004 23:17
To: Ken Follett_Private
Subject: Pillars sequel

Dear Ken,

These notes are coming to you in two parts. First, I'll talk about some broad strokes, major elements which I think you might consider adding, deleting or seriously altering; and second, will come some page-by-page detailed notes on each of your chapters and scenes.

Let me say again that on the whole I'm happy with what you've done. You have built more than a foundation. The structure and through line of your story is almost all there; and it is a compelling one. So in these sets of notes, I'll concentrate on what I see as areas of possible rebuilding.

Much of what makes PILLARS great is that in many ways it is a family story. Its drama is enhanced by the fact that many of its characters have close familial ties. This story has some of that, but I believe we can link your principal characters even more tightly together so as to intensify the emotions of their conflicts.

What if, for example, Merthin is the illegitimate child of Anthony; and he has been given over to be raised by Ralph's family. Merthin might then be presented to the community as an orphan who's been taken in; and that might also explain why two boys who are so different are nonetheless hanging out together in the woods. Merthin's mother might be a nun who secretly visits him, tries to give him little treats when she can. You might also consider adding Glynis to the group, and she could be a sister to Philemon. Later in the book each of these characters' issues might take on greater depth and resonance because of these relationships which date from childhood. ✓

We now have Anthony and Edmund as brothers, but there is as yet no hint of this in their dealings with each other nor with the fact that Charis is Anthony's niece. And at some point (if you go along with the above) she should then find out that Merthin is her cousin.

The idea I had for Godwyn is that he may have been an orphan raised by the bishop who loved him and sodomized him. As an adult Godwyn may secretly hate the bishop who nonetheless keeps doing good things for him.

Missing this time from your group of characters are two types who gave us great service in PILLARS. One is a seriously devout monk, priest or nun who believes totally in Christ but who also is effective in his or her secular work. Charis to some extent fills the bill for this, except that privately she appears to be agnostic. I think we need to have one important and sympathetic character who is deeply religious. And if you find it hard to add such a person or perhaps build up the role of Carlus or Thomas for this purpose, you might consider changing Charis from agnostic to pious.

The other character who sticks vividly in my memory after sixteen years is William's mother, your Lady Macbeth of sorts. Might it be worthwhile to give Ralph such a scheming and conniving mother? And if you are attracted to this idea, but don't see her for Ralph, maybe you could attach her to Godwyn. Maybe it was she who brought him to the bishop as a child because he was very beautiful, and she knew the bishop would be attracted to him; and she could foresee great things for her lowly boy once placed in such an environment.

Corollary to this limited amount of family drama is the fact that a lot of the conflict which you now have in the story is presented largely as business disagreements. Is it better to build a bridge this way or that way, to repair the Church using one technique or some other technique etc? These are all excellent conflicts; but they won't optimally work unless we can weave in strong personal elements between the characters involved; and if these characters are tied by links of blood, then their conflicts grow bigger. ✓

The novel's main event is the plague. To render this most effectively, I suggest you introduce death and dying almost from the beginning of the story; and we also are going to need a larger focus on the practice of medicine during this period as well as on the operation of a hospital. ✓✓ We need, as it were, to set the scene for the plague that is coming. To do this, we might, for example, give Anthony a lingering, slow but fatal illness when we first meet him. It could be something as painful and slowly inexorable as crippling arthritis or any other disease which causes him little by little to suffer and also diminish in ability. He (or anyone else you choose) would then be consulting with doctors, paying visits to the hospital, enduring whatever treatments seem appropriate, deciding whether or not to undergo this or that treatment etc. Because of this character's malady, we would get a good view of how medicine is practiced, how the hospital operates, who runs it etc. And from afar, we might see nameless characters dying, being buried, having masses said for them etc. Death after all is an integral part of life in this community. Then when the plague arrives we see it all with a vengeance but it won't feel as if it's coming in from some other novel.

Another key environment for this story might be the nunnery. Do these women meditate and pray all day or do they cultivate their own food, milk their own cows, largely sustain themselves from their own work, or do they live only from their rents and by collecting alms? Charis is one of your two main characters; and we see her interacting with the major forces outside the nunnery, but in your outline we do not share in her problems in dealing with all these women and how she manages what has to be an extremely difficult job. And all the more difficult, I would imagine, if she herself is less than devout.

The one perhaps major change in the story which I'm going to suggest is the elimination of the murder of Edward the II. To me this felt like a plot strand that was grafted onto a group of characters whose story had little or nothing to do with royal politics. But I did like the kids' seeing a murder in the forest; and I suggest that this could be changed more or less as follows. Thomas is in the woods fleeing. He falls. His pursuer catches up and demands to know where Edward has been hidden or makes a demand of any other kind. Thomas claims not to know or refuses whatever it is. The other man attacks him and Thomas prevails. Thomas thus becomes transformed from an assassin to a good guy. A bad guy is or was after him and he flees to the monastery for safe haven and possibly to do penance for having killed someone. He might then develop into a pious monk

who also becomes the adversary to Godwyn and later perhaps to Philemon. You gave him some background in architecture, but might he be even more interesting and useful if he had training as a doctor? He might then play a key role in struggling with the plague.

All through this period and in fact right up through the Renaissance, politics was essentially a struggle for power between secular and clerical powers. You have a lot of that in this story; but I wonder if it might be worth pinpointing one issue which in this story might over time focus on who prevails. What is it that the Earl of Shiring (and this could hold true for all three of them who hold this title) wants most desperately from the bishop and/or the monks and vice versa? Much of the conflict along this lines which you now have is between the monks and the nuns, but I wonder if the stakes couldn't be even higher between the religious forces on one side and the secular ones on the other.

A few small points: I very much like the little dog at the opening; and I think it might be a good idea for Charis as an adult to have a dog as a companion, maybe even a cat too.

If we decide to cut the Philip story, then we need another issue between Cecilia and Anthony in the prologue; and I thought that could be about Merthin and/or his mother. Cecilia would of course know that Anthony is the father. Alternatively they might suddenly be faced with some sort of crisis in the hospital. Stemming maybe on how to handle some important person who died because he was treated badly.

Finally, here is a list of minor characters about all of whom I think we need another sentence or two to set them in place: Naomi Weaver, John Constable, Ronald, Earl of Shiring, Bishop of Kingsbridge, the Widow Baxter, Elizabeth Clerk, Nathan Reeve, Mark Weaver, Bella Brewster, William of Castor and of Shiring, David and his Madder.

It'll be fun talking all this over with you.

Warmly,

Al

P.S. Now come the chapter by chapter notes:

3 Would Charis play with the boys?

Might these kids first be introduced watching the men being read the royal command? They could be awed by the power of the longbow.

Which kid is the leader-organizer?

The killing is so swift and silent; and so lacking in resonance through the course of the story that it feels unnecessarily sensationalistic. My feeling is that either we eliminate or build it into more of a scene. If they're both believing Catholics, wouldn't there be some ceremony, some last rites?

4. What is Godwyn's dream? What does he hope to achieve by studying at Oxford? Does he have a scheme to get himself sent there?

It would be good to introduce once of the doctors here to start setting up the plague along with other common maladies of the period.

Why would young Godwyn be present at this dinner? Does he have a specific role?

How do we invest this exposition about Edward and Isabella with any drama? And do we even need it?

What's missing are the feelings of Anthony and Cecilia for each other. Are they longtime buddies, perhaps former lovers, or do they have issues with each other? And if you do bring in the royal politics what strong feelings do each of them have about the key players? And how do they imagine or fear that they will be affected by these changes?

5. ~~Unclear how we readers would recognize Thomas, unless the narrator tells us.~~ And why would a royal spy and killer want to become a monk? For so great a service, wouldn't he have received a more important reward? Unless through interior monologue we learn his true mission.

6. Were the nuns in this period literate? And if so, in what language?

Merthin is from what kind of family to attract a bishop's niece? And what do we know about this bishop, and his connection with the monastery?

You'll establish of course that the farmers in the area all raise sheep. And is their wool (or cloth) any better or worse than the Shiring product?

What most essentially are the two brothers at odds about?

Why would Edmund have to beg Anthony? Especially if the monastery is so broke? And wouldn't Anthony's income also depend on rents from sheep farmers?

This would work better if it was less about business and more about some long term personal rivalry between the two brothers. ✓ Maybe Anthony is bitter that he got stuck in a monastery while Edmund got to enjoy a wife, children and other luxuries of the period.

And where would the bishop be in all this?

7-8 Why would Anthony rather than the bishop be the local sub-agent? And would clergy be subject to the local secular power? But Anthony should have a hard time refusing his brother and his niece. In whose POV is this part?

Suggest POV for first half of second scene is Ralph and second half is Wulfric.

8. What particular things has Merthin already built? Who was or is his mentor?

Would a monk rather than a priest or bishop be responsible for the cathedral?

Thomas feels like a fifth wheel unless we understand what he wants for himself.

How has the collection of the King's new tax been resolved?

9. Merthin's conflict with Godwyn and Elfric is again all business. It could use a personal component. Could Elfric have formerly been Merthin's boss and treated him badly, perhaps as an apprentice? And might he also have issues with Godwyn from some past episode? ✓
✓

And were there bound books 200 years prior to 1337?

10. Introduce Naomi earlier with Edmund so she won't be a total stranger to the story in this scene of high drama; and we should see Philemon earlier in Godwyn's entourage, perhaps with Merthin (or Ralph) calling him Snake to connect up with the prologue.

I assume you'll be using Glynis' POV.

Rather than an intuitive flash, an accident on the bridge could more solidly draw Merthin's attention, and he could well be in company with Charis.

And the accident could have been caused by a sick person who might have fallen into the river

Again let's try to infuse Merthin's conflict with Thomas and Elfric with a personal component.

10-11 Godwyn was in Chapt. 5, so he couldn't be just back from Oxford. And how did impoverished Thomas manage to send him? With money from the nunnery? Or was it the bishop?

11 What is our stake in whether or not Godwyn gets what he wants in the scene with Carlus?

Perhaps if we did this from Carlus' POV, we might gain insight into what Godwyn really is after.

And might it be possible for Godwyn to go up against one of the protagonists we already have without now introducing a new one? Or set up Carlus earlier as the good guy in the

monastery.

12 Amidst the widespread mayhem of the collapsing bridge and the frantic lifesaving efforts, Anthony's indistinct words about the death of Edward II are likely to be forgotten by the reader, especially since Edward is only momentarily onstage and then not identified.

13 ~~How does Godwyn "pick off" his enemies? And aside from Carlus, who are they? And where, if anywhere, is the bishop in this?~~

If Thomas is to be the main opposition, he'll need a role in some of the prior events to establish a story arc for him

Anthony would have known about this land in Norfolk, but would he never have told anyone? How does Philemon make this discovery? And if Thomas has a strong link to the Queen and King, why would he withdraw. Wouldn't he have all the strength? And what's happened to Carlus?

As prior, what material and spiritual benefits does Godwyn anticipate and dream of?

Would he have no interest in women?

14 Who is the Earl of Shiring? How important a noble is he? What powers can he exert over our principal characters? How would it help him to have his own man as prior? Why would he let Godwyn persuade him?

Nothing in the rest of the story is made of the bishop's sexual preference.

The bishop's predilection for boys should be introduced earlier and then gets worked into a plot that Godwyn organizes well in advance.

Also it might help to set up almost from the beginning a rivalry of sorts between the bishop's office and the monastery.

Let's give Godwyn a more difficult time with Cecilia. She should not be a push-over. She loved Anthony, but most likely would be suspicious of this young Turk. He should prevail but by tricking her in some way.

15 What is at the root of Oran's selling his daughter? Would he have a special plan for the use of this money? Are there other people in Kingsbridge who are slaves? How badly are they treated, and how are they kept in servitude?

How is the town surviving without its bridge and how has its collapse impacted on Merthin's stature?

And where are Edmund and Charis?

Annette for the first time takes action. How are we meant to feel about her? Does she love Wulfric or has some more suitable young man passed her by?

Are we meant to be disappointed or relieved that Wulfric doesn't get to marry Annette?

To whom else might Ralph pose a threat as Lord of Wigleigh?

How has a 16 or 17 year old boy managed to resist sexy Glynis? A favorite animal perhaps?

16 Unclear how or with whom Merthin lives? Does he create this design as a public service or is he commissioned; and if so, by whom? What contact, if any, does he have with the folks in the intervening chapters?

How does Thomas get to prevail over Godwyn? And how, if at all, would the Earl and Bishop be part of this decision?

And is there any personal component in this conflict between Merthin and Thomas?

For us to become involved, Merthin must want this design badly. And for us to love him, folks in the story should love him and vice versa.

We're 40% or so into the story before our main romance begins. I think we'll need to start weaving it in sooner, so that Merthin's becoming Charis' lover becomes a culmination. And if Elizabeth is to be a serious competitor to Charis, she also needs to be part of the story earlier on.

What in particular does Charis admire about Cecilia and Baxter; and in what context do we learn this?

16 But it should be something about her own mother and the life her mother lives that impels Charis to want to live somewhat differently. But how? What other role could there be for a woman of her class in this period?

17 Charis' business undertakings have some interest but little drama. Could she be in a domestic battle with her father who wants to marry her off before she's too old? And how torn, if at all, is she about having to shut out Merthin?

What steps does the Earl take to prevent the bridge? Would he use Ralph to do this? And shouldn't our principals have been afraid of this right from the start?

And suddenly the King figures in the story. Could such minor figures as Edmund and Godwyn easily get to him? Isn't it more likely that they'd deal with a Chamberlain or a courtier duke? Who would be the next higher authority over Shiring?

Would a woman have been admitted to the parish guild?

And if the conflict over who gets the tolls is purely commercial, it's not involving to the reader. Why do we long for Charis and the guild to prevail?

And Godwyn by now should fear Merthin and fire him essentially for some personal reason. ✓

Might Godwyn have developed a lech for Charis or Elizabeth and be jealous of Merthin?

18 I'd pretty much forgotten Ralph and his interest in Annette. Can we connect him in some way to the conflict about the bridge? What if the best masons are serfs or peasants attached to his holdings, and he actively sides with Elfric, or possibly Merthin?

So far there's been no carryover from his childhood companionship with Merthin.

Wulfric, then, still carries a torch for Annette; or does he just hate Ralph? And where does William fit in to the conflict about the bridge. Would he be with the Earl or the Kingsbridge folk?

If the gang is hurting Shiring, why does the Earl do nothing. Perhaps Ralph endangers only the Kingsbridge area, Might he now for awhile abduct Annette or even Charis?

Godwyn's restrictions will need to be set up stemming from crises in earlier chapters.

And how does this tie in with how Edmund's wool business is faring? Would he now be suffering or prospering?

And how, if at all, would this relate to the conflict over the bridge?

Best, I think, if these restrictions stem from Godwyn's hatred of Edmund, Charis, Merthin etc.

The existence of the royal court will need to be introduced earlier. As will be the fact that the Kingsbridge folk are serfs.

19 Where has Merthin's courtship been?
Philemon now takes action; but what has his story arc been until now?
And Elisabeth and her uncle the bishop? Where have they been?
Would Charis enter a nunnery under the control of Godwyn?

We've seen little or no evidence of Merthin's love for Charis or of the obstacles to their union.

What resources does M have, and what would he hope to do in Florence?

Does Elfric have a thrust of his own in the story? What might he gain by pleasing Godwyn?

20 I think we need a doctor as well as illness and dying from almost the beginning of the novel. Anthony or the Earl of Shiring's father might be lingering with a slow-moving cancer, being treated

by Carlus (or some new character.) This would introduce the medicine and hospital of the period which later on would dominate the story.

Would Merthin in Florence then try to treat his family with whatever methods he'd learned as a youth in Kingsbridge?

Another plot strand for Chapter 9 (33) probably ought to involve a financial issue between Charis and either Godwyn or Philemon. And how is the nunnery faring now under Godwyn's thumb?

21 Could rumors of the Plague in Florence or elsewhere have reached Kingsbridge, prompting Charis' concern for rebuilding?

Let's earlier plant seeds for Godwyn's grandiosity. What pinnacle of social advancement does he aspire to?

Might the bishop see him as something of an upstart and a threat? Or would the bishop perhaps fear him?

The rivalry between Charis and G. would be more compelling if it wasn't solely economic. What if G has a lech for Charis or possible for Mair? Or he treats Edmund unjustly in some way?

22 I've lost track of Annette. Is she still single? Yes, now I remember Billy Howard.

Might Glynis and Charis have a relationship that goes back to their childhood?

Is there anything interesting or distinctive about Nathan Reeve?

23 But isn't Charis subordinated to Godwyn? Or is she mostly autonomous?

Who has taken over Edmund's business? And who is Mark Weaver?

At a personal level, what do Merthin and Elfric despise about each other?

24 Is Mark's death a tragedy? Whom does it affect?

Earlier introduce the pilgrim traffic. Are there relics or what is the goal of the pilgrims?

The church tower problem appears to echo the bridge controversy.

25 Let's give Merthin some compelling reason for marrying Bella. And she also should be introduced earlier.

Godwyn says no because he feels threatened by Merthin. But how does M pose a threat to him?

How has Ralph become wealthy? Loot? A reward from the king? With whom is Ralph close? Philemon? His mother? Could or would Charis try to protect Wulfric?

26 Charis' lover? Unclear that this relationship with Mair has continued.

The death of Edward II feels like it's part of another novel, not this one.

Cecilia has for so long been out of the spotlight, I didn't realize she was still alive, now that Charis is seen running hospital and nunnery.

Where would the bishop come from? His location not clear. How far is Shiring?

And through whose dying will we experience the worst of the plague?

27 Why can't the bishop write up new charters replacing the originals? And if this is the same bishop we've had right along, what do we know about him.

And how do we account for Charis being untouched by the plague?

Again I have doubts about grafting the Edward story into a novel that has almost nothing to do with royal politics. Thomas too is too shadowy a character in the present story.

28 I suggest the story of the plague be played out most intensely in the hospital. We may need one or two more nuns as characters. And could Merthin do some doctoring?

Tilly plays so small a role that I'd forgotten Ralph had a wife; so her death has little impact. Might she have children who try to protect her? Or might Merthin or Wulfric become involved?

29 I wonder if Charis and M don't prevail over Godwyn too easily. It might be better if Godwyn was sick but still alive with Philemon and one or two others; and there's some struggle involved in dealing with him and retrieving the chest.

On the labour issue, we'll need Charis and Ralph to confront each other directly. And who is the new Earl of Shiring? How does he get on with Ralph, Charis? Ah, but there is none yet, is there?

Unclear what drama we'll have in Chapters 53 and 54 and 55

30 Let's give Philemon a dark side through which Charis could try to weaken him, but fails. How do we explain the bishop being so mercurial?

Need to set up earlier Merthin's attraction to Philippa. And how would this relationship put him into opposition with Ralph?

And what position, if any, does Philemon take on the demolishing of the tower?

31 How do Billy Howard and Annette feel about Ralph? Is it known that he killed Tilly?

If Thomas is in danger for his life, it doesn't work for this to be introduced in the last quarter of the novel. Also since Thomas has played so minor a role, we have no stake in his death.

Would Philippa be required to marry Ralph? Would she have no means of her own?

32 As the new Earl, what would Ralph's main conflict be with Charis and Merthin?

And how has Charis become a theatre impresario?

33 In addition to enjoying her relationship with Merthin, might Philippa also want to induce him into some kind of plot against Ralph?

Do the Church and Earl fight over who benefits most from the town's new prosperity? Who pays for the tower building?

34 Ralph versus David is interesting, but Ralph from the moment he becomes Earl needs a major issue with the key Kingsbridge folks. Perhaps the King requires him to raise more taxes than Ralph can get his hands on.

Philemon wants a guest house, but what happened to Godwyn's mansion?

35 What if Ralph fails to persuade the bishop, and he decides to intimidate him by killing Charis. He might even involve Philomen in this, but the assassins bungle the job.

Ralph's episode with Sam and Glynis is good; but it would be better if linked to the main story. How at this point would Glynis be allied to Charis and Merthin? And would Ralph take any personal interest in his newly discovered son.

36 If Philemon becomes bishop, what new powers would he acquire? And how does Charis go about opposing him? In whose hands does this decision lie? Does she offer an alternative candidate?

Can we get Ralph to become Duke without all the Edward stuff?

37 What does Philemon's becoming bishop mean for Charis and the nunnery? And the hospital?

39 Charis' warning should be specific, i.e. a local threat and not that all monasteries will be destroyed

Does John know that Merthin is his real father? Probably more interesting if he does know.

Why would Sam kill Ralph? After Ralph has pardoned him? Or is he seething about not having been recognized as a son of the Duke.

- 40 To set up this ending, we should participate some in John's growing up.
The story of Edward and his skeleton will find little or no resonance in non-British readers.